

JULIAN PHILIPS

Dread of Starry Majesties

for Tenor & Piano

Poems: Ivor Gurney

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Commissioned by Richard Edgar-Wilson
with funds awarded by the Arts Council of England.

First performed by tenor Richard Edgar-Wilson with Eugene Asti, piano,
at St John's Chapel, Lichfield, Friday 14th July 1995,
as part of the Lichfield Festival.

Duration: 19 minutes

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PREFACE

The idea of writing a song cycle on poems by Ivor Gurney was first proposed by tenor Richard Edgar-Wilson. It is often difficult to ensure a new commission fits with a next artistic conception, but here I was particularly fortunate. I have never forgotten the wonderful moment of synchronicity when I went straight to a copy of Gurney's *Collected Poems* in Westminster library and the book fell open at *Between the boughs* (Song 5). I knew then that whatever the difficulties of setting Gurney - his language is often tortuous and complex - I would be drawn into his intensely private world of poetic experience.

Initially I was attracted by the idea of writing a narrative solo cantata, one that would deal with the tragic events of Gurney's troubled life. But ultimately only the song cycle could provide the key to unlock Gurney's inner world and what I envisaged were musical snapshots that grew from his poems.

Several factors determined the final sequence: personal taste, suitability for musical setting and the desire to assemble the most varied and vivid "snapshots". The themes that dominate inevitably reflect Gurney's own life: the countryside (Songs 2, 3 & 4), aimlessness and wandering (Song 6), human love and frailty (Song 5), the act of artistic creation (Song 7) and the art of song writing and singing (Songs 1 & 9).

Although the cycle is not strictly narrative, there are nevertheless several poetic journeys within the piece, one from "near spring" of Song 2 to "the change" to winter's austerity in Song 7, and a second towards the musical world of Gurney's finest song *Sleep* of 1912. From this song I took the rather Mahlerian motif of an oscillating major third enclosed by a minor sixth and the motto appears blissfully at the close of Song 5, in sinister dislocation in Song 7 and with fateful portentousness in the final song, where it permeates the whole texture. Both this last song and the first frame the cycle, both reflecting on the art of song writing itself. The first on the white heat of inspiration and the last on songs as "bright tracks" where a later generation can roam freely. This last image seemed a fitting epitaph to the whole cycle and to Gurney's life, and in the final couplet we are left with a chilling, almost supernatural communication from Gurney to living composer, to singer and to listener:

Think well, O singer
Soon comes night.

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Dread of Starry Majesties - Texts by Ivor Gurney (1890-1937)

1. Songs Come to the Mind

Songs come to the mind -
Other men's songs
Or one's own, when something is kind
And remembers not any wrongs.

Swift cleaving paths in air
On a bicycle, or slow
Wandering and wondering where
One's purposes may go.

Songs come and are taken, written,
Snatched from the momentary
Accidents of light, shape, spirit meeting
For one light second spirit, unbelievably.

2. Near Spring

Now the strong horse goes loose at last,
Free for his strength, in the February's end -
Floods have left the meadows and gone past
To the broader river's rocks and sand.

Musing on old tunes, ploughboys go
Hoping to catch the lilt forgot
Of a tune their fathers recalled in glow
Of talking, or after cricket hot.

The year stirs wing and watches skies
Deep-in again; the girl is happy
With her white apron showing in the doorway's
Frame; daffodils thrill in hedgebanks ruddy.

3. April Gale

The wind frightens my dog, but I bathe in it,
Sound, rush, scent of the spring fields.

My dog's hairs are blown like feathers askew,
My coat's a demon, torturing like life.

4. The two

Hearing the flute call
Of my country's meadows still through March blasts,
There have I hurried out and farther to the amethyst
Changes of the willows small.

And at home at night
Quiet through poetry the day's roaring shaking and rising
Me has driven to music, great mood to iron-twisting changing:
Withered leaves at next seeing.

That at least gave dawn
When to the upper windows of the house all else still
Climbed I, saw magnificent dawn-pageant of the daffodil
And rose-on-thorn come on.

5. Between the Boughs

Between the boughs the stars showed numberless
And the leaves were
As wonderful in blackness as those brightnesses
Hung in high air.

Two lovers in that whispering silence, what
Should fright our peace?
The aloofness, the dread of starry majesties,
The night-stilled trees.

6. If I Walked Straight Slap/The Telegraph post

If I walked straight slap
Headlong down the road
Toward the two-wood gap
Should I hit that cloud?

The Telegraph post stands and is a foil
To the high and dim sky,
Hardly aware of the ribbon of roadway
That's checked by it and then goes by.

If I walked...

But the poles on the edge of the rises out westward
Are symbols for all lonely travel -
A strange distance of untold futures,
Significances hard to unravel.

(If I walked straight slap
Headlong down the road
Toward the two-wood gap
Should I hit that cloud?)

7. The change

Gone bare the fields now, and the starlings gather,
Whirr above stubble and soft changing hedges.
Changed the season chord too, F major or minor,
The gnats sing thin in clouds above the sedges.

And there is nothing proud now, not disconsolate,
Nothing youthful save where dark crocus flings
Summer's last challenge toward winter's merciless
Cohort, for whom the robin alone sings.

Fields for a while longer, then, O soul,
A curtained room close shut against the rime -
Where shall float music, voice or violin's
Denial passionate of the frozen time.

8. What was dear

What was dear to Pan is dear to him no more,
He answers prayers never, nor ever appears -
And so sore a loss is this to his lovers
They play never, the sweet reed sounds no more

In the oak coppice; or the Severn poplar shade
Silver hearted...softly waiting at eve
The silent country folk no more bring gifts
They delighted in - nor the new pipe greenly made.

9. The Songs I Had

The songs I had are withered
Or vanished clean,
Yet there are bright tracks
Where I have been,

And there grow flowers
For others' delight.
Think well, O singer,
Soon comes night.

to Richard Edgar-Wilson,
with gratitude.

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Dread of Starry Majesties
To Richard Edgar-Wilson

Commissioned with funds made available by the Arts Council of England

Poems by Ivor Gurney

Music by Julian Philips

I. Songs Come to the mind

Allegro (♩ = 126)
with restless energy

Tenor

mf Songs come to the mind — O - ther men's

Piano

legato *mf*

— songs — or one's own, when some - thing is

kind **f** And re - mem - bers not a - - ny — wrongs.

A

p carefree

carefree

p Swift — clea - ving paths

2 11

in air... on a bi cy cle, or slow Wan -dering and won -dering where One's pur - po -

14

poco rit. **B** **poco accel** *poco a poco crescendo*

ses may go. *pp* Songs come

pp legato

16 **A tempo**

and are ta - ken, *p* writ - - ten, *mp* Snatch'd

18

from the mo - men - ta - ry Acc - - - i - -

C

19

- dents of light, *mf* shape, —

mf *sempre crescendo*

21

spi - rit mee - - ting

24

f For on light second spi - rit, — *f* un be lie - va - - bly. — *in a forced whisper* *attacca*

II. Near Spring

4

Allegro (♩ = 132)
with incisive energy

Tenor

mf Now the strong horse— goes loose at last, Free

Piano

mf

8.....

6

for his strength in the Feb - ru - ary's end—

legato

p

(8).....

10

mp Floods— have left the mea - dows and gone— past

mf

p

8.....

14 *rit.*

f To the broa-der ri-ver's rocks and sand

(8)

f

pp



D Andante (♩ = 92)

19 *conversational* *ten.*

mu-sing on old tunes, plough-boys go

cheekily whistling

pp

pp



25 *ten.*

plough-boys go

(8)

rit.

E Largo (♩ = 46)

more thoughtful and intense

30 *p* Ho - ping to catch the *p* lilt for - got Of a tune their fa - thers

(8)-----

p dreamy

8.-----

34 re - called in glow Of talk - ing, *pp* or af - ter or -

pp *p*

8.-----

rit.

F Allegro (♩ = 132)

assertively

38 af - ter cri - cket hot. *f* The year

ppp freely

f bell like

8.-----

42 *stirs wing and watches skies Deep-in a - gain; **ff** the girl is ha -*

(8)

ff pesante

*- ppy With her white a - pron **f** show - ing **mf** in the*

(8)

f mf

G Largo (♩ = 46)

53 *rit. with humour (freely)*

*door - -way's Frame; **p** daf - fo - dils thrill in hedge - banks*

(8)

mp

57 *rubato*

accel-

attacca

The musical score consists of four staves. The top staff is for the voice, with the lyrics "ru - ddy." written below it. The piano accompaniment is on the bottom three staves. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line. In the first measure, the piano part features a melodic line in the right hand starting on a G4, moving up stepwise to a D5, and a bass line in the left hand starting on a B3, moving up stepwise to a G4. Both hands have a slur over the notes, with a "10" above it indicating a ten-measure phrase. The dynamic marking *p* is placed below the piano part. In the second measure, the piano part continues with a similar melodic line, but the right hand has a grace note (marked "8") on the D5. The dynamic marking *ppp* is placed above the piano part. A "10" above the piano part indicates another ten-measure phrase. The score concludes with a double bar line.

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III. April Gale

Allegro vivace (♩ = 132)

Tenor *urgently*
p The wind frigh - tens my dog,

Piano *pp* *urgently*
sfz pp

mf
but I bathe in it, *p* Sound,

p *mf* *sfz pp*

accel
rush, scent of the spring fields.

f *pp*

10 **H** free tempo

half spoken (own tempo)

mp My dog's hairs are blown like fea - thers as - kew,

freely (own tempo)

sfz pp *repeat ad lib*

sfz pp *repeat ad lib*

moving back into sung voice

mf My coat's a de - mon, *ff* tor -

sfz mf *repeat ad lib*

repeat ad lib

I A tempo (♩ = 132)

in tempo

- tur - ing like life.

ppp *fff* *ff*

ppp *pp* *ominous* *ppp*

IV. The Two

freely (with a feel of $\text{♩} = 50$)

Tenor

as if from a distance

Piano *pp quasi flute*

recitativo

pp Hear-ring the flute call _____ Of my coun-try's mea-dows _____

freely pp

still through March blasts. _____ *pp* There _____

accel rit.....

piu animato

have I hur-ried _____ out _____ and far-ther _____ to the a-me-thyst Chan-ges _____

pp p mp

piu animato

of the wi-lows small. of the wi-lows small. _____

p pp

