

A Century of English Music

What makes English music typically English? Until the end of the nineteenth century the English themselves had no idea. As a matter of fact, for a long time they preferred foreigners, who gained such a prominent place in English music life that, despite their origin, they were regarded as 'British'. Mendelssohn's oratorios, for example, appeared to be written expressly to keep the numerous English choral societies busy. George Frideric Handel, who lived in England for a substantial part of his life, was considered English par excellence. Remarkably the explanation for this, as given by George Grove in 1890, was: 'There is something expressly English in Handel's characteristic. His size, his large appetite, his great writing, his domineering temper, his humour, his power of business, all are our own.'

The way **Ernst Pauer** (1826-1905) won the hearts of the Londoners ties in with this tradition. This pianist and composer, who was born in Vienna, studied harmony and counterpoint with Simon Sechter, who was to teach Bruckner later on. He was trained as a pianist by Franz Xaver Mozart, the son of the great composer. In 1845 he moved to Munich where he studied composition with Franz Lachner, a friend of Schubert. Having been trained in the best Viennese tradition, Pauer started his career as a pianist. In 1851 he gave his first performance in London. He had such great success in the city that he decided to go and live there. From 1861 he organised concert series in which he gave an overview of the history of piano music. He published the music that was played on these evenings in a series of piano books. The active pianist became a teacher at the Royal Academy of Music, and did not return to Germany until 1896.

During Pauer's first visit to England the impressive Crystal Palace, built for the Great Exhibition of 1851, was the latest attraction in London. Pauer gave concerts there on more than one occasion, also with his own music. Possibly he took part in a performance of his Quintet in F for oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn and piano from 1856. The virtuoso piano part demonstrates that the composer himself was an excellent pianist and is reminiscent of Beethoven and Hummel. The piano part has solo aspects, yet at the same time it unites the piece. The first movement has a grand introduction with a motive that sticks out through its sonorous trill. The second movement is a minuet with a charming Viennese trio in which the piano has a brilliant part. In the slow movement Pauer blends the woodwinds in beautiful dark timbres. The Quintet ends with a dazzling finale. Remarkably this wonderful composition has remained unknown: the recording by the Hexagon Ensemble is the first ever.

Like Pauer, **Gustav (von) Holst** (1874-1934) was of German origin. A significant difference was that Holst belonged to the third generation of his family to grow up in England. Therefore Holst is considered an English composer. In the English repertory his most popular orchestral work *The Planets* from 1916 has a status similar to that of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. In 1893 Holst was admitted to the Royal College of Music in London. Pauer still lived in London at that point, but the music life had changed since the time of his greatest successes. Composing had been given a new, national dimension, referred to as the *Second English Renaissance*, initiated by Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry, Holst's teachers at the Royal College of Music. After the turn of the century Edward Elgar crowned their work with the typical British 'pomp', the royal style he gave his music. Other English composers discovered elements in folk music, history and poetry with which they could give their music a national colour. For a generation of composers, including Vaughan Williams, Holst, Bax, and Bridge, the British cultural heritage formed a new source of inspiration. At the beginning of the twentieth century the answer to the question posed at the beginning of these programme notes was simple: typical of English music are, among others, the idyllic aspect that evokes the countryside and the return to traditional folk music or music from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Both aspects can be found in the Wind Quintet that Holst wrote in 1903. In those days Holst was influenced by Wagner, but there is little evidence of that in this light work. The first movement has that flowing motion and intimate character that are characteristic of English pastoral music. Despite some liveliness, the movement remains calm and the music ends serenely. An oboe solo introduces the stirring slow movement. This is also interrupted by an accelerated section, but once again it remains within the bounds. The minuet in the form of a canon reveals a second characteristic: it is reminiscent of a stately seventeenth-century dance. The piece ends with a lively variation movement that is in keeping with the preceding lightness.

The Quintet reached the concert hall in a very roundabout way. In the catalogue of her father's compositions Imogen Holst indicates that he entered the Quintet in his list of compositions in 1903. Later he added: 'Sent to Fransella in 1914.' Oboist Albert Fransella possibly lost the manuscript. In any case the composer never heard about it again. In his dissertation on Holst, Thomas Block says that the composer easily abandoned works if he had the slightest doubt about them. Imogen Holst suggests that her father even hoped that the music had got lost. Luckily this turned out not to be the case. In 1952 a flautist rediscovered the manuscript in a pile of sheet music. In 1982 the work was premiered by the Nash Ensemble and a year later the score was published by Imogen Holst and Colin Matthews. They made cuts in the first two movements.

The Sextet (1962) by **Gordon Jacob** (1895-1984) received its first performance exactly a century after Pauer's Quintet. Although Jacob was a generation younger than Holst, he had a similar training. He also studied at the Royal College of Music and had lessons from Stanford. One of his teachers was Ralph Vaughan Williams, a friend of Holst. Vaughan Williams declared later that Gordon Jacob 'was, at one time, nominally my pupil though there was nothing I could teach him, at all events in the matter of technique, which he did not know better than I.' For Jacob's generation the revival of English music was taken for granted. His tutors trained him to write music that pleased the ears. After the Second World War many people considered this way of composing conservative and old-fashioned. Jacob felt at odds with these new movements. He could not really imagine music in which melodiousness and beautiful sound were no longer allowed. In a documentary which the BBC made about him in 1959 he said: 'I personally feel that the day that melody is discarded, you may as well pack up music altogether.'

Jacob's predilection for melodiousness and harmony are clearly demonstrated in the Sextet that he wrote in 1955 for the legendary hornist Dennis Brain. The work was written for the tenth anniversary of Brain's wind ensemble. The Sextet was also a tribute to Brain's father, hornist Aubrey Brain, who had passed away in September 1955. For this reason Jacob used a motif consisting of the notes ABEBA, derived from Aubrey Brain's name, as the thematic basis for all the movements, with the exception of the Cortège. Apart from the fact that this motif is absent, the Cortège stands out through its melancholic character. The other four movements have a lightness that is at times reminiscent of French music. Before the end of the final movement the piece slows down: in the coda Jacob returns to the solemnness of the first movement. The horn produces a signal that seems to be Dennis's final farewell to his father. Dennis Brain was to outlive his father by only two years. Sixteen months after the premiere of Jacob's Sextet in 1956 he died in a road accident.

Niek Nelissen

Translation: Hilary Staples