

George Butterworth: Songs from A Shropshire Lad

When George Butterworth was killed by a sniper's bullet on the Somme in 1916, the men he fought beside had no idea he was one of the most promising British composers of his generation.

Just a few years earlier he had written two cycles of songs based on poems from A.E. Housman's **A Shropshire Lad** and an orchestral Rhapsody of themes from the first cycle – and critics were hailing him “a new composer of the first order”.

Butterworth was a close friend of Ralph Vaughan Williams – the two met while he was studying at Oxford and both developed a love for English folk music.

Many British composers including Vaughan Williams were inspired to set the poems of **A Shropshire Lad** to music – Housman always gave his consent in the hope, he said, “of becoming immortal somehow”. But no composer came close to Butterworth's achievement. The folk-like simplicity of the vocal line and delicate, pared-back piano accompaniment perfectly match the simple lyricism and tragic beauty of Housman's verses.

And, for audiences today, the songs are all the more poignant and moving when we know Butterworth was powerfully evoking themes that seem to foresee the terrible events on the Western Front – and his own fate.

The song *Loveliest Of Trees* is about the fleetingness of life; *The Lads In Their Hundreds* is about the “the lads who will die in their glory but never be old”; *Think No More Lad* is about the need to avoid thinking and just drink and be jolly if you're going to forget about your mortality; *With Rue My Heart is Laden* laments the loss of “many a lightfoot lad” now laid by brooks too broad for leaping.

Best of all is Butterworth's setting of *Is My Team Ploughing?*, which has been described as “one of the great songs of the world” – one that challenges comparison with the best of Schubert.

It's a dialogue between a dead soldier and his living friend back home. The dead boy asks his friend if his team of horses is still ploughing on the farm where he worked before he went off to war. His friend's responses to the dead soldier's questions build to a devastating conclusion.

It captures the mood of a poem Housman thought his best – “if not the most perfect” – in a way music critics have said makes you wonder what Butterworth would have gone on to achieve if he hadn't suffered the same fate as the young soldier of the song.

Themes from the songs are used in York-based Pick Me Up Theatre's one-man production of **Private Peaceful** – the story of a young soldier spending his last night reliving his life before he's to be shot at dawn. The production runs at the Edinburgh Fringe from 14-26 August. Butterworth's songs will also be performed at the Fringe by 18-year-old baritone Sam Hird and pianist Sam Johnson.

Butterworth, whose family lived in York, had thoughts of going into the legal profession but during his time at Oxford he decided music was his life passion. He went on to study at the Royal College of Music but left after a year and, realising he couldn't afford to live through music composition alone, he found employment teaching and writing about music for newspapers.

Despite the success of his Housman settings, he was generally restless and dissatisfied in his 20s – unsure what he was going to do with his life – and when war came in 1914 he signed up, saying it “gave him something to do”.

He and a group of friends enlisted as privates but, by the time he went to France, Butterworth was a lieutenant commanding a platoon made up of Durham miners. With his northern roots, Butterworth felt an affinity with the Durham soldiers, and they loved and respected him. He apparently collected songs from them – but none of them suspected he was an acclaimed composer.

Butterworth was killed in a trench near the German front line as dawn broke near Pozieres on the Somme on 5th August 1916. Fighting was so fierce he was buried nearby and his grave was never rediscovered.

People who knew Butterworth before the war said they thought few men could be less suited for a soldier's life – but the Durham miners thought him an unselfish, courageous leader, and in the weeks leading up to his death he was awarded two Military Crosses.

In his recent book **Housman Country**, Peter Parker speculates that the reason Butterworth had such an affinity with Housman's poetry was that he shared aspects of Housman's temperament.

Outwardly, Butterworth appeared a hearty figure with a pipe in his mouth and a typically Yorkshire style of plain speaking – but friends said this covered a great shyness and very tender heart.

He responded to Housman's poems *When I Was One-And-Twenty* and *Look Not In My Eyes* with settings that capture the desperate feeling of a young person struggling with thwarted or unrequited love.

Parker says no women outside Butterworth's family seem to have featured in his life and asks: "Was he simply a man's man or did he, like Housman, have some secret sorrow that fed into his work?"

Whatever the answer, Butterworth was inspired by Housman's poems to create some of the most wonderful English songs of the 20th century.

*With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.*

*By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.*

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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Website:

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/shropshire-lad

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/fringe

Performances:

Songs From A Shropshire Lad 22-26 Aug 6pm

Private Peaceful 14-19 Aug 9.55am, 21-26 Aug 4.35pm

Venue:

theSpace@NiddryStreet Venue 9 EH1 1TH