

Finzi Scholarship Report

Philip Lancaster

THE PASSION OF WAR:  
A CHAMBER ORATORIO

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my Finzi Scholarship was to attempt to reclaim a facet of my work that had been set aside during the pursuit of my academic studies; to seek to unlock my own creative voice, which had been suppressed for almost fifteen years, during which my work has almost solely been directed towards studying and research into the creative work of others. At the beginning of 2011, following the success of my orchestration of a choral work by Ivor Gurney, I took the decision to seek to reclaim my original work and ideas. This decision first, more easily, manifested itself in the writing of poetry. However, being first and foremost a musician, it was to composition that I wished to return, having started composing at the age of 10, pursuing it with some application for 12 years, before it fell by the wayside in favour of my historical and editorial activities in the field of musicology.

The Finzi Scholarship project proposed was to begin the composition of a musical work which I first conceived in March 2013: the writing of a setting of the Passion which drew together the biblical Passion narrative with poems by the poets of the First World War. In February–March 2013, I had been reading William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, and was contemplating whether an English Passion had ever been written based upon his telling of the Passion story, and other such sources. During these contemplations, whilst continuing my work on war poetry, I began to recognise some striking kinships between some war poems and the stages of the Passion story, as well as a kinship between the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption and salvation of man with the sacrifice of soldiers in war for not dissimilar ends. The idea that a Passion might be created that drew together the story of the Passion with the poetry of the First World War struck me so forcibly that I began to work on the libretto in whatever moments I could claim over the next few months, completing the libretto, titled *The Passion of War*, in early June 2013. I contemplated sending the libretto to an established composer, but during the compiling of the texts, music had started to suggest itself very strongly, and I began to think, rashly perhaps, that maybe this could be the work with which I might try to make a return to composition. An application to the Finzi Scholarship scheme seemed to be a possible means to allow me, for a short period, to set aside the procession of freelance work that was necessary to provide for my family and myself, and to devote some time to rediscovering my facility for translating music from head to page. With the success of my Scholarship application, for eight weeks across March and June 2014, I was able to do just that.

## PROJECT ITINERARY

The nature of this project meant that there was no fixed itinerary for this project, there being no travel required, the project being an allocated eight week period during which I could devote my time to composition, working between home and a nearby piano, to which I had access. The intention was to devote all of March and April 2014 to the writing. In the event, with a few other commitments intruding into March, the eight week period was spread across three months, between 17 March and 8 June.

# THE PASSION OF WAR

## The Work & its Title

During the course of this project, the title of the work has altered. I originally titled the libretto *The Passion of War*, which I thought conveyed both a description of the work and acknowledged that human passions run high in the inducement and act of war. It was admittedly also chosen in part in order to avoid any possible comparison being made with Benjamin Britten's monumental *War Requiem*, as either progenitor or model, however little influence that piece has had upon my own. During the writing of the piece I have, however, always referred to it as my *War Passion*, and I have come to the decision that *War Passion* is the stronger title. While *War Passion* leaves me floundering slightly on the need, or not, for a prefixing article, it retains still an element of the double-meaning intended. Also, as I have gained in confidence in my work, I have felt no intimidation from Britten, my work being wholly different in concept and mode. So: *War Passion* it is, and this is the title by which the work will be referred to from hereon.

The libretto for the *War Passion* was conceived in four movements; four scenes:

- I. Gethsemane
- II. Trial
- III. Golgotha
- IV. Epilogue: The Seven Last Words

The piece brings together the Passion story as told in the Gospel of Mark, based upon a translation by Ronald Knox (suggested to me by a friend, Pauline Round), with poems by (in order of appearance) Julian Grenfell, Ivor Gurney, Edward Thomas, Charles Sorley, Robert Graves, Herbert Read, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden. The final movement of the piece is based solely upon Sassoon's 'Christ and the Soldier'. The 'Seven Last Words' of this movement's title are not the traditional sayings of Christ from the Cross, referred to in this way and expounded in musical works by composers such as Josef Haydn and James MacMillan, but are the Seven Last Words from a soldier to Christ on the Cross, Sassoon's poem (presumably) by chance (although it may be by design) presenting seven speeches by the soldier, directed towards the Cross.

For the sake of practicality — to give it a fairer chance of performance — I have always envisaged the *War Passion* as being a chamber oratorio. The work is set, therefore, for four soloists, chamber choir (of around 24 voices), and a 13 piece chamber ensemble, consisting flute/piccolo, oboe/cor anglais, clarinet, horn, string sextet (2 vln. 2.vla. 1.vcl. 1.cb.) and percussion (3 players). I contemplated the inclusion of a piano, with a perhaps smaller instrumental group, but in discussing the work at an early stage with Adrian Partington he suggested, wisely, that a piano would further limit the chances of performance, not all venues having a concert piano readily to hand. Shortly after beginning the composition of the piece I spent some time mulling the paring down of the ensemble, questioning in particular the place of a wind instrument in the originally intended four wind mix, and of the second viola. A bassoon was excised in favour of the clarinet (it was one or the other), and the second viola I decided was something I could

not do without. The division of the solo parts developed during the Scholarship period, having originally conceived their being soprano, tenor and 2 baritones, which become a standard SATB quartet. I had envisaged one of the baritones taking on the role of narrator. However, during the second half of the scholarship period, as I was moving on with some of the narration of the first movement, it occurred to me that this part would be far more effective if sung by a contralto. So, the quartet became:

- Narrator (contralto)
- Christ/The Soldier (tenor)
- Judas, Pilate, second soldier and commentator (baritone)
- Observer/commentator (soprano).

## THE PROJECT

As I approached the start of my Scholarship, I felt an increasing sense of panic. How would I even begin to surmount the great monument that I hoped this work to be? At an anticipated duration of 40 minutes, never having written anything of this scale before, never mind not having put pen to paper in a wholly original work since 2000, how would I tackle it? Was it a foolish thing to even contemplate such a vast undertaking? Furthermore, I knew in my mind, from my imaginings of music I should have liked to have written in the years of compositional drought, that my musical language had grown, and moved on from nearly all of the work I had written in my youth. There was a new vigour in my imaginings that I had never attempted to capture on paper, and it was essential that I seek to capture from the outset that new, but so far silent, voice. But was I capable of doing so?

When I sat down to begin work on the first day of the scholarship, I cautiously sketched out a motivic idea that finds its fulfilment at the close of the third movement: ‘Veni sancte spiritus’; a quasi-plainsong melody that had long been in mind, from the devising of the libretto. It is one of several key motifs that I envisaged as recurring throughout the work to bind it together. In the months after the completion of the libretto, I had worked through the text working out what the motifs might be, and where they would recur. I had always known that it would need a structure of motifs to hold such a large scale work together. However, having sketched out that first motif at the start of the Scholarship, I felt unable to confront the climax of the whole work that sees its full exposition. I wasn’t yet ready for such an important moment. I therefore made a start on the opening of second movement, ‘Trial’, for which I had a strong feel and sense of what I wanted, but which is also where a few of the other key motifs originate, which

would help drive the composition of the work thereafter. The second movement begins with a setting of the first seven lines from Edward Thomas's poem 'Rain', concluding with a quasi-Beatitude: 'Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon'. At this stage in the drama, Christ has just been arrested at Gethsemane; his disciples have fled, and he is being held in a cell prior to his first interrogation; a 'bleak hut' on which the rain beats down. The situation, in my mind, is akin to act 3 scene 2 of Vaughan Williams's *A Pilgrim's Progress*, when Pilgrim is imprisoned, awaiting the carrying out of the death sentence pronounced upon him by Lord Hate-Good and the people of the town of Vanity — although musically this moment of my piece is wholly different.

Throughout the process of writing, I have been reminded as to how words are always my starting point, the poetry/prose suggesting both the mode of communication and a sense of the melodic shapes they require, as well as the direction their musical delivery will take. The accompaniment is thereafter sought to match the situation — although often textures and accompanimental manner suggest themselves to some degree concurrently. With this Edward Thomas poem I had both a sense of the vocal line and a strong feeling for the textural undertow that would drive the passage; a texture that depicts the rain as well as both a sense of the despair and of the inevitability of the events now set in motion. I began slowly, cautiously, with the opening few bars, trying to capture the texture and getting a handle on writing for the ensemble. Finding such a small focal point within this relative giant of a piece distracted me from the panic I had felt leading up to the start of the project. Slowly, I managed to wheedle out the texture, and set up the pace of the movement as I felt it. Once I had established the texture of the first few bars, and begun the 'cello rumination that leads towards the first vocal entry — a process that took longer than I might have hoped, but with far more success than I thought possible — it began to flow more freely, growing out of the vocal line, with a feeling of inevitability in its direction. Thinking contrapuntally and texturally, and becoming increasingly involved in the passage, as expected, I needed to write the music in full, rather than loosely sketch out this passage in short-score, perhaps going on to draft the whole movement thus, as I know some other composers do. Eventually, after just over three weeks' work, I had completed the setting of this passage: a mere three minutes of music; but it was finished, and it exceeded my hopes and expectations as to its manner — never mind the fact that I had succeeded in wrestling thought and feeling into real music, on paper.

Having completed a passage in full was a great boon, and I think this sense of achievement was important for me in moving forward with the piece. It grew very slowly; and yet, in these opening three minutes of the second movement, I had defined a number of the motifs that would run throughout the work and hold it together: rain; solitude and abandonment; death; and the quasi-Beatitude, which also finds allusion elsewhere — as well as drawing part of the first-drafted 'Veni sancte spiritus' motif at that more hopeful Beatitude.

My deep involvement a short passage, and the sense of achievement on the detailed completion of that passage, in perhaps its final form, set a pattern for the manner of working on the piece going forwards, focussing on small sections at any one time and

bringing them to completion. I have noticed that as I have completed more of the work, and grown in confidence in my writing, I have started to be able to sketch out larger passages — mostly just writing down the vocal lines that are suggested by the text, ready to return to them later to work up to completion. While devising the libretto I was always concerned about making a coherent whole, with always a sense of purpose and continual direction and momentum. A piecemeal way of working at the composition stage might seem counterintuitive, but, perhaps as a result of my having compiled the libretto myself, I have always had a strong sense of how things link up into a congruous musical whole, so I was confident about sections being completed in isolation.

As for the compositional process: I have recollections of writing music at school and at university, when I would sit at a piano and try to work out ideas and put them down on paper. With this project I have found from the outset that, while sometimes a piano is of occasional use in determining or checking how some ideas work best together, my lack of fluency at the piano leaves me feeling impotent when trying to write there. I have sometimes used a lack of piano as a reason for my being unable to write music during the last fifteen years. However, it has been proved to me that I work far better by thinking of ideas and writing them directly from my mind onto paper, writing out melodies, counterpoints and textures, before transferring them to the computer, where I refine and develop them a little, before printing that refined version and working again in ink to develop them further, refining and adding new material, and returning to the computer to input those changes. Only when I wish to check the sonority/sounding of a harmony is the piano of value. Having discovered this fact during this intensive period of work, gaining the self-knowledge as to how best to get the music out of my head and onto paper most efficiently, has been perhaps the most invaluable lesson of this Finzi Scholarship.

With the arrival of Holy Week, I was thrown into a series of services at the Cathedral which were highly relevant to the work in hand, so while work necessarily paused for this time (partly in the relief and excitement at having completed the setting of *Rain*), the *War Passion* was uppermost in my thoughts. On Good Friday I found the time to take a recording device into a courtyard garden near my (then) home in the Cathedral Close, in order to record a blackbird in song. After a few failed attempts, when people walked through and disturbed the bird, I managed to get a good half hour of recorded song. The following week I sat down at the piano for a couple of hours to transcribe it. This was no mere folly, even if the blackbird is my favourite birdsong: some of the poems within the libretto talk of birdsong, and one of them specifically of the blackbird. I wanted this birdsong to be as close to genuine birdsong as I could manage. It is a recurring presence throughout the piece; a motif which strives to give strength and confidence, even in the darkest moments of the narrative. The first section to which I would first apply this birdsong during the writing of the piece — and the next I felt able to tackle in the Scholarship — was that which made direct reference to the blackbird: a stanza from Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle' used in the first movement, Gethsemane, to offer strength to Christ/The Soldier as he offers his first prayer in the garden, asking for the trial that is to come to pass him by: 'The blackbird sings to him, "Brother, brother, | If this be the last

song you shall sing, | Sing well, for you will not sing another; | Brother, sing!”.’ Again, it was a passage for which I had a very strong sense from the outset, whilst compiling the libretto, so it required only the birdsong to provide the seed for its writing, both instrumental and vocal, to allow it to be formed. Having completed this section, of the first movement, that movement became the focus for the rest of the Scholarship period, developing the music into and out of this solo and chorale, most notably the first narration and prayer, and the subsequent chastisement of the disciples and second narration into the beginning of the subsequent moment of contemplation that follows the second prayer: Gurney’s ‘The Sentry’.

Towards the end of the scholarship period I broke off from these vocal occupations, needing to leave the latter half of ‘The Sentry’ to settle a little in my mind, it not yet being clear to me. The question of how to begin the work as a whole now became an overriding concern, now that a substantial part of the basic melodic material, and the style of the piece, was becoming established. How to set the tone of a work that descends into absolute despair, presenting some of the motivic ideas for the piece, whilst also leading into the warm hope of spring in the garden, with which the work begins? I played with a few ideas for the opening, before one came that seemed overwhelmingly to be right, and worked up into a richness perfect for the beginning of the opening chorus: ‘The naked earth is warm with spring’. The completion of this opening, up to the first chorus entry, extended a little beyond the scholarship period, but once again, for the third or fourth time during the work undertaken during the scholarship, I was left with a feeling of delight and surprise at how I had managed to achieve what I had, musically. Each substantial new portion to be completed has brought with it a very real sense of achievement.

Work during the scholarship was much slower than I had hoped, completing less of the work than I had imagined; but I had succeeded in getting 11 minutes of music down on paper, which was a not insubstantial start — and more importantly, I was thrilled with the results, exceeding the expectations I had of what I might be able to achieve, and was perhaps capable.

In the twelve months since the formal end of the Scholarship, I have been spending all the time I can on the *War Passion*. I am on the cusp of completing the first movement, and I have completed a third of the third movement and half of the final movement. Other sections, particularly a key section of the second movement, are sketched. Some of the completed sections are those that I was dreading: quick passages of strident energy, which are now some of those of which I am most proud. The piece continues to exceed my own expectations of myself, and what I have been able to produce, and I hope the work will come across in performance as powerfully as I have felt it. It has so far provoked some pleasing responses from those to whom I have shown passages from the work.

An interesting aspect of the work that has emerged during the last couple of months, has come when (ever the academic!) I have chanced upon or sought out manuscripts of, or other sources relating to, the poems I am using, only to find

discrepancies between the published version of the poem and the original manuscript. It is a most curious anomaly, and, being concerned in my scholarly pursuits with manuscripts, their interpretation and accurate representation, I have had to change the poems to the authorial versions. This required no musical changes in the case of Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle', but my setting of Isaac Rosenberg's 'The Tower of Skulls' (in the third movement, 'Golgotha') has necessitated some substantive changes to the music, the emphasis of the latter part of the poem being altered entirely.

As I have been working on the *War Passion*, it has become evident that I have been giving more space to the piece than originally envisaged in my originally anticipated timing of the work. The original estimate of 40 minutes quickly became 50, and then 60; and having now just completed half of the work, and with a further portion sketched out, it is apparent that it is likely to run to some 66 minutes in total. So from that initial 11 minutes from the Scholarship period, just over 33 minutes is now completed, with a further 10 minutes or so sketched.

## CONCLUSION

Being able to rediscover my facility and capacity for original musical composition has been a joy, a revelation, and a relief, being able to release many pent up ideas. It is already proving enormously fruitful. The re-creation of a facility to sit down and write after almost fifteen years of silence has been a great boon. I have now created a 'habit', doing a little work on my music every day. This may be as little as just half an hour, which makes for slow progress — but it is progress nonetheless. Having built up my confidence and facility over the intensive period of the Scholarship, such a compositional habit has formed a viable path through which to keep creating, venting and giving voice to some of the ideas occur to me. Where I can, I spend longer periods of up to several hours on composition (the *War Passion* certainly requires a large number of hours yet before it will be brought to completion). In the midst of the intensive demands of my growing young family and my full time post as a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Exeter University (achieved since being awarded the Finzi Scholarship), I can readily switch into composition 'mode', and very quickly pick up the ideas I am working with, which will usually have been developing in my thoughts during my other work. In this way I continue to make progress on the *War Passion*, and have also just completed a new song with piano: a setting of a poem I considered for inclusion in the *War Passion*, Ivor Gurney's *Bach and the Sentry*. This song is to receive its first performance in late July 2015, and I shall be trying to build

some interest in that song amongst performers thereafter. Going forwards, I have strong ideas for three song cycles (one with just solo 'cello accompaniment), an orchestral work and a children's opera; and I should like also to make some deeper explorations in the direction of chamber music.

As far as the *Passion* is concerned, with the growth of the piece from the originally envisaged 40 minutes, and the other demands on my time, I was unable realistically to complete the piece in the six months following the Scholarship, as suggested in my application. I am now pushing to complete the work by the beginning of December (2015). I am thrilled that I have just received confirmation that my *War Passion* is to be premiered as part of the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival, in the last week of July 2016. Having mentioned the work to Adrian Partington, the Festival Director previously, following the Scholarship period I sent some of the completed sections, with the full libretto and an explanatory note, and he was sufficiently excited by the concept and material — and that work seen since — to include the work in the festival programme. *War Passion* will be performed in Cirencester Parish Church by Gloucester's St. Cecilia Singers, conducted by the cathedral's Assistant Director of Music, Jonathan Hope, with a team of soloists and ensemble yet to be confirmed. It is an enormous privilege for my first major work to be receiving its premiere at such an esteemed festival, and it is only as a result of the Finzi Scholarship that this has been made possible.

*Philip Lancaster, June 2015*

## POSTSCRIPT

### Performance Context

A question that was very reasonably raised by Liz Pooley during the Scholarship interview, was whether I had given any thought to the works that might accompany the *War Passion* in performance, it being only one half of a concert (even in its now more substantial form). With the performance now in place, the question of programming became more immediately relevant. I gave much thought to works that used some or all of the *Passion*'s accompanying ensemble, but found nothing that might suit. However, the nature of the *Passion* is such that, relatively speaking, the choir have a reasonably modest (although important) role in the piece (the fourth movement, for instance, has just one a short passage for upper voices, being otherwise *tacet*). Therefore I thought that a first half to a concert including the *War Passion* might be given over to the choir, unaccompanied, and to works that would set the scene or otherwise compliment the *Passion*'s subject. I therefore proposed three possible 'first halves' to the Festival:

Ralph Vaughan Williams	<i>O vos omnes</i> <i>Valiant for Truth</i> <i>The Souls of the Righteous</i>
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*followed by one of the below works:*

Hubert Parry	<i>Songs of Farewell</i>
	<i>or</i>
Edmund Rubbra	<i>Nine Tenebrae Motets</i>
	<i>or</i>
Herbert Howells	<i>Requiem</i>

Going forward, I shall be keeping an eye out for further possibilities for works that might compliment the *War Passion* in future performances (one can hope!); particularly for works with some instrumental input.

**Philip Lancaster** divides his time between work as a composer, poet, singer and academic. As a textual and critical scholar, he works at the interface of British music and poetry of the early twentieth century. He is the leading authority on the work of composer-poet Ivor Gurney, and in his current post as British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Exeter, he is, with Tim Kendall, editing Gurney's complete literary works for publication by Oxford University Press, and is writing a monograph on Gurney's music and poetry. He collated the first catalogue of Gurney's musical works, and has brought numerous works to performance, recording, broadcast and publication – most notably his orchestral and choral works. Philip has also recreated the original scoring of Gurney's *Five Elizabethan Songs*, and his orchestration of a Gurney choral work, *The Trumpet*, was released on CD by Naxos in November 2014. He is at present completing and orchestrating Gurney's major post-war cantata for baritone, chorus and orchestra, *Anthem of Earth*.

Philip lectures widely on British music and poetry, in venues ranging from village halls to the British Library, and has written articles, CD notes and book chapters on figures including Parry, Finzi, Ireland and Britten.

As a singer, Philip has appeared in recital at the Three Choirs Festival, English Music Festival and Ludlow Weekend of English Song, performing a wide range of repertoire from Bach and Beethoven to Benjamin Britten and Flanders & Swann. As a soloist on the concert platform his work has ranged from the intimacy of Bach's solo cantatas to the grandeur of Elgar's *Apostles*.

In 2014 Philip published his first collection of original poems, *Fulcrum*, and, under the auspices of a Finzi Scholarship, began the writing of a *War Passion* for soloists, chamber choir and ensemble, which will be premiered in July 2016.