

Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century was a prosperous country with a relatively large middle and working class. Though a small island nation, its century-long imperial expansion had given it control of many regions around the globe, so it could be stated with some accuracy that 'The British Empire was one upon which the sun never set.'

Prosperity at home enabled more people to engage in leisure activities. There was a sharp rise in amateur music-making and concert-going, with choral singing a popular pastime. The large choral societies for which Britain is famous were established during this period, and many important music festivals were initiated, including the Birmingham Triennial Festival, for which Mendelssohn, Dvorak, and Elgar all composed major works. While the Birmingham Festival did not survive after World War I, other important festivals carried on and are still in existence today. Of these, perhaps the most notable is the Three Choirs Festival shared annually among the cities of Worcester, Gloucester, and Hereford, and the Proms - now the preeminent music festival in the country - that takes place over the summer months in London.

We begin our program with the lovely setting *My Soul, There is a Country*, which is the first of Sir Hubert Parry's *Songs of Farewell*, composed from 1916-18. Parry was a respected member of the British musical establishment and, along with Charles Villiers Stanford, an important teacher of the subsequent generation of British composers. His tuneful and romantic music exhibits a certain musical nationalism, a quality for which Edward Elgar is also known. The Church of England was the dominant religious institution at this time, and it provided stable employment for many of the country's leading musicians and composers. During the nineteenth century one of the more important of these was Samuel Sebastian Wesley, who worked as organist and choirmaster in several of the large English cathedrals. His blissfully serene anthem, *Thou Wilt Keep Him in Perfect Peace*, remains a staple of cathedral and parish choirs alike. A later cathedral musician and composer with a relatively small but extremely fine output was Edward Bairstow, the organist and choirmaster of York Minster from 1913 until his death in 1946. His Russian-inspired anthem *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence* is very highly regarded indeed, even here in California. I once asked a local organist and choirmaster if he had a copy of this anthem in his library. His response - 'Is the Pope Catholic?!

The Great War of 1914-18 resulted in an immense loss of life in many European countries. Each year Britain holds an Armistice Day ceremony to honour its fallen soldiers. The tradition properly began in the 1920's when Maud MacCarthy and her husband, the composer John Foulds, initiated the Festival of Remembrance, a concert performance given in the Royal Albert Hall, with proceeds donated to the charity known as the British Legion. Foulds' *A World Requiem* was composed especially for the occasion, and subsequent performances of this massive work for chorus and orchestra were given over the next four years, the intent of which was to honour the dead of all nations, a progressive and visionary notion for the time. Foulds' music deserves to be much better known, given the craft and calibre of his work. The opening movement, a litany, sets the tone beautifully, while his mystical conception of 'Elysium' as a serene and heavenly abode for the souls of the fallen is not unlike the Elysian Fields of Gluck's *Orfeo*.

Although Christian orthodoxy remained a strong undercurrent within society, many began to open themselves to other cultures and other ways of thinking. A poet particularly admired for his humanism was the American Walt Whitman, whose collection *Leaves of Grass* was an inspiration to several composers. Ralph Vaughan Williams' setting of Whitman's *Toward the Unknown Region* effectively captures both the poet's initial trepidation upon facing death, and his courageous exuberance in embracing the hitherto un-experienced.

The second half of our program begins with a ballad, which was an especially popular narrative genre with composers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Schubert, Loewe, Grainger). Very early in his career Benjamin Britten made his own contribution to this repertoire with his fine *Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard*. It is a tale of infidelity and of honor, but ultimately, of tragedy.

It is easy to think of the composer Gustav Holst solely as another important figure within the nationalist musical movement known as the English Renaissance, since he did compose some memorable works in this vein. But in his formative years Holst was fascinated with Sanskrit language and literature. Many of his finest works are settings from the collection of Sanskrit hymns known as the Vedas, and it is the musical language he developed in response to the Vedic Hymns that finds its way into Holst's most famous composition, *The Planets*. In our three settings from the Rig Veda, Holst gives us a glimpse of another culture and religious tradition. The Vedas are all hymns of praise (and of petition) to various deities within the pantheon of Hindu gods. The first, *To Varuna*, is a hymn to the God of the Water and the Celestial Ocean, while the second, *Hymn To Soma*, is in praise of the herb that is used in Hindu religious ritual. The opening phrase sung by the men is based upon a special south Indian scale, or *melakarta*. The final Rig Veda setting is a prayer to Indra, the leader of all the Gods and the Lord of Creation. He is Lord of Heaven, and as such he has control of the weather: his attendants here are the storm clouds, known as Maruts, which bring life-giving rain to the land.

We close our program with an excerpt from Edward Elgar's oratorio, *The Dream of Gerontius*, composed in 1901 for the Birmingham Triennial Festival and considered to be one of the composer's masterpieces. Gerontius, a name derived from the Greek word *geron*, or old man, is a kind of religious everyman who, in the course of dying, is shepherded about in the immediate after-life by a guardian angel. After initially encountering demons (fallen angels) they come eventually to a host of angels singing and praising God and his deeds on behalf of mankind, and it is here that our excerpt begins. Eventually Gerontius is brought before God and, in an instant, favourably judged and sent to dwell in purgatory, here a place of purification for those aspiring to enter the "joy of heaven".

For more on the music and culture of Britain during this period, as well as the profound influence of India upon the composers, Elgar, Holst, and Foulds, and the important work of Maud MacCarthy in the collection and dissemination of Indian music, you are encouraged to read the forthcoming Oxford University Press book by Professor Nalini Ghuman, *Resonances of the Raj - India in the English Musical Imagination, 1897-1947*. The book will be available in June and further information about it may be found at the following website:
<http://global.oup.com/academic/product/resonances-of-the-raj-9780199314898>

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