

PROGRAMME NOTES by Mark Baigent

(the words of the poems are at https://oboeconcerts.com/Blake_poems.pdf)

Ralph Vaughan Williams - Ten Blake Songs (1957) Part I

- 01 The Divine Image (Innocence)
- 02 Infant Joy (Innocence)
- 03 The Piper (Innocence, titled "Introduction")
- 04 Eternity (Several Questions Answered)
- 05 A Poison Tree (Experience)

The Ten Blake Songs are presented here for the very first time in the order in which they were commissioned for the 1958 film *The Vision of William Blake. A Poison Tree* and *The Piper* were omitted from the final cut due to time constraints. Shortly after the film's release the songs were re-ordered for publication by OUP in agreement (according to Ursula Vaughan Williams*) with the composer, who it seems sought to broadly follow the order of the poems in Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (Nos 1, 3, 5, 6 & 9) and *Songs of Experience* (Nos 2, 4, 7 & 8), concluding with *Eternity*. However, apart from a certain chronological advantage, there does not appear to be any great logic to this order and I hope like me, you will find this version a far more satisfying musical experience. They were dedicated to Janet Craxton and Wilfred Brown who recorded them for the film and gave the first public performance shortly after the composer's death.

Cyril Scott - Idyllic Fantasy (1921)

- 06 Moderato

Described by Sir Eugene Goossens as "the father of British Music", Cyril Scott wrote both the words and music for his *Idyllic Fantasy*. It is the earliest piece on this recording, and includes muted cello along with voice and oboe. Both oboe and cello are instructed to play behind a screen or offstage in an adjoining room with the door ajar. Either way, the oboe and voice remain the dominant voices and for this reason I have included this as part of this project.

Herbert Murrill - Three Carols (1929)

- 07 Rosa Mystica
- 08 Cradle Song
- 09 The Falcon (Corpus Christi Carol)

Vaughan Williams befriended Herbert Murrill after he enjoyed a performance of Murrill's ballet *Picnic* in 1927. A composer of mostly sacred music, Murrill's *Three Carols* (written while he was an Organ Scholar at Worcester College, Oxford) make use of religious texts: The *Rosa Mystica* in the Catholic tradition is a poetic title for Mary; *Cradle Songs* are typically about a mother's love for her child; and the *Corpus Christi Carol* is a Middle or Early Modern English hymn first written down in the early 16th century. In Performing *The Falcon*, I decided to use the ambience of the church to

highlight its religious nature, with James Gilchrist starting at a distance and joining me for the main body of the work before retreating as the falcon "flies away".

Carey Blyton - Lyrics from the Chinese, Op. 16a

translated by Helen Waddell

- 10 Peach blossom after rain
- 11 Within the massive cup of jade
- 12 I saw the marsh with rushes dank and green
- 13 Blue Iris sweetest smells
- 14 We load the sacrificial stands
- 15 White clouds are in the sky

Carey Blyton, nephew of the author Enid Blyton, added a string trio to the oboe and tenor for his *Lyrics from the Chinese*. In it we are presented with a selection of six poems masterfully set to music by a composer equally gifted producing serious classical music as he was in comedic and light music for tv and radio, evidenced in commissions for such scores as *Bananas in Pyjamas* and *Dr Who*. Soon after its completion however, Carey withdrew it, reworking it three years later (1957/8) for high voice and string orchestra, expanding it to seven poems with three string interludes. Quite why he withdrew his original score is unknown. James Gilchrist mentioned that it was uncomfortably high in places which could explain its re-designation for 'high voice', so it is with great pleasure (and with the aid of copious throat lozenges!!) that we are able to present the whole of this beautiful work for possibly its première performance in its original scoring.

Rutland Boughton - piece for Voice, Oboe & Clarinet (1940)

- 16 Poem, *Fairy-led* by Mary Webb

"In any other country, such a work as *The Immortal Hour* would have been in the repertoire years ago" (Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1949). Rutland Boughton became a household name in the 1920s; this opera received 376 consecutive performances in London, earning him a knighthood (which he turned down) for his contribution to British Music. This untitled and unpublished setting of Mary Webb's poem *Fairy-led* pairs the oboe and voice with a clarinet in A; Its dark timbre grounding the otherwise cheeky, playful and skittish music above it. The piece revisits the same poem and musical ideas used in Boughton's *Faery Flout*, the second of his *Three Songs Without Words* for oboe and string Trio written three years earlier. We don't know why he revisited this material, but we can be sure he had his daughter Joy** in mind when he wrote it.

Philip Napier Miles - Four Songs, Op. 17 (1925)

Poems by Robert Bridges

- 17 The Poppy
- 18 The Cliff Top
- 19 Thou art alone, Fond Lover
- 20 When June is come

The earliest composition I know of for oboe and voice, and preceding the *Ten Blake Songs* by some 32 years, Napier Miles' *Four Songs* is a charming set of works depicting the themes of landscape and love. The last squire of Kings Weston, Napier Miles was a philanthropist, composer and, for a short while, the High Sheriff of Gloucestershire. He was a supporter and close friend of Vaughan Williams who visited him regularly, completing his *Lark Ascending* for Napier Miles' protégé the violinist Marie Hall. As a notable minor composer, he won a Carnegie award for his opera *Markheim* and received positive reviews for the performance of his opera '*Westward Ho!*' at the Lyceum Theatre, London. He tried to recreate, locally, Rutland Boughton's successful 'village opera' based in Glastonbury as well as to develop an English National Opera House which failed to be realised. His set of four songs was published in 1933, the second dedicated to Mrs Hugo Mallett. Why he composed them for oboe and voice is unknown; most of his songs have piano accompaniment, and any clues to connection with Mrs Mallett have not been forthcoming. It was the close connection of Murrill and Napier Miles to Vaughan Williams that made me wonder whether the seed for the scoring of the *Ten Blake Songs* came from their direct contact. We shall never know whether he saw their scores or discussed their compositions, but as can be seen, there are ties between many of the composers presented here and I wonder how much they discussed ideas and were aware of each other's output.

Footnotes:

- * Stephen Connock, The Vice President of the RVW Society discussed the songs with Ursula Vaughan Williams in 1998.
- ** 'for Joyance', the complete chamber music for oboe by Rutland Boughton is available on Oboe Classics CC2034.

Instruments:

The music is performed on period instruments and gut strings to recreate the sound world of the time.
OBOE Reynold's system thumbplate model (Lorée, 1905)
COR ANGLAIS System 6b (Lorée, 1899)
CLARINET Boosey & Hawkes 1010 c.1930

The words to the poems are at www.oboeconcerts.com/Blake_poems.pdf

Performer links: www.markbaigent.uk, www.jamesgilchrist.co.uk

The cover image is from Blake's frontispiece to the *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

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Benjamin Britten - Nocturne Op. 60 (1958), excerpt

Poem, *Kind ghosts* by Wilfred Owen

- 21 Slow and regular

Looking beyond the Ten Blake Songs by a matter of months we find Benjamin Britten's *Nocturne* (premiered in October 1958) for tenor, seven obbligato instruments and strings. Within it we find *Kind Ghosts*, a movement for tenor and cor anglais, following beautifully in the tradition of our other recorded works. Set to a backdrop of ghostly, skeletal pizzicato string chords, the haunting sound of the cor anglais and the mellifluous voice of the tenor are left to themselves to explore the poetry's text, reflecting on the tragedy and senselessness of war.

Ralph Vaughan Williams - Ten Blake Songs Part II

- 22 London (Experience)
- 23 Ah! Sun-flower (Experience)
- 24 Cruelty Has a Human Heart (Experience, titled *A Divine Image*)
- 25 The Lamb (Innocence)
- 26 The Shepherd (Innocence)

That Vaughan Williams took this form to a new level of sophistication is indisputable, producing what has become the definitive work for oboe and voice; yet, despite its simplicity, he found it far from easy to complete his commission, complaining at one point that he was struggling to come up with a tune for "That horrible little *Lamb*, a poem I hate". The Songs now conclude with *The Shepherd*, composed for solo voice. Described by Vaughan Williams as "the oldest and greatest of musical instruments", it feels an appropriate way to end this recording; left to itself, abandoned by all the characters and storylines that have joined it on its way through the music on this album.