

Program Notes

Ten Blake Songs

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Between 1957 and 1958 in the last year of his life, Vaughan Williams wrote the "Ten Blake Songs for tenor and oboe". This song cycle was composed for the documentary film "The Vision of William Blake" written and directed by Guy Brenton. The film, which commemorated the bi-centennial of Blake's birth explores his personal philosophy as expressed through his poetry and artwork. The piece was dedicated to tenor Wilfred Brown and oboist Janet Craxton who performed for the film and in the first performances both on-air at the BBC and publicly in concert. Vaughan Williams' wife Ursula, in the biography of her husband tells of how the "Ten Blake Songs" came to be:

A short job that came Ralph's way was the writing of some songs for a film. The Blake Centenary had suggested a film of Blake pictures and music was needed for it. The film makers brought film and machinery and ran the film through and showed Ralph the poems they would like him to set. At first he was not at all enthusiastic. He has always admired Blake as an artist, but he did not care greatly for his poems. However, he said he would see what he could do, stipulating that the songs should not include "that horrible little lamb – a poem I hate".

Once Vaughan Williams decided on setting the poems for tenor and oboe, the tunes were quickly created and he wrote nine songs in four days. On one morning he said to his wife, Ursula, "I was woken up by a tune for that beastly little lamb, and it's rather a good tune".

Although the song cycle was intended for tenor and oboe, underneath the title in the printed music it states "for voice and oboe".

Vaughan Williams never heard the cycle performed, for he had died on 26 August, well into his eighty-sixth year.

Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op 49

Benjamin Britten

This masterpiece composed by Benjamin Britten is unique in the oboe repertoire and is one of the most distinctive examples of solo single-line instrumental writing from any age. It is technically demanding and enigmatic.

It was written for and dedicated to Joy Boughton who first performed it on a punt in the boating lake at Thorpeness in Suffolk in 1951. At one point, the music blew into the water causing ink to run on some of the pages – the stains can still be seen on the manuscript.

Britten was known to have been keen for his music to be played accurately. Although there may be a fine line between accuracy and artistic license, various recordings show that interpretation and imagination play an important role in

the beautiful imagery evoked by Britten's writing being portrayed to the audience successfully.

The six movements are inspired by characters in Greek legend from Publius Ovidius Naso's great poem, *Metamorphoses*.

Pan who played upon the reed pipe which was Syrinx his beloved. The writing is based on a 3-note motif, which quizzically ends the piece and is characterized by free and asymmetric rhythms, ebbing and flowing. In this movement, as in the following five, the comma (pause) is used throughout and can be of varying length. Performances will vary according to interpretation and the need for greater rhythmic tension or relaxation. The final section is perhaps a paradox but surely a question?

Phaeton who rode upon the chariot of the sun for one day and was hurled into the river Padus by a thunderbolt. One can surely hear the clattering of horse's hooves and the speed of the wild journey across the sky at the beginning. Is the middle section, which is gentler, evocative of Phaeton momentarily being in control of the chariot and enjoying the journey? The last section which is marked "agitato" conjures up the hurling of the boy into the river but what can be happening in the final pianissimo section? Is the chariot disappearing into the distance or steam rising from the water?

Niobe who lamenting the death of her fourteen children, was turned into a mountain. The falling phrases in D flat major marked "piangendo" (weeping) seem to capture despair as Niobe comes to terms with the loss and faces her own shortcomings. In which phrase does the metamorphosis occur? Perhaps in the penultimate phrase which is followed by an unexpressive final phrase where Niobe has become the mountain.

Bacchus at whose feast is heard the noise of gagging women's tattling tongues and the shouting out of boys. Here, the musical phrases depict the energy and virility of Bacchus, the god of wine and intoxication. What can be heard during the festivities? Perhaps drunkenness, shouting, laughter . . .

Narcissus who fell in love with his own image and became a flower. In his score, Britten writes that the quiet passages represent the reflections of Narcissus as he becomes more confident facing his own image. These reflections become more intense and with the boy's transformation into a flower, there is stillness. The beauty of the flower is depicted without emotion.

Arethusa who, flying from the love of Alpheus the river god, is turned into a fountain. One can hear the fluidity of the phrasing depicting water and the movement of Alpheus. Arethusa rests thoughtfully near the gently flowing water. Soon the music becomes restless and panic ensues. She is being pursued by Alpheus and to hide from him she slips behind a cloud. She is restless and fearful and begins to perspire turning into a fountain, which becomes a stream uniting with the river.