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A YOUNG MAN'S EXHORTATION

Finzi was a fastidious composer: songs could be the product of years of gestation, remaining in his “bottom drawer” until his strivings after perfection were neared. Once completed he kept the songs in his drawer until such point that he had enough suitable settings to form a set of songs, which he believed would have more chance of making an impact and surviving in a commercial world than the issue of an individual song which could get overlooked. Part of Finzi’s genius is that, despite the possible longevity of gestation and time between the settings, the songs and sets sound spontaneous and fresh, the music almost having grown organically from the poem, like the fruit on one of his collection of rare species of apple tree.

A Young Man’s Exhortation is a cycle, but has no narrative - unlike Die schöne Müllerin or Winterreise. The thread is an emotional one, linking the young idealist as he matures to his gentle end under the yellowing trees. Over the first five songs Finzi set the quotation in Latin, ‘In the morning it flourisheth, and growth up’ (but even by song 4 the singer is imagining his own past obscurity) and over part II ‘In the evening it is cut down, and withereth’. The first song begins lyrically, with imitation in the piano part, as if all set for a closed form; but it slackens into quasi-recitative for the questioning fourth verse; has a Holstian march bass at the mention of passing time, and ends (having started in A flat) on a surprising chord of E major—all characteristic Finzi procedures. The second song, apparently artless, is subtle in the way Finzi plays stress against metre to point up the words. ‘Budmouth Dears’ is deliberately more hearty, for contrast. ‘The Comet at Yel’ham’ is remote and still: poet and composer set our little human life in perspective, but without sitting in judgement. In ‘Former Beauties’ a vision, held in the memory, is re-lived. All five songs have their counterpart - in sentiment and form - in the later set.

Colin Judson writes : “Although the Finzi has no actual narrative it is very much an emotional journey of a young man as he discovers love in its many forms - unrequited, lustful, puzzling - and then looking back as a middle aged man until he meets his metaphorical end under a yellowing tree. It is a cycle full of optimism and looks back without regret. Conversely, the Vaughan Williams is a darker, more mature journey looking back with regret at lost love. This is why I feel the two cycles compliment each other.”

SONGS OF TRAVEL

Vaughan Williams’s Songs of Travel belongs to the first decade of the last century and, although they were conceived as a group of integral songs, the commercial demands of the publisher meant that they appeared separately in two volumes in 1903 and 1905, apart from the final song which the composer clearly planned as an epilogue to be performed only when the songs were performed as a whole. This was not published until 1960 in the first edition of the cycle in its original sequence.

The opening song “The Vagabond” establishes the cycle’s Romantic credentials; indeed Stevenson had composed the words “To an air of Schubert”. Its steady tramping accompaniment, combined with a triplet that prefigures the opening of the vocal line, evokes the purposeful tread of the wanderer striding out on the open road. ‘Let Beauty Awake’, with its images of dawn and dusk, has a fervent melodic line that floats on a buoyant arpeggio accompaniment. Particularly memorable is the bitter-sweet radiance of the phrase ‘And the stars are bright in the west!’ which recurs as a link between the verses and in the brief coda. Over a joyous accompaniment, ‘The Roadside Fire’ radiates the delight of new-found love that bubbles ecstatically in the final verse. ‘Youth and Love’ is the kernel of the cycle and points to its central dilemma: which is preferable, ‘love’ and by implication a settled life, or ‘solitude’ and the freedom to wander. As if emphasising the choice to be made, the accompaniment includes transformed allusions to the triplet figure from ‘The Vagabond’ and the opening phrase of ‘The Roadside Fire’ at the song’s climax. ‘In Dreams’ has a chill melancholy, created through a persistent, uneasy off-beat rhythm in the piano and a brooding chromatic vocal line. Planissimo, wide-spanned arpeggiated piano chords, combined with an expansive melodic line evoke the vast brilliance of the night sky in ‘The Infinite Shining Heavens’, in which the traveller, gazing above, finds peace. ‘Whither must I Wander?’ has a homely simplicity, appropriate to the poet’s images of childhood and the security of home and family which are now long in the past, never to return. A sole sonorous chord, like a call to attention, opens ‘Bright is the Ring of Words’, whose forthright melody incorporates the opening notes of the hymn ‘Sine nomine’ (‘For all the Saints’), which haunted the composer throughout his life. The brief epilogue, with its references to earlier songs, encapsulates the whole cycle with the wanderer, now old, looking ahead to his final journey beyond the grave.
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