

SHEER: Setting Wilfred Owen to Music

"I can find no word to qualify my experiences except the word SHEER... It passed the limits of my Abhorrence. I lost all my earthly faculties, and fought like an angel."

(letter from Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 4th (or 5th) October 1918)

Wilfred Owen in the last few weeks of his life was a poet nearly lost for words, but still desperately trying to communicate the unspeakable experiences of war. The word that he finds, "SHEER", suggests a precipitous fall or a steep ascent, but even this demands capital letters to bring home the extreme nature of what he has gone through. Arrestingly -- and disturbingly -- Owen suggests that out of the horror a kind of spiritual transcendence can be forged: he fought not like a demon, but like an angel.

When I was commissioned by the Wilfred Owen Society to compose a new work for the conference 'Wilfred Owen and beyond', I felt almost as lost for notes as Owen had been for words. Apart from the challenges of doing musical justice to Owen's unflinching testimony from the distance of my twenty-first-century perspective, there was the long shadow cast by the nine settings of his poetry that Benjamin Britten wove into his War Requiem (1961-2). I quickly made the decision not to use any of those texts. The next step forward came from the idea of using excerpts from Owen's letters alongside two of the poems that Britten hadn't used, "Exposure" and "The Last Laugh".

In the letters we get to see a side of Owen that doesn't come across so clearly in his poetry: a charming, playful voice that delights in entertaining his intimate circle of friends and family. Frequently, when writing to his siblings and to his mother, he adopts a tone of mock-pomposity, as if trying to lighten up the seriousness of his poetic persona. Occasionally, he indulges in gleefully irreverent biblical parody. This shows him turning against the religious certainties of his upbringing, while, simultaneously, invoking them as part of a shared cultural inheritance that helps him to maintain intimacy with his family across a widening gulf of wartime experience.

A letter to his mother from June 1918 includes a lengthy and bizarre litany, which begins, "Preserve me scrupulously from old women without dignity, wit or wisdom" and, by way of similar injunctions against "dogs", "ugly children", "irritant underclothes", "rag-time" and a host of other dislikes, ends with "...all the arts and deceitful devices of Victoria". Although I didn't set these lines, I did find a way of involving Owen's disdain for Victoriana in the context of another provocative passage from a letter to his mother. Here he furiously corrupts the famous verses from the Gospel of John: "God so hated the world that He gave several millions of English-begotten sons, that whosoever believeth in them should not perish, but have a comfortable life." A distorted quotation from Stainer's setting of the original verses in his oratorio *The Crucifixion* (1887) becomes one of the central musical materials of my piece, which, throughout, engages in parodying, dissolving and reconfiguring the mannerisms of religious music.

The scoring of the piece for countertenor, tenor and piano alludes to Britten's canticle, *Abraham and Isaac*, which presents the same biblical narrative of sacrifice that Owen repurposes in "The Parable of the Old Man

and the Young" (set by Britten in the War Requiem). In the canticle Britten memorably renders the voice of God as the merging together in close harmony of the two solo voices. In my piece, as in Owen's "Parable", no divine voice penetrates the human hell; the coming together of the two voices in the setting of "Exposure" symbolises Owen's attempt to be with his men, to return mentally (and, ultimately, physically) to a world set apart from the civilian world from which war has irrevocably severed them. In my setting of "The Last Laugh" the countertenor is a ghostly echo of a sequence of dying soldiers, whose final exclamations -- "O Jesus Christ! I'm hit" -- offer up a kind of stunned hymn that bears out Owen's observation that "there is a point where prayer is indistinguishable from blasphemy" I would add: when sung, blasphemy almost inevitably becomes a form of prayer.

The tenor frames the piece like a warped evangelist. He embodies the voice of Owen's letters, articulating his anger and bitterness, but also his humour and his persisting faith in friendship, albeit with the notable exception of "man's best friend", that paragon of unquestioning loyalty:

And there are no dogs among my friends. No dogs, no sorcerers, nor the other abominations... For I have been bitten by the dogs of this world; and I have seen through the sorceries and the scarlet garments... And so... have come to the true measure of man.

(letter from Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 31st December 1917)

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