

## A passion for war poetry

Philip Lancaster tells how his study of the War Poets has inspired him to compose a new musical work



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It is quite amazing where a song can lead you. In around 1994 I was page-turning for the pianist in a concert at the Lichfield Festival of song settings of, and readings from, the work of A.E. Housman, performed by Gabriel Woolf, Ian and Jennifer Partridge, and the Lindsay String Quartet. One song knocked me for six: a setting of the poem 'Far in a Western Brookland' by one Ivor Gurney. Such poise, intensity and beauty! I asked Gabriel for a copy of the score, and began, slowly to explore who this Gurney was. Ten years later, having made my interest known to some, I was asked to prepare some unpublished songs for a recording by baritone Roderick Williams; an edition of Gurney's *War Elegy* for orchestra followed; and so began a relationship with the Gurney Trust and Gurney's archive that has led to the bringing of numerous works from manuscript to performance, recording and broadcast, including the remainder of Gurney's orchestral works and the first of his choral works to be brought out of the archive.

With my PhD I unexpectedly crossed a great formal divide: I moved from the world of academic music into English literature and poetry. Gurney is both a composer and a poet, so it was a natural progression in this respect. And as a singer with a great passion for English song, and a dabbler in the writing of poetry, I discovered that I knew a little more about the subject than I thought. It was still, however, a daunting step, but it is one that has brought great re-

wards, both in my research and, during this second year of my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (PDF), in the surprising joy that I have found in teaching poetry to undergraduates.

My PDF research continues the work begun during my PhD: the ordering and reclamation from the archive of Gurney's poetical works, two-thirds of which – in the region of a thousand poems – is yet unpublished. With Professor Tim Kendall I am editing these for publication by Oxford University Press. Alongside this edition, I am writing a monograph which will draw together my work on both the music and the poetry in a detailed study of his work, looking at the common tropes and ideas behind both of his arts.

With the monograph in mind, in March 2013 – just after successfully defending my PhD – I began with purpose to read much more thoroughly and widely within the genre of War Poetry, seeking to identify how Gurney compared; where he sat within the War Poets. I was reading Isaac Rosenberg when one poem struck me: 'The Tower of Skulls'. 'These layers of piled-up skulls/These layers of gleaming horror – stark horror!' It was a little before Holy Week, and I was, at around that time, revisiting a recording of J.S. Bach's *Johannes Passion*, and it struck me

forcibly that Rosenberg's poem could be evoking the scene of Christ's crucifixion at Golgotha – 'the place of the skull'. The evocation of the Passion is not unusual in War Poetry. Wilfred Owen, for instance, invokes it directly in his poem 'At a Calvary near the Ancre'. The imagery of the crucifixion was very present in the landscape of Catholic France and Flanders, that religious iconography adorning the roadsides, giving rise to places being known by the British soldiers as 'Crucifix Corner', for instance.



Ivor Gurney, photographed in hospital at Rouen in May 1917, after he had been shot in the arm on Good Friday, 6 April.

PHOTO: IVOR GURNEY ESTATE/GLOUCESTERSHIRE ARCHIVES.

One of Gurney's most famous songs, *In Flanders* – one of a handful of songs composed whilst at The Front – was written in January 1917 at one such Crucifix Corner. The Rosenberg poem, in combination with that connection with Gurney, made me think: might it be possible to draw together a telling of the story of the Passion with a commentary from poems by the poets of the First World War?

For three months I devoured the work of the War Poets with a greater hunger, and slowly began to build up a narrative based upon the Gospel of Mark and reinforced by the work of Rosenberg, Gurney (of course; an unpublished poem), Julian Grenfell, Charles Sorley, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, Herbert Read, Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. So a *War Passion* was born in which the war poetry not only strengthened and lent weight to the story of the Passion, but also presented a parallel narrative of the soldier, and the sacrifice of the common man for the salvation of wider mankind; a purpose not dissimilar to that of Christ's crucifixion.

Whilst I was awaiting the verdict on my British Academy PDF application, I was awarded a two month scholarship by the Finzi Trust in order to start bringing the libretto of the *War Passion* to life with the addition of music, and so a year after the first idea, I began composing. Having not done any serious composition for almost 15 years, I made but small and steady progress – but it was progress. Following that two month scholarship, and having been successful in my PDF application, I expected to tinker with it occasionally in my spare time and bring it to fruition as and when I could, whether during the centenary of the First World War, as would be appropriate, or not, I couldn't say.

The third arm of my PDF work has been to bring to life a substantial post-war cantata by Gurney, which he didn't quite complete. This setting of Walt Whitman, *Anthem of Earth*, is a major work for baritone solo, chorus and orchestra through which Gurney likely sought to lay to rest some of his experiences of war, telling of the rejuvenation of the earth out of the putrefaction of death. It is a substantial work of some importance, and in seeking to find an output for the première of that work I contacted Adrian Partington, the Artistic Director of the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester. As a former Gloucester Cathedral chorister who sang in that festival in the early 20th century, Gurney had a close connection with that place, and the festival had in 2010 programmed my orchestration of Gurney's choral setting of Edward Thomas, *The Trumpet*, and the world première of his 1921 *A Gloucestershire Rhapsody* for orchestra (which receives its Australian première this August); and in 2013 they had



Canada's *Golgotha* (1918), by the British sculptor Francis Derwent Wood (1871–1926), in the Beaverbrook Collection of War Art at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (CWM 19710261–0797). The sculpture is a depiction of a story that arose during the First World War, in May 1915, of a Canadian soldier who was crucified by German soldiers, pinned to a barn door with bayonets. The story has been dismissed as propaganda, although subsequent research has suggested that, if it is true, the soldier was Sergeant Harry Band.

PHOTO: OWEN BYRNE.

programmed my reconstruction of the original scoring of Gurney's first masterpiece, the *Five Elizabethan Songs*. Would they like another important Gurney première for the 2016 festival? In my correspondence about this Gurney work I mentioned as an aside my *War Passion*. To my absolute amazement, Adrian was more interested in my own work than in the Gurney; he wanted to programme it in the festival. To my delight and terror, it was confirmed, and so I had to step up work on the piece, whilst trying to maintain momentum on the Gurney project and also work out how to teach. The result is a 67 minute chamber oratorio for four soloists, choir and an ensemble of 13 instrumentalists; a new, and I hope effective, telling of the experiences of war, which will hopefully bring the work of 10 different War Poets to new audiences. It will be premièred on the afternoon of 24 July 2016, during the period of commemoration of the centenary of the Somme offensive, as part of the 301st Three Choirs Festival; my first major work as a composer.

With much relief, I can now refocus all of my time and effort back onto Gurney; but it is quite amazing where a song will lead you: from a page-turning school-boy, through a PhD to a PDF; the undertaking of a major poetry edition and monograph; the teaching a subject that is not your first; and to the première of a major original work that has grown directly out of the research that has defined your academic career. Who knows what might happen next? ■