

THE MUSICAL LEGACY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Over the past few hundred years, wars and crises in Europe had often resulted in artistic responses from writers, artists and composers. However, it has been said that WWI was an exception to this and that, although there was a strong literary response to the war, there was little musical or other artistic response. Such a view is only partly true and this article will set out to identify some of the (mainly British) musical responses and consequences that resulted from the 'Great War'.

There is no doubt that, of all the great art forms, music has the immediate ability to deeply affect human emotions and music is used in nearly all cultures as an essential component to mark meaningful occasions whether they be social or solitary, national or personal, sad or joyous, serious and contemplative or merely entertaining.

It is not easy to categorize the music that was written in response to the Great War as many rapidly changing emotions were being vigorously stirred in the artistic-responsive melting pot. Composers who experienced the horrors and tragedies of the war first hand from the trenches may well have been influenced to respond musically in a different way to civilian non-combatant composers who may have been influenced to respond in more patriotic musical ways from the safety of the home front. Moreover, emotions and feelings constantly fluctuated between the poles of 'anger, bitterness and hatred for the enemy' and 'sadness, nostalgia and desolate resignation'. In addition, emotions and perspectives affecting musical composition written at the time of the war were probably different in nature to those affecting musical works written some time after the war. Music even momentarily united British and German soldiers on the Western Front during the brief unofficial ceasefire on Christmas Day 1914 when both sides sang carols together (apparently much to the fury of the generals on both sides).

For this article, music in response to WWI will be looked at via the following themes:

- "Classical" music written at the time of WWI
- "Classical" music written post- WWI
- Popular music of WWI

Classical music at the time of WWI

Ralph Vaughan Williams although 41 years old at the outbreak of war chose to enlist in the Royal Army Medical Corps serving in Flanders and his experiences there had a major influence on his music. His music is so often regarded as quintessentially 'English' and his *Pastoral Symphony* (written during and just after the war) was always viewed as such. However, more recent scholarship suggests that may not be so and that the slow movement of this symphony – with its poignant solo trumpet – is evocative of the war-torn French battlefields rather than the rolling English countryside. It is an elegy to fallen comrades. Interestingly, inspiration for his *The Lark Ascending* came when Vaughan Williams was walking on the cliffs of Margate on the day Britain entered WWI. At the time, ships by the coastline were beginning to engage in fleet exercises and as Vaughan Williams jotted down the notes for the piece, a young scout made a citizen's arrest of him assuming he was noting details of the coastline for the enemy!

Vaughan Williams survived the war - but other younger and promising composers were not so fortunate. **George Butterworth** (whose works include *The Banks of Green Willow* and *A Shropshire Lad*) was a brave and unassuming young man who, along with Vaughan Williams, was a prolific collector of English folk-music. He was shot through the head and killed at the Somme in 1916 aged just 31. He destroyed many of the compositions that he

was not satisfied with before going to the war in case he would not return and thus not be able to revise them. Australian-born composer **Frederick Kelly**, a friend of the poet Rupert Brooke, was also killed at the Somme in 1916. A promising young German composer was **Rudi Stephan**; he was killed at the age of 28 in the Ukraine. Englishman **Ivor Gurney** was a poet as well as a composer and was especially well-known for his songs. He found it difficult to compose whilst on active service in the trenches but was able to write some songs there including a superb setting of John Masefield's *By a Bierside*. Although he was not killed he suffered both before and after his time at war with deep depressions. He just about managed to write an orchestral *War Elegy* (inexplicably underperformed) in 1920 but by 1922 he had been declared insane and was committed to mental hospital. He died of TB in 1937. Other aspiring young composers – relatively unknown today – who were killed in battle were **William Denis Browne**, **Ernest Farrar**, New Zealander **Willie Manson** (killed on his 20th birthday) and the Scottish composer **Cecil Coles**.

Non-combatant British composers include **Gustav Holst** who was medically unfit to fight (*Mars* from *The Planets* was written on the eve of war but painted an intensely furious picture of the warfare to come) and **Frank Bridge**, a staunch pacifist who was deeply disturbed by the First World War. The war had a major and significant effect on the style of Bridge's later compositions. Holst, who volunteered to organise musical entertainment for the troops, wrote little in direct response to the war other than his *Ode to Death* which was written in response to his composer friends who died in the war.

Like **Charles Villiers Stanford** and **Hubert Parry**, **Sir Edward Elgar** – although horrified by the carnage of the war – felt it his duty to write inspirational and patriotic works such as *The Spirit of England*, *Carillon* (for voice and orchestra in honour of Belgium), *Polonia* (in honour of Polish Victims' Relief) and *The Fringes of the Fleet* (settings of verses by Rudyard Kipling). He wrote his famous E minor Cello Concerto just after the war during the summer of 1919 at his secluded cottage in Sussex, where during the war he had heard the distant sound of heavy WWI artillery emanating from across the Channel at night. This no doubt had major influence on the contents and composition of this sad and deeply contemplative work.

With regard to non-British European music at the time of the war, **Bela Bartok** and **Leos Janacek** felt particularly hostile to the German nation, as did **Igor Stravinsky**, and expressed this in their compositions. Similarly, in France, **Claude Debussy** also felt aggression to all things German. The Viennese composer **Alban Berg** was deeply affected by his time in Austro-Hungarian Army and his passionate antipathy to war resulted in his opera *Wozzeck* which was completed some time after the war in 1925.

Classical music written after WWI

British music written some time after the Great War but in response to it include **Sir Arthur Bliss's** choral symphony *Morning Heroes* completed in 1930 and written as an act of catharsis with regard to his own experiences in the trenches and the death in active service of his brother Kennard Bliss. He dedicated the work "To the Memory of my brother Francis Kennard Bliss and all other Comrades killed in battle". **Benjamin Britten's** famous *War Requiem* was completed and first performed in 1962 for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. Britten did not have immediate experience of WWI (he was born on the eve of the war in 1913) but was a life-long pacifist. He poured his passionate anti-war feelings into the requiem by interweaving some of the poems of WWI poet Wilfred Owen with the Latin Mass. Even if not written specifically as a response to WWI, the *War Requiem* stands as a requiem for all wars, WWI included.

More recent works written in response to WWI include **Sally Beamish's** 1st *Violin Concerto* (written in 1994), **Roxanna Panufnik's** orchestral prelude *Three Paths to Peace* (written in 2008) and **John Tavener's** *Requiem Fragments* (composed in 2013 just before he died). It is totally appropriate that these works will be performed at this year's Henry Wood Promenade Concerts (120th season) to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of the war.

Popular music of WWI

Music Hall originated in Great Britain in the 1830s in public houses as a vehicle for popular entertainment; it became the hotbed and meeting place to hear new and catchy tunes and lyrics. By the time of WWI Music Hall theatres were used to stage charity events in aid of the war effort and artists and song-writers passionately devoted themselves into rallying support and enthusiasm for the war effort from the general public. Many patriotic songs emerged such as *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* (1914), *Keep the Home Fires Burning* (1914), *Pack up Your Troubles* (1915) and were sung with great fervour by music hall audiences at the time. The songs covered all aspects of the war, some being satirical, some promoting recruitment and some concerning themselves with bravery or cowardice. Famous Music Hall stars of the time included **Vesta Tilley** (who did much to recruit young soldiers) and **Marie Lloyd**. In common with most other musical hall artists, Lloyd also supported recruitment campaigns and toured hospitals and factories to help boost morale. In 1915, she performed her only wartime song *Now You've Got your Khaki On* which became a firm favourite with frontline soldiers. Eventually recruiting songs virtually disappeared and were replaced with nostalgic songs about returning home.

In the United States at this time, the Great War had much impact on the development of popular music. Once the US decided to join the Allies in 1917 there was almost a deluge of songs supporting the war effort – important in this being George M Cohan's *Over There* written in 1917 as a propaganda enlisting song. Aided and abetted by 'new technology' such as the gramophone and the silent film, and the existence of famous movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks Snr and recording stars such as the **American Quartet** and **Billy Murray**, the time was right for an explosion of popular culture - with America playing a leading role. This was particularly true for the emergence of jazz. bands that accompanied the US Army's African-American regiments such as the 'Harlem Hellfighters' who played in a (jazz) style totally new to Europeans and introduced hitherto unknown jazz to British, French and other audiences and precipitated an international demand for it. Such bands became internationally famous. This, in turn, paved the way for the 'Jazz Age' (a term coined by F Scott Fitzgerald) in the 1920s where jazz played a huge part in influencing popular culture.

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