

Charles Hubert Hastings Parry
1848-1918

BLEST PAIR OF SIRENS [Ode at a Solemn Musick

Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heaven's joy,
Sphere-born harmonious sisters Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ,
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce.
And to our high-raised phantasy present
That undisturbèd song of pure consent,
Aye sung before the sapphire-coloured Throne
To Him that sits thereon,
With saintly shout and solemn jubilee;
Where the bright Seraphim, in burning row
Their loud, uplifted angel-trumpets blow,
And the Cherubic host, in thousand quires,
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those spirits that wear victorious palms,
Hymns devout and holy psalms
Singing everlastingly.
That we on earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise;
As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against nature's chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience, and their state of good.

O may we soon again renew that song,
And keep in tune with heav'n, till God ere long
To His celestial concert us unite,
To live with Him, and sing in endless morn of light.

John Milton [1608-1674]

Stanley Sadie's admirably concise overview on Parry's achievement provides an absorbing insight into the life and work of one of the most underrated British composers since Henry Purcell:

His forceful personality and social position, together with his ethical views and intellectual vigour, enabled Parry to exercise a revitalising influence on English musical life in the late nineteenth century.

For generations, Britain in general – and England in particular – had been known on the continent as *the land without music* – generality not altogether deserved, especially in respect of church and organ music with characters of the volatile, maverick tendency such as Thomas Attwood Walmisley and Samuel Sebastian Wesley who produced music of startling originality and astonishing energy. Parry's magnificent setting of John Milton's *Ode at a Solemn Musick* is said by many to be the single work that heralded the late-Victorian period known as the *English Musical Renaissance*.

Parry's reputation in English cultural life remains secure, even if only by virtue of two works – the glorious melody to William Blake's *Jerusalem* written at the quest of his demanding wife, Lady Maude (the daughter of the Earl of Pembroke) for a *Fight for Right* rally at the Royal Albert Hall in 1915 arranged in support of female suffrage and the superb Coronation Introit *I was glad when they said unto me*.

Additional to his composing, Parry was a leading figure in the British cultural establishment of his day – Professor of Music in the University of Oxford and Director of the Royal College of Music in successor to founder Sir George Grove. Knighted in 1898 for his services to music, he received a baronetcy five years later. His Symphonies, now all happily available on CD, organ music, liturgical choral output and songs all clamour for attention from serious music-lovers. *Blest pair of Sirens* was written for, and dedicated to, Sir Charles Stanford and the Bach Choir of which he was for many years conductor. Originally disposed for eight parts, *Blest Pair* loses very little by being sung in an ingenious version for four voices devised by Dr C S Lang – a version in which the clarity of the individual vocal lines may be seen – and heard! – as a decided virtue.

Edward Elgar

1857-1934

ODE: THE MUSIC MAKERS

We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamer of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.

With wonderful deathless ditties,
We build up the world's great cities,
And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory:
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
And three with a new song's measure
Can trample an empire down.

We, in the ages lying
In the buried past of earth,
Built Nineveh with our sighing,
And Babel itself with our mirth;
And o'erthrew them with prophesying
To the old of the new world's worth;
For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.

A breath of our inspiration,
Is the life of each generation.
A wondrous thing of our dreaming,
Unearthly, impossible seeming-
The soldier, the king, and the peasant
Are working together in one,
Till our dream shall become their present,
And their work in the world be done.

They had no vision amazing
Of the goodly house they are raising.
They had no divine foreshowing
Of the land to which they are going:
But on one man's soul it hath broke,
A light that doth not depart
And his look, or a word he hath spoken,
Wrought flame in another man's heart.

And therefore today is thrilling,
With a past day's late fulfilling.
And the multitudes are enlisted
In the faith that their fathers resisted,
And, scorning the dream of tomorrow,
Are bringing to pass, as they may,
In the world, for it's joy or it's sorrow,
The dream that was scorned yesterday.

But we, with our dreaming and singing,
Ceaseless and sorrowless we!
The glory about us clinging
Of the glorious futures we see,
Our souls with high music ringing;

O men! It must ever be
That we dwell, in our dreaming and singing,
A little apart from ye.

For we are afar with the dawning
And the suns that are not yet high,
And out of the infinite morning
Intrepid you hear us cry-
How, spite of your human scorning,
Once more God's future draws nigh,
And already goes forth the warning
That ye of the past must die.

Great hail! we cry to the corners
From the dazzling unknown shore;
Bring us hither your sun and your summers,
And renew our world as of yore;
You shall teach us your song's new numbers,
And things that we dreamt not before;
Yea, in spite of a dreamer who slumbers,
And a singer who sings no more.

Arthur O'Shaunnessy [1844-1881]

With the notable exception of the famous *Enigma* Variations for orchestra (on an original theme, Op 36), *The Music Makers* may be said to be its composer's most personal work. In many ways it represents a wonderful retrospective of the Victorian and Edwardian eras in England – redolent of an emotional and spiritual parting of the ways and possibly prophetic of the horror of the Great War that was shortly to come, the so-called “War to end all Wars”. The piece is notable for the way in which Elgar weaves in motto themes from earlier works – there are self-quotations from the *Enigma* Variations, *The Dream of Gerontius*, *Sea Pictures*, both symphonies and the violin concerto (many of these are to be found in the accompaniment rather than in the choral or solo vocal lines. The work was composed for the 1912 Birmingham Festival – it was, of course, for these festivals (rather than the Three Choirs) that Elgar wrote *Gerontius*, *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*.

The composer's intimate relationship with O'Shaunnessy's evocative text is, in the words of the famous hymn, “full clear on every page” partly since Elgar was himself a great “dreamer of dreams”. Of all the musical quotations in the work, the most powerfully expressed are two in number:

The *Nimrod* theme from the *Enigma* at the soloist's lines *But on one man's soul it hath broken,
A light that shall not depart* and, from *Gerontius*, the reprise of the *Novissima hora est* music used to introduce the last words of the mezzo soprano soloist in *The Music Makers* at the line *And a singer who sings no more*

In general terms, O'Shaunnessy's words elicit from Elgar music of quite extraordinary power and passion. The sonorous orchestral sonorities lose very little of transference to a fine, Romantic organ and the ecstatic nature of the glorious solo vocal line is a major factor in this miniature masterpiece.

We are grateful to Simon Lindley for stepping in to rehearse and conduct this concert.

We are also indebted to David Houlder for the support he has given in taking some rehearsals.