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The Great War inspired some magnificent music – but the piece that best captures the shock is little known

The Great War affected our culture deeply, and still makes an impact today, at the centenary of the Armistice. It has resounded with me since childhood. I had a relatively old father who joined up nearly three years under age, did more than three years in the trenches, and talked lucidly and calmly about an experience impossible for others to imagine.

Listening recently to David Elstein's superb plays *Countdown to War* and *Countdown to Peace* (available on audible.co.uk, a sort of Netflix for radio plays and talking books – the BBC, insanely, was not interested), I was reminded of the war's lasting effect on creativity. Yet the greatest works came decades ago – think of Sassoon, Graves and Blunden, the memorial architecture of Lutyens, and paintings by war artists such as Wyndham Lewis and William Orpen.

Above all, the conflict inspired some magnificent music, four pieces especially. Three are by Englishmen: Arthur Bliss's *Morning Heroes*, a choral work with a narrator commemorating Bliss's brother Kennard, killed on the Somme; Ralph Vaughan Williams's *A Pastoral Symphony*, drawing on the composer's memories of driving an ambulance on the Western Front; and a setting by Cyril Rootham of Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen", from which it takes its name. The fourth, and probably best known, is by a Frenchman; Maurice Ravel's six-movement piano masterpiece *Le tombeau de Couperin*, each dedicated to a friend killed in action, about which I wrote here last year.

It is interesting how detached, by comparison, Ravel is from the majestic grief that permeates the three English works. His tribute to his friends recalls happier times, and notes, perhaps, the joy tinged with sadness of the deliverance of his country from an existential threat. The English works, by contrast, focus on the pain of losing a generation. *Morning Heroes*, which Bliss completed in 1930, was very much a cathartic exercise. Ever since the war, in which Bliss lost his brother and was himself badly wounded, he had suffered recurring nightmares. Writing *Morning Heroes* helped to reduce them.

Almost an hour long, it has been performed in this centenary year, and has lost none of its power. Bliss's idea

was to combine words about warfare in the ancient world with poetry about modern combat. As with all works including a narrator, the spoken words can sound arch, and recognition of the greatness of the piece has been handicapped by its form.

Bliss did justice to the fine words he chose: from the *Iliad*; from Walt Whitman; from Wilfred Owen's "Spring Offensive"; and from a now little-known poem by Robert Nichols, "Dawn on the Somme". The Nichols provides Bliss's title – "O is it mist or are these companies/ Of morning heroes

other critics in 1922, he could not see how it related to the horror of war. Its title is not ironic; it evokes the pastoral landscape of northern France, turned into a killing ground: the music suggests that nature will assert itself again. Vaughan Williams heard a bugler mangle Last Post, sounding the seventh and not the octave, and included it in his symphony; that, and its function as a requiem is emphasised by the wordless soprano soloist in the finale, and her ghostly lament. It took another appalling war to confirm the message of the work.

Yet, in my view, there is no better

work of remembrance than Rootham's setting of Binyon, written in 1915. Elgar set the same poem, subsequently, then offered to withdraw his piece, not least because it is not as good as Rootham's. More than a composer, Rootham was a teacher – head of music at St John's, Cambridge. *For the Fallen* reveals his genius, conveying with solemn beauty the intensity of the shock and grief at the carnage already apparent in the opening months of the war. In the second century of remembrance, it should become far better known, and emblematic of what we feel when we mark the Armistice.

Rootham conveys the grief at the carnage already apparent in the war's opening months

who arise, arise/ With thrusting arms..." – while the Owen contains some of the greatest English poetry: "Of them who running on that last high place/ Leapt to swift unseen bullets, or went up/ On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge, or plunged and fell away past this world's verge./ Some say God caught them even before they fell." As the bells of Shrewsbury rang to announce the Armistice, 100 years ago tomorrow, Owen's mother opened the telegram telling her that he had been killed in action a week earlier.

Hugh Allen, Hubert Parry's successor as director of the Royal College of Music, ignorantly dismissed *A Pastoral Symphony* as "VW rolling over and over in a ploughed field on a wet day". Like



RETURNED The author's father, James Heffer, aged 16, Sept 1914

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