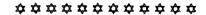
JULIAN PHILIPS

Dread of Starry Majesties

for Tenor & Piano

Poems: Iver 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

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 potentousness 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 mats 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 wailing 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.

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





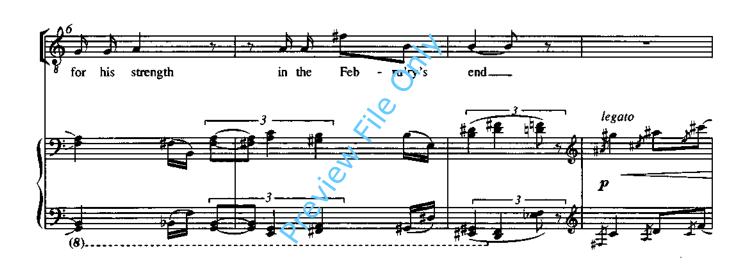


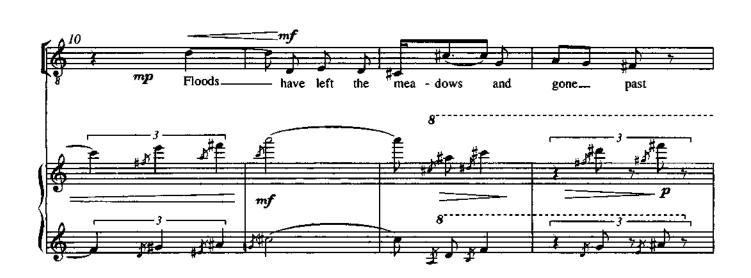




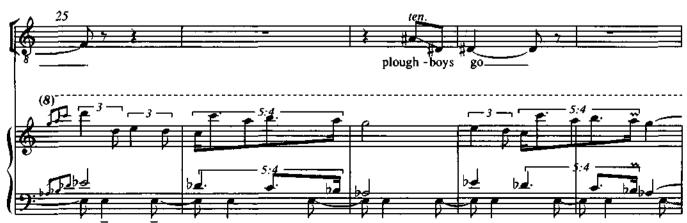
II. Near Spring





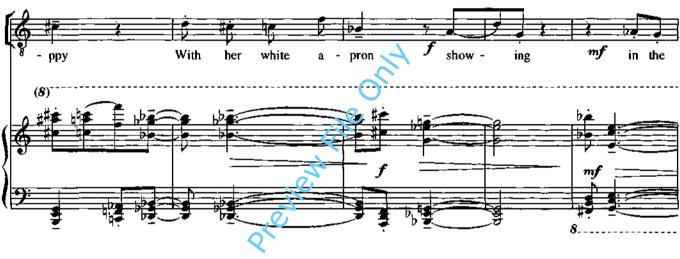


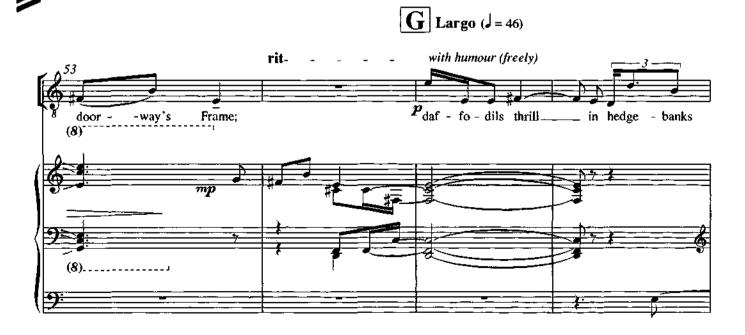


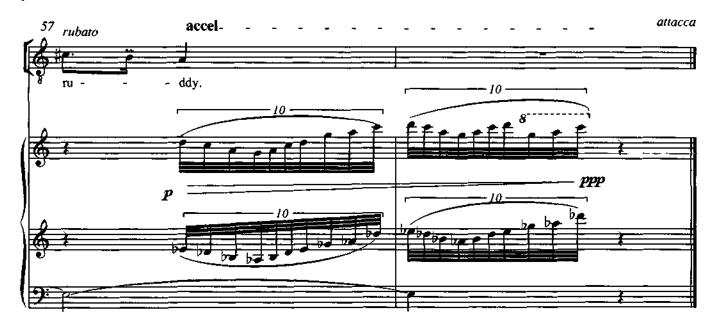












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