

'BRIGHT FLOWER BREAKS FROM CHARNEL BOUGH'

COMMISSIONING THE ARTS OF PEACE FOR THE 1953 CORONATION

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A Garland for the Queen was a cycle of ten choral madrigals commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain to celebrate the coronation of Elizabeth II. Newly written by a glittering group of composers in collaboration with a living poet of their choice, it should have been an unparalleled example of English vocal music. Some of the most eminent living composers of the day—Ralph Vaughan Williams, Michael Tippett, Gerald Finzi, Herbert Howells, John Ireland, Lennox Berkeley—worked alongside celebrated poets such as Louis MacNeice, Walter de la Mare and Christopher Fry, and successful librettists like Paul Dehn and Christopher Hassall. As the first commission by the Arts Council of song, that most English of musical genres, it should have been a fanfare beginning. The collection was performed by the Augmented Choir of the Cambridge University Madrigal Society on the Coronation Eve at the newly-built Royal Festival Hall, constructed as part of the 'tonic to the nation', the Festival of Britain in 1951.¹ Yet instead of providing sparkling additions to the professional and amateur choral repertoires of the nation, the songs were variously failures, ignored, or strangely ambivalent.

This article will chart the commission, compilation and reception of the project, making particular use of the Arts Council Archive to provide what I believe to be the first detailed history of the madrigal cycle. The research corrects some misunderstandings that have arisen due to the lack of such a history, such as the suggestion by Stephen Banfield in *The Twentieth-Century* that Walton and Britten were not invited to take part, when they were, but turned down the commission.² Furthermore I will

claim that Britten did make a contribution to the *Garland* in the song from the *Masque of the Country Girls* in Act II of his coronation opera, *Gloriana*, where they bring ‘Norfolk’s own garlands for her queen’.⁵

The article will also consider some of the reasons for the works’ subsequent lack of success, including the commissioning purpose, the publication history and the contemporary and later reception. I will argue that the failures and ambivalences are both the result of the artists’ attitude to a prestigious but occasional commission, and the result of the difficult legacies of the Second World War, of austerity Britain and of the first Elizabethan age. In ‘Canzonet’, by the poet Louis MacNeice and composer Alan Rawsthorne, the difficult legacy is turned into an opportunity for a serious and complex negotiation between celebrating the ‘bright flower’ of a young queen born in the spring time, and simultaneously insisting on the dark background, the ‘charnel bough’.⁴

The new queen’s coronation provided more opportunities and funding for art than any in the past century, building on a tradition of many centuries’ standing of commissioning coronation works by the court, particularly choral and processional music.⁵ Such commissions had often gained significant nationalistic overtones, such as the setting of ‘Land of Hope and Glory’, an arrangement of Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance* marches for the 1902 coronation of Edward VII; or the tradition from the seventeenth century of setting Psalm 121 ‘I was glad’.⁶ What was new in 1952–5 was the harnessing of this court occasion by artists, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Arts Council as an opportunity to create national music outside the ceremony itself, in concerts, broadcast on radio, film and, for the first time, television. Many pieces were composed: commissioned by the court, the Church of England, the Royal Opera House and Royal Ballet, for two documentary films, and a coronation opera, *Gloriana*.⁷

High hopes for the future were expressed by the media:

Those who had seen other Coronations would agree that never in their time had there been such an upsurge of loyalty and devotion to the Sovereign as there was now. He [Lord Simmons, the Lord Chancellor] thought it was because the whole world saw in a radiant young Queen the embodiment of their hopes for a new age in which the arts of peace would flourish.⁸

Yet in spite of all this discussion of the ‘new’, the scars and debts incurred by the war meant that the coronation was also a time of conservatism, of relative poverty, of fear for the future. The war had left the British government debts of approximately £7.5 billion in depreciation, damage, loss and the need to pay for the Forces.⁹ ‘Austerity’ measures affected all strata of society.¹⁰ The new Conservative government, led again by the war-time Prime Minister Winston Churchill, was only slowly moving away from deficit budgets and rationing. In spite of victories in two World Wars, the Empire was ‘dissolving and departing from us by a voluntary surrender’ to be replaced by the Welfare State and the ‘Commonwealth’, a hazy euphemism for the reduced imperial influence.¹¹ The 1951 Festival of Britain was a ‘tonic to the nation’, a medicinal celebration for a sick country, a marked contrast to the Great Exhibition of 1851 which had celebrated a thriving Empire.

Both the *Garland* cycle and Benjamin Britten’s opera *Gloriana* were funded by the Treasury through the Arts Council.¹² For the first five years of its existence, the new Arts Council had functioned solely as a guarantor for productions, neither commissioning new works nor funding performances: ‘Before 1951 [and the Festival of Britain] the Arts Council had been shy of becoming involved in commissioning schemes’, and large-scale projects such as the Coronation were extremely rare.¹⁵ The Coronation was the first time that the Arts Council funded an opera from creation to first night; or funded any commission of purely vocal music.

An institutional commission for a state occasion might seem to be a perfect example of art as a purely social product. Moreover, it might seem that such commissions would be inflexible, conservative and bureaucratic, constrained by budgets, protocols and public accountability.¹⁴ Certainly, *A Garland for the Queen* was run by a sub-committee of representatives from four other committees, and attempted to keep control of the process by having all the composers’ requests for poets, the commissioning of the poets, the text of the poems, and then the music pass through their hands. There is, however, evidence that those involved acted rather as idiosyncratic individuals, with their own networks, ideas and loyalties.

John Denison, Music Director at the Arts Council and chairman of the committee, formed a personal clique outside the committee which

provided the impetus, the ideas, and the contacts. Denison regularly met for lunch or corresponded with Prof. Tony Lewis of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts (University of Birmingham) and Leonard Isaacs of the BBC, with Boris Ord, the Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge. At these meetings they would 'pow-wow', exchange trade gossip and plot musical events.¹⁵

Furthermore, the composers were allowed to choose their own poets and, although a list was produced should any require prompting, all but two chose someone they knew well, and had worked with on a previous project. Only half of the poets were from the list. Nor did the committee exercise much editorial control. Ralph Vaughan Williams's and Ursula Wood's 'Silence and Music', about a dying swan, was not considered ideal by its creators nor the committee, but since an attempt had been made at a more celebratory piece that had not worked out, it was allowed to stand.¹⁶ Thus it would seem that Eric W. White's claim in his later history that the Art's Council was 'a system that enables the State to provide a vital measure of help to the arts in a way that does not stifle artistic freedom or individual enterprise,' was in fact true (p. 11).

In the same way, the idea of *Gloriana* as a national coronation opera was concocted by Britten and the Earl of Harewood on a skiing holiday, and it only became official because Britten was adamant he would not take on such an opera unless it was—which Harewood, as a cousin of the Queen and Director of the Royal Opera House, was well placed to arrange.¹⁷ In fact with these pieces such personal connections were the norm rather than the exception: the poets, composers, producers and commissioners were well established men, privately or public-school educated, and then at Oxford, Cambridge or the Royal College of Music, who created culturally privileged works of art professionally. Their artistry was recognised by knighthoods, or positions as Master of the Queen's Music, at the Arts Council, the British Council abroad, or the BBC.¹⁸ Yet this seemingly deterministic background is a poor indicator of what we might expect from these works, which are, in fact, often awkward, or odd, or unexpected.

'A search for modern parallels with the age of the first "Oriana" may prove fruitful,' Christopher Hassall had written in his commissioning notes ('Annexure B').¹⁹ The madrigals, the opera about Elizabeth I, and

the newly-refurbished South Bank of the early 1950s were therefore the final and most public flowerings of a neo-Elizabethanism which had been influential for some decades before the serendipity of the enthronement of a queen bearing the same name. The madrigal revival had been most significant in the 1930s and 1940s, when composers like Gerald Finzi and Michael Tippett wrote madrigals, motets and part-songs for professional and amateur performance.²⁰

Neo-Elizabethanism was the looking back to a Golden Age of literature, music and political might in the reign of Elizabeth Tudor. The early twentieth century looked back to a golden age of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Sidney and Spenser; of Raleigh and Drake; of Byrd and Tallis; of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and the Anglican settlement: an earthy vision of 'merrie England' before Puritanism and Industrialisation. As the journalist Philip Gibbs wrote in *The New Elizabethans* (1953):

Now that there is a second Queen Elizabeth beginning her reign many of us are inclined to take stock of ourselves and to compare our own character, conditions, manners, morals, and chances of a new blossoming, with those of our Elizabethan ancestors. (p. 15)

The new Elizabethanism signified both visually and politically powerful spectacle, when pageantry and display were as important to popular forms, like film and television, as they were to opera and choral song. New Elizabethanism also evoked a sense of social cohesion. This social utopia was imagined as the pit of Shakespeare's Globe, where people who couldn't even afford a seat jostled to hear verse-drama classics like *Hamlet*, among the stews, slums and stink of the South Bank.²¹

When the Arts Council commissioned ten composers and poets to write new part-songs, based on *The Triumphs of Oriana*, it was a sign of the conservatism of the commissioning process.²² Even the name of the commission was significant, as new Elizabethanism's definitive statement was by the historian A. L. Rowse in his 1953 book *An Elizabethan Garland*.²³ An imagined social history of secure villages, morris-dancing, maypoles, of 'cakes and ale', with the upheavals of the dissolution of the monasteries or Mary's martyrs behind them, was integral to the neo-Elizabethanism of the twentieth century. Yet this glamour was not only because of the bucolic: bawdiness was also integral.

Out of this time of brutality, heroism, tavern brawls, bawdy songs, stabbings, coarse laughter, animal love, squalor and splendour, adventure and daring, English genius burst forth in glory (Gibbs, p. 17)

As a school boy, Louis MacNeice had thought of ‘Elizabethan England as through-and-through glamorous’.²⁴ The adult MacNeice would be more critical. Writing in 1939, he would reflect on how his earlier admiration had been blind to the ‘appalling chicanery and crudity’ (*The Strings are False*, p. 98). It was a view he explored creatively in May of 1951 in the ‘Suite for Recorders’, taking its title from Tudor music.²⁵

Golden Age? Age of discovery? Age of madrigals and liars,
Age when men died young. We envy what we think an innocent ardour,
What in fact was staged revolt upon a tightrope, a creative
Despair (*Collected Poems*, p. 317)

It is this conflict that produces much of the best, and most interesting work in the collection.

A Garland for the Queen was intended to take the Elizabethan *Triumphs of Oriana* madrigal collection and transpose it to ‘contemporary Britain’ (Hassall, ‘Annexure B’). Thus suggesting that the intention was to encourage the artists to produce works which celebrated a sense of a new ‘Golden Age’, but also to provide a landmark collection of songs. The Elizabethan volume was made up of twenty-three newly composed madrigals by twenty-one composers for four to six voices, with the common refrain: ‘And then sang the shepherdes and nimphs of Diana / Long live fair Oriana’. Compiled by Thomas Morley, the works were of lasting significance to English music, and made a significant contribution to the contemporary madrigal repertoire (for example in the *Oxford Book of Madrigals*).²⁶

The Triumphs of Oriana was written in praise of Elizabeth Tudor, and dedicated to the Earl of Nottingham. The original was published in 1601 but not distributed until 1605, after Elizabeth I’s death: ‘Were they not to the Queen’s liking?’ Mann asks in his essay in the Programme for the première of *A Garland for the Queen*.²⁷ Tradition had it that it was Nottingham who intercepted a ring that Elizabeth had given to Essex to return if he was ever in danger, so that she did not stay his execution. It

may have been, Mann speculates, that Elizabeth saw Nottingham as ‘the murderer of Essex’.²⁸ In fact the work ‘might so have disquieted Elizabeth I that she forbade the publication of *The Triumphs of Oriana*’ (p. 8).

Nonetheless, the *Garland* was consciously modelled on the Elizabethan collection. The committee of representatives of other Arts Council committees was set up ‘to report and make recommendations on the possibility of commissioning a “collection” of short a cappella pieces for un-accompanied voices to mark the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.’²⁹ Included were John Denison as Music Director and representative of the set that met to ‘pow-wow’, Eric Walter White as Assistant Secretary, Christopher Hassall from the Poetry Panel, and Edmund Rubbra (composer), Mervyn Bruxner (founder of the Dartington music courses) and Alan Frank (Head of Oxford University Press Music Publishing) all from the Music Panel. They hoped for eight to ten pieces, to last between twenty-five and forty minutes, with no more than six vocal parts, and some pieces with fewer, ‘some of the pieces should be within the technical reach of most amateur groups’ (Music Panel Paper No. 17). At least one song should be for female voices only, and one for men’s voices.

Composers should be asked to collaborate with a living poet in the provision of a suitable text, and while they should be free to choose whom they liked, the invitation should be accompanied with a list of poets recommended by the Poetry Panel from whom they could make a choice, if they so wished.³⁰

The composition of the poets and composers lists required multiple drafts of names, and a series of votes. The names of the composers were divided, sportsmanlike, into the ‘Team’ and the ‘Reserves’, then ‘Full Votes’ and ‘Wingers’, and finally a ‘First XI’ and ‘Reserves’.³¹ The rather larger list of poets was further expanded in the course of a correspondence between White, Hassall and John Compton (the noted organ builder), and sent out to the composers in order, with the full list of poets and Hassall’s guidance notes, which made the connection with the *Oriana* madrigals explicit.

The proposed composers’ First XI consisted of Arnold Bax, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, Arthur Bliss, William Walton, Edmund Rubbra, Lennox Berkeley, Michael Tippett, Herbert Howells, Gerald Finzi, and John Ireland. From the notes it is clear that Bliss was

expected to work with Henry Reed, having recently collaborated on *The Enchantress* (1951). Finzi, it was assumed, would work again with Blunden; Blunden had stayed with Gerald and Joy Finzi while he was working on an edition of Ivor Gurney's poems and they had written the ceremonial ode *For St Cecilia* in 1947. Hassall, the text editor, thought Walton was likely to work with him, as they were then writing *Troilus and Cressida* together. Unfortunately the libretto for *Troilus* was going badly, and so Walton refused on the grounds of his other commissions, the *Orb and Sceptre* march and the Te Deum for the coronation service in Westminster Abbey itself.⁵² Instead, Hassall collaborated with the music editor, Rubbra.⁵³ Because of the demands of *Gloriana*, Britten also refused, though he did include 'Norfolk's own garlands for her Queen' in act II, a part song brought by the Country Girls in the Masque. It would appear that Alan Rawsthorne was promoted from the reserves, as suggested by the drafts 'A' and 'B', to 'the first twelve' as suggested by Denison's letter to Lewis (18 November 1952).

The list of twenty-four poets in 'Annexure A' included, in addition to those mentioned above, the Poet Laureate, John Masefield; the surrealists David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas; the grand dames Edith Sitwell and Vita Sackville West; and the 50s poets Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis and Laurie Lee. In the end, only Louis MacNeice and Paul Dehn were subsequently taken up by a composer, and then only because they had been collaborators in the past.⁵⁴ The other lyricists were James Kirkup, Ursula Wood (Ralph Vaughan Williams's wife), Christopher Fry (an old school colleague of Michael Tippett), Clifford Bax (Arnold Bax's brother) and Walter de la Mare (the poet Herbert Howells set most frequently). John Masefield contributed two poems to the celebrations, though no lyrics: 'Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (June 2)' was published in *The Times*, and 'On our Glorious Sovereign' printed in the *Approved Souvenir Programme*, especially for those who still had no television and would be following the event on the wireless:

May this old land revive and be
Again a star set in the sea,
A Kingdom fit for such as She⁵⁵

Even as Masefield evoked glorious natural images of an island nation,

crossed with the Marian imagery of the *Stella Maris*, the Star of the Sea, he was depicting a land that was ‘old’ and in need of reviving.⁵⁶ Even in the most steadfastly rural and lyrical of the songs, there are as many deep shadows and dark valleys as white flowers and golden mornings.

The song that I consider to best reflect the complexities of the commission is ‘Canzonet’ by MacNeice and Rawsthorne. In ‘Canzonet’, not only are the shadows successfully foregrounded but the light is multifaceted to provide a challenging commentary, an earthy celebration, a nuanced critique. MacNeice and Rawsthorne use natural images, regular rhythms and block harmonies as well as modernist techniques, including allusions to *The Waste Land* and conflicting time signatures. The techniques and content set up tensions within the text and music which make it particularly valuable as a way to examine contemporary attitudes to the commission and the coronation. The collaboration between Louis MacNeice and Alan Rawsthorne on ‘Canzonet’ is a work of ‘angular’ beauty and troubling dissonances, where disjunctions and unresolved conflicts were harnessed to produce greater interest and complexity.⁵⁷ This was characteristic of MacNeice’s working practices as a features writer for the BBC, where he was accustomed to treading this creative tightrope between institutional creation and artistic integrity, producing works that were at once accessible and difficult.⁵⁸ Music was often fundamental to creating meaning in his features, and Rawsthorne had previously collaborated with MacNeice in the personal elegy for MacNeice’s closest school friend killed at sea in 1944, in the dreamlike *He Had a Date* (1944), and a coarse classical comedy, *Trimalchio’s Feast* (1948).

‘Canzonet’ sets a Latin quotation from the Bacchanalian third (or possibly fifth)-century Latin hymn to Venus, the *Perivigilium Veneris* as the chorus, with the words of MacNeice’s poem set above as a soprano solo.⁵⁹ The Latin poem was inextricably linked to the golden adolescence of MacNeice’s last days at Marlborough College, an ‘idyll’, described in his unfinished autobiography, *The Strings are False* (written in 1959), where he recalls sunbathing in the nude, picnicing on berries and reciting the *Perivigilium Veneris* by heart. As school friends later recalled, MacNeice had performed a recitation of the *Perivigilium Veneris* for an Anonymous Club ‘Evening of Vernal and Amorous Verse’ in his final years at

Marlborough.⁴⁰ It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that in the welter of spring imagery, prompted by the queen's youth and the hopes of a new beginning as much as her April birth, and the repeated emphasis on love (as Masfield has it, 'May love keep all her pathways green'), 'Vernal' should prompt 'Amorous' for MacNeice.

The tag, '*Cras amet qui nunqu'amavit / Quiqu'amavit cras amet*,' translates as, 'Tomorrow they will love who have not loved, / Those who have not loved, will love tomorrow'. The first line of the quotation is repeated six times, the second line thrice and, together with a single line each of MacNeice's poem sung by the basses, tenors and altos, make up the entire choral text. Thus the Latin functions not merely an epigraph or, as with medieval macaronics, a stock refrain, but rather is the central message of the song, with MacNeice's poem serving as a commentary and a development.⁴¹ The lines might thus suggest an innocuous new era of love and peace, as most of the *Garland* lyrics do, reflecting the general mood of the event. However, in the context of the *Perivigilum*, the lines are clearly about tumbling those nymphs who had not fallen the night before. As Lewis Gielgud would put it in his 1952 translation, with nude wood engravings by George Buday, 'Tomorrow be lovers who never were lovers / and they that were lovers be lovers again!'⁴² Both MacNeice's words, and their setting by Rawsthorne play on this double entendre with a literal double hearing, the new poem and the Latin overlapping. Complexity is introduced not only by contrasting a dark past, but by suggesting a riotous, carnivalesque future.

The context of transposing *The Triumphs of Oriana* to the twentieth century played to Rawsthorne's talents. Stephen Banfield wrote in *Sensibility and English Song*:

The versatility of Rawsthorne's chromatic sonorities is their great strength. They can appear to arise out of pseudo-Elizabethan false relations . . . or they can construct a modernistic sound-world of extreme dissonance.⁴³

In 'Canzonet', Rawsthorne had the chance to create both a 'pseudo-Elizabethan' and a 'modernistic sound-world'. Rawsthorne's setting is extremely sympathetic to MacNeice's poem: he sets the stresses of the line to the beats of the bar and extends important words beyond the

crotchet. The discomfort, the uncertainty as to the text's appropriateness is underlined by the setting. Accidentals in the solo line set up individual dissonances with the underlying choral, chordal, harmonies. At the same time, the time signatures are subtly set against each other, the chorus singing in 3/4, with a measured crotchet rhythm, while the soloist sings in 9/8.⁴⁴ The ambiguity and palimpsestic construction of MacNeice's poem is therefore mirrored in the musical modernism of Rawsthorne's setting.

The part-song aligns itself with modern and modernist practices in the frequent use of dissonance, the unusual sandwiching of time signatures, and five key changes achieved by chromatic shading, often in the middle of a phrase. At the same time the song's regular rhythms, both musical and poetic (iambic tetrameter, occasionally catalectic), the use of rhyming couplets and the eventual return to close harmony and the tonic, retain a link to popular and traditional forms like the madrigal and Romantic part song. It is in the overlaying of the traditional and the modern that the difficulty is produced.

In bar 13, the soprano sings over the choir's '*amavit*' (loved) and then the tenors singing '*Cras*' (tomorrow): 'A thousand years and who knows how / Bright flower breaks from charnel bough.' Here Rawsthorne introduces dissonances which emphasise the contrast in the image, and the contrast between the choral celebration of future love and the solo expression of a dark miracle. In bar 13, Rawsthorne distorts the tonic chord with an augmented fourth, the so-called '*diabolus in musica*', and the seventh, two dissonances which classically lead to a strong resolution by a return to the tonic, but instead the piece changes key altogether, resisting, for the moment, any resolution.⁴⁵ Yet in the final phrases, choir and soloist antiphonally sing: 'A thousand years and none the same' and 'Tomorrow love, you who have never loved'. In bar 32 the soloist and chorus return to the tonic and fifth; a stable, perfect, consonance. The meaning of the words and music together are clear: the previous millennium of kings have not ruled with love, but with war; now is the time for the 'arts of peace'.⁴⁶

Thus it is that a 'bright flower breaks from charnel bough'. The 'bright flower' maintains the spring imagery of the collection as a whole, what Edmund Blunden and Gerald Finzi's 'White-flowering Days' called 'long days of blue and golden light'. In *The Queen Elizabeth Coronation*

Souvenir, Neil Ferrier recapitulated this sense of rejuvenation: ‘Everyone has felt since the Queen came to the throne that in her the British Monarchy had found a very special kind of renewal’ (p. 20). These white flowers suggest a new blossom, budding in the colour of peace and innocence (white flags, bridal gowns, the queen’s coronation robes) from a dead limb, of the war years, as they were in Rubbra and Hassall’s ‘Salutation’—or perhaps of the House of Hanover-Windsor. The flowers may be intended as a communal and natural metaphor in a modern, mechanized society, in the same way that Pound’s ‘petals’ in ‘In a Station of the Metro’ lays an image of delicate Japonaiserie over a dark underground background and the pallid faces of commuters.⁴⁷ Pale flowers fall in flurries from the trees in Masfield’s poem for the *Approved Souvenir Programme*, when ‘the cherry blossom snowed’ (p. 2).

Yet MacNeice’s flowers ‘break’ away from the branch; or even snap it in an echo of the nursery rhyme, ‘When the bough breaks/ The cradle will fall’, implying a fall from innocence, a sin, a deflowering.⁴⁸ The ‘bright flower breaks from charnel bough’, the ‘flower and flame’ thus refer us back to the *Perivigilium*, to the ‘rose dressed as a bride in a robe of fire’ (*‘Cras pudorem qui latebat veste tectus ignea’*), to the ‘the sparkling teardrops trembling on the bough, in the balance of falling’ (*‘En micant lacrimæ trementes de caduco pondere’*), blushing, quivering, to be disrobed by the morning light.⁴⁹

The contrast of the fresh life of the ‘bright flower’ with the dead image of the ‘charnel bough’ is so unexpected the mind suspects a mishearing, perhaps for a ‘charred’ or ‘carnal bower’—both of which reinforce the disturbing imagery of sex and death.⁵⁰ MacNeice had written in ‘Suite for Recorders’ (1951), a gloss on this Elizabethan heritage, where he has the shepherds and nymphs ‘dying in holocausts of blossom’ (*Collected Poems* p. 317), perhaps rewriting one of the *Oriana* madrigals:

The Nimphs and shepheards daunced,
Lavoltos in a dazy tapstred vally,
Love from their face lamps glaunced,
Till wantonly they dally,
Then in a Rose bankt ally,
Bright Majestie advanced,
A crowne grac’t Virgin whom all people honor,
They leave their sport amazed . . .

Then sang the Shepherds & Nymphs of Diana,
Long live faire Oriana!⁵¹

So was all this wanton dalliance at a Treasury-funded concert an act of public school boy mischief?

It seems unlikely that the commissioning panel would have been unaware of the ambiguous cultural allusions of the work, or of the kind of work that these artists routinely produced.⁵² The *Perivigilium* was by no means an unknown text, it was included in the *Oxford Book of Latin Verse* for example, and it was one of the ‘fragments I have shored against my ruins’ in the closing lines of *The Waste Land*.⁵³ Considering the education of the panel members, and the continuing cultural significance of the *Perivigilium*, its content could be expected to have been recognised by the commissioning committee and by the Palace.⁵⁴ Rather, they were likely to have seen in ‘Canzonet’ a closeness to the spirit of the *Oriana* originals, more appropriate than the simplistic text provided by Paul Dehn, for which Berkeley’s dissonances were able to do little to provide complexity or depth:

O let us try
In a world grown old,
Thus to behold
Through a child’s eye
(Wonder of wonders!)
A Queen pass by
Wearing her crown.

Because dissonance is a consistent a feature of modernist music, its use, alone, does not necessarily imply resistant or dangerous meanings. It was no longer a self-deprecating apologia to describe songs as ‘these few discordant tunes’, as Morley had in his dedication to the *Oriana* cycle (p. 163). Rather, as new harmonies had been sought, and new ways of understanding tonality were explored, it became as common to hear strongly dissonant pieces in church settings (Howells), at the opera house (Britten) or the ballet (Bliss), as in the concert hall (Tippett), on the wireless (Rawsthorne) or the cinema (Walton). So accustomed to non-realist representations, dissonant harmonies and distant allusions had the artists and audiences become, that they were able to use or decode techniques that three decades before had sparked outrage or

incomprehension: they had even become pretty.⁵⁵ That disharmony which had so excited London when it first heard *Firebird* or *The Rite of Spring* forty years before, had become an everyday part of the musical language.⁵⁶ Similarly, ambiguity had become a central tenet of literary criticism.⁵⁷ It had become integrated into the modes of reading and writing without needing to be in the foreground of the poem, its purpose. By 1955, modernism had become so much part of the shared language of the arts that it was used by the *Garland* artists for representational, pastoral, convivial and institutional purposes, integrating them with traditional and popular forms like rhyme and tonal harmony.

Yet the confluence of dissonant music and ambiguous texts with a complex historical moment caused difficulties for those unable or unwilling to make it an artistic opportunity. For such songs, the commission to ‘search for modern parallels with the age of the first “Oriana”’ produced unfortunate resonances. The rapturous crowds and glittering tiaras recur alongside ‘darkness’, ‘shadowed’ and ‘night’ in most of the songs. But when the doubleness is unsuccessfully handled it can lead to inopportune, if unintentional, misapprehensions. The Vaughan Williamses ‘Silence and Music’ was a swan song drawing on Orlando Gibbons’s ‘The Silver Swan’, more appropriate as the starting point for the unlikely Paul McCartney-fronted recreation, the funereal *Garland for Linda* (2000) than for a new age of peace.⁵⁸ In John Masefield’s poem, ‘On our Glorious Sovereign’ it seems maladroit to mention that on ‘The spring in which our queen was born . . . / One cuckoo tolled his here am I,’ in the context of the succession to the throne, when legitimacy is so important. Yet it is unlikely either work was intended to be seditious, disrespectful or even resistant.

In contrast is the Masque in *Gloriana*, the most celebratory and straightforwardly Elizabethan section in a dark, sordid, tragic opera. That Britten excised them from later performances, and that they enjoyed a more successful independent performance history than the opera itself suggests that Britten saw the Masque as a separate occasional commission.

Harebell and hyacinth,
Myrtle and bay with
Rosemary in between,
Norfolk’s own garlands for her queen. (p. 137).

The song and dance of Shakespearean flowers was Britten's claim not merely to have contributed to *A Garland for the Queen*, but for the Masque as his 'own garlands'.

This issue of future reception and availability of the works was a major problem facing all the commissions. In 1953, the Arts Council was not concerned to provide works for posterity, but rather for the moment—or perhaps for the sake of lists of works produced. The occasional performance context remains the most significant aspect of the collection's continued neglect, and also of *Gloriana*. It the source of the critical opprobrium that was heaped on the opera Britten called his 'slighted child', and *Gloriana* only began to garner the critical attention and respect it deserves with the publication of the first book-length study forty years later, the casebook *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources* (1995), coinciding with the issue of the Decca/Argo recording of the Welsh National Opera production.⁵⁹

Until its republication in 2012 to coincide with the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, *A Garland for the Queen* remained little known. In the 1950s, performance, publicity, publication, or recording was more often left to luck or the artists' and producers' own devices than included in the institutional planning. It was the group of Denison, Lewis, Ord and Isaacs who organised the recording of the cycle.⁶⁰ The performance and republication permissions for the *Garland* pieces were held by seven different publishing firms, and Ireland retained his permissions himself, thus making republication as a group highly unlikely. Re-performances by amateurs or in the provinces were therefore made extremely difficult by the lack of scores. The uncollected pieces were only sporadically available into the early years of the twenty-first century, though some have remained popular, such as Tippett and Christopher Fry's 'Dance, Clarion Air', and the Vaughan Williamses 'Silence and Music'.⁶¹ Access to the only borrowable full-copy of the scores from the Pendlebury Library (Music Faculty Library, Cambridge University) led to a limited number of recitals and recordings by Cambridge choirs, suggesting that more performances will take place now that the scores are more accessible.⁶² However, the *Garland* fared better than the Arts Council commissions for the Festival of Britain. The three performed Festival ballets remain

unpublished to this day.⁶⁵ The Festival competition operas were forced to struggle for even initial performances, abroad if at all. The futuristic and patriotic public structures, with their murals, were destroyed, and ‘sold for scrap’.⁶⁴

Therefore it is unsurprising that little critical attention has been paid to the madrigal cycle, which is mentioned exceedingly briefly in Stephen Banfield’s essay on ‘Vocal Music’ in *The Twentieth Century* and in scattered references in *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.⁶⁵ The most extensive consideration is in Heather Wiebe’s article on “‘Now and England’: Britten’s *Gloriana* and the ‘New Elizabethans’ in the *Cambridge Opera Journal* in 2005. In it Wiebe depicts a commission uncomfortably balanced between ‘independent’ and ‘official art’ (p. 151), a Spring-time celebration which had to ‘overcome’ the ‘winter’ of contemporary Britain (p. 152), and *Gloriana* as ‘an amalgamation of ‘Ashton’s masque-like ballet and the madrigal collection *A Garland for the Queen*’ (p. 155), or surprisingly, ‘a little bit *Garland for the Queen* and a little bit *Wozzeck*’ (pp. 153–4).

A third reason for the ambivalences and ensuing obscurity of the pieces is due to the fact that ‘occasional’ art was considered a compromise by many artists and critics. Walton wrote to Hassall, ‘Te Deum is complete . . . Quite a lot of work. It is not too bad for an occasional piece’.⁶⁶ The music critic of *The Times* (probably Frank Howes, author of *The English Musical Renaissance*) wrote in his review of the *Garland*:

A sequence of ten madrigals, to use a generic term out of its historical context, by living composers raises all sorts of questions about the relations of words and music . . . Is occasional verse good enough for music? If it is not occasional what is the point of putting its setting into this garland?⁶⁷

Although he declined to attempt an answer, this is one of the most important and telling issues that surround both the *Garland* and *Gloriana*. Occasional means ‘limited to specific occasions’.⁶⁸ It may suggest commemorative mugs and tea-towel art or propaganda. In any case, to be ‘limited’ and incidental is the opposite of ‘great’, as the *Scotsman* review claimed, ‘No poet or composer has produced anything great,’ though all were apt and well written.⁶⁹ Howes seems to suggest that poetry written to be set to music, rather than great poetry

appropriated *post hoc*; music written to set words; and anything written specifically for a function such as a coronation, must, therefore, be occasional verse and occasional music, and in turn they must always be second-best.

The reviews of the Coronation Eve concert were varied, but the *Manchester Guardian* captured the spirit of most of them, stating cautiously that the songs ‘emerged on the whole not without honour’. Sir Arthur Bliss (about to become Master of the Queen’s Music in his turn) and Henry Reed’s ‘Aubade’ was perhaps the most successfully occasional piece. All the critics of the day praised it, ‘a little masterpiece’ (Richard Capell, *Daily Telegraph*), ‘few of the compositions equal . . . ‘Aubade’ . . . for sustained beauty of sound’ (*Yorkshire Post*), ‘undoubtedly the gem of the collection’ (*Manchester Guardian*) are representative. However, Bliss’s subsequent reputation and, probably, its very contemporary success, mean that it is now not available separately as a recording, unlike the Vaughan Williams, Tippett, Howells, or Finzi songs, and has undeservedly slid from the repertoire.

In *The Birmingham Post*, J. F. Waterhouse was of the opinion that *A Garland for the Queen* showed the English Musical Renaissance promise been fulfilled.⁷⁰ In the context of a hierarchy which denigrated both impure vocal music and occasional works, neither the unstained success of ‘Aubade’ nor the failure of *Gloriana* are much of a surprise. Furthermore, the late-Victorian music of the English Musical Renaissance, best typified by the works produced by Elgar and Parry and the operetta *Merrie England* by Edward German for the coronation of Edward VII in 1902 as both King and Emperor, was assured that it belonged to a nation at the head of a global Empire.⁷¹ By 1953, however, in spite of the impressive list of Commonwealth and Empire heads of state processing by horse-drawn carriage down the Mall to Westminster Abbey, the end of Empire was imminently in mind.⁷² Nor was the monarchy itself the secure structure it had been in 1902, damaged by the Abdication Crisis in the 1930s, and upheld by a reluctant George VI through the war. While people were generally hopeful in 1953 that the new reign would usher in a better era, they were deeply aware of the difficulties of the past.

The official celebration of the coronation was a moment when artists

were forced to deal publicly with the collapse of the British Empire, the legacy of the Second World War and changing social mores, while negotiating aesthetic issues including a confusion about the purpose and place of occasional and state sponsored art work. The difficulties of translating the elegiac last strains of the English Musical Renaissance and the predominant discordant modernist idiom into a politically apt, historically significant and artistically valid artwork provided a few artists with an opportunity to create successfully complex works, such as ‘Canzonet’. In others, which attempted to fudge or dodge the issues, this difficulty was the song’s downfall.⁷⁵ Clifford and Arnold Bax’s ‘What is it like to be young and fair’, for example, was unable to decide whether to be fawning, journalistic or exuberant. ‘Here’s to our queen, the daintiest queen, / So we believe who ever was seen,’ were ‘some abysmally commonplace verses’, according to the *Spectator* (12 June 1953). They were matched by an undistinguished musical offering from the ageing Master of the (now) Queen’s Music.

In the commissioning notes, Christopher Hassall wrote that the poets and composers should not forget:

the obvious fact that the occasion is festive. Thus moods of lyrical tenderness, gravity, or gaiety, may well belong together in this context, whereas an item of brittle, sardonic, or satirical wit will be out of place and damaging to the general effect.

The concern stated here is that ‘sardonic . . . wit’ will destroy the unity of the piece, not that it will offend the Queen. Perhaps that is the only criteria for suitability for a coronation, that the monarch is pleased, at least in public, and the second Elizabeth was. She accepted the dedication of *A Garland for the Queen* and of *Gloriana*.⁷⁴ And if the discussion of an affair between the first Elizabeth and a much younger, married, courtier; or allusions and quotations from a poem about copulation under the myrtle boughs in worship of Venus wasn’t offensive—this is after all the country in which *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Ulysses* and *Mrs Warren’s Profession* were still banned; and in which Rawsthorne’s ballet *Tiresias* had to be radically edited for a gala performance for the Queen Mother two years before—then the new reign was the beginning of a more modern, open period of public life.

Above all, these works show that neo-Elizabethanism was a dream of

both high art and social unity, of bawdy songs for the people approved and supported by the ruling classes. They show that ambivalence and modernist ‘difficulty’ is still being used as late as 1953 to negotiate complex issues, discomfort or uncertainty. They show that alongside this modernism is a passionate traditionalism that could be a means of contesting prudishness, reinvigorating artistic forms and effecting social cohesion. They show that we must be wary of assuming that state-sponsored art—even in a country with strict censorship, a state-funded media, and a recent war-time history of propaganda—must be humourless, intolerant of difference and reactionary. The documentary evidence of these commissions shows that, in fact, the opposite was the case.

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NOTES

¹ Banham and Hillier 1976.

² Banfield 1995, p. 437. See Wiebe 2005 for the correction in her three page history of the *Garland*, pp. 151-3.

³ Britten 1990, II.i, p. 137.

⁴ MacNeice 2007, p. 779; Rawsthorne and MacNeice, 1953.

⁵ Antiphons were sung in the first records of a coronation in the British isles, that of the seventh-century King Egbert. See Howes 1953, pp. iii-v; Tanner 1952), p. 93.

⁶ 'I was glad' had been set by Purcell (1682-5), William Boyce (1761), Thomas Atwood (1821), and Parry (1902, rev.1911).

⁷ *Homage to the Queen: The Coronation Ballet* Malcolm Arnold, chor. Frederick Ashton; *A Queen is Crowned*, dir. Castelton Knight, composer Guy Warrack, Christopher Fry narration read by Laurence Olivier; *Elizabeth is Queen*, dir. Terry Ashwood, music arranged Adrian Boult and Doreen Carwithien. *Gloriana*. The coronation service included new anthems or arrangements by Walton (*Te Deum; Orb and Sceptre*), Howells, Vaughan Williams, George Dyson, Healey Willan and William H. Harris.

⁸ 'Upsurge of Loyalty', *The Times*, 1 June 1953, 8b.

⁹ Lloyd 1970, p. 271.

¹⁰ Kynaston 2007.

¹¹ Palme Dutt 1953; Gibbs 1953, pp. 13-15; *The Times*, June 22, 1949 5.b.

¹² Though perhaps at one remove, as with *Gloriana* via Covent Garden.

¹³ The next such occasion after 1953 was not until Britain joined the European Union in 1973. White 1975, pp. 222-5.

¹⁴ See for example Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (2nd edn.; London: Macmillan, 1993), John Pick, *Vile Jelly: The Birth, Life, and Lingering Death of the Arts Council of Great Britain* (Doncaster: Brynmill, 1991).

¹⁵ Tony Lewis to John Denison, 29.10.53, 'Garland & "Orb and Sceptre"', Arts Council Archive, ACGB/51/68.

¹⁶ See correspondence in ACGB/51/68.

¹⁷ Harewood 1981, pp. 154-5.

¹⁸ MacNeice was director of the British Council in Rome in 1950, Bax was knighted 1937, Bliss in 1950, Tippett was made CBE in 1959, and Berkeley in 1957, Britten was made a Companion of Honour in 1953, Vaughan Williams accepted an Order of Merit in 1935.

¹⁹ Hassall, 'Annexure B', ACGB//51/68.

²⁰ See Finzi, Seven Robert Bridges Partsongs, 1954-7; Tippett, 'The Weeping Babe' with Edith Sitwell, 1944.

²¹ White 1975, p. 274.

²² Banfield 1995, p. 437.

²³ Wiebe 2005, p.149. A further 'garland' was *The Queen's Garland: Verses made by her Subjects for Elizabeth I*, ed. M. C. Bradbrook, (Oxford, 1953).

²⁴ MacNeice 1982 [1965], p. 98.

²⁵ Or at least the musical re-enactments like those which so horrified Jim Downson in Kingsley Amis's novel, *Lucky Jim*, 1954.

²⁶ Morley was central to English musicality: he 'also wrote and published the first English manual of composition, his witty and direct *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* of 1597 whose opening conversation gave rise to the myth of a nation of literate music lovers so satirically re-inscribed in the year following the second Elizabeth's coronation by Kingsley Amis in chapter four of *Lucky Jim*.' Banfield 2008.

²⁷ Mann 1953, pp. 7-8.

²⁸ In Britten and Plomer's *Gloriana*, the Queen instead is forced to chose.

²⁹ Music Panel Paper No. 17, 8 August 1952, Minutes 7 July 1952, ACGB/51/68.

³⁰ Hassall, 'Annexure B', Music Panel Paper 17, ACGB/51/68.

⁵¹ ACGB/51/68 [7 July 1952].

⁵² Walton 1988, p. 135.

⁵³ Denison, Rubbra and Hassall were the 'editorial quorum' who met in early March to 'arrange the flowers in proper order', wrote Denison to Ord, 25 March 1953 (ACGB/51/68).

⁵⁴ Rawsthorne had worked with MacNeice on BBC Features including *The Story of My Death* (1945), *He Had a Date* (1944), *No Other Road* (1948) and *Trimalchio's Feast* (1948). Dehn and Berkeley were already at work on *A Dinner Engagement* (1954).

⁵⁵ John Masefield, 'Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II', *The Times*, 2 June 1953 7d, *The Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2 June 1953: Approved Souvenir Programme* (London: King George's Jubilee Trust, 1953).

⁵⁶ For connections between depictions of Elizabeth I and the Virgin Mary were the 'garland of names' replaced pre-Reformation iconography, and established the Queen as 'a spring-time goddess', pp. 15-16, see Strong 1977.

⁵⁷ Banfield 1995, p. 437. See McCabe 1999, p. 148.

⁵⁸ MacNeice 1995.

⁵⁹ or *Pervigilium*. In *The Oxford Book of Latin Verse* (1934), it is attributed to Tiberianus (fl. A.D. 335).

⁶⁰ John Hilton, (Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 101) and Anthony Blunt (Bodleian Modern Manuscripts, Stallworthy, Box 30, folder B, 1).

⁶¹ *Love and Honour* booklet (GMCD 7287, 2005), pp. 5-6.

⁶² *The Vigil of Venus Done into English* (London: Frederick Muller, 1952).

⁶³ Banfield 1985, p. 392.

⁶⁴ 3/4 and 9/8 are both triple time, but 3/4 counts three crotchets to a bar, while 9/8 consists of three dotted crotchets.

⁶⁵ (The devil in music) traditionally used to denote ambiguity or evil.

⁶⁶ See *The Times*, 1/6/53, 8.e; and Banks 1993, pp. 1-16. 3.

⁶⁷ Pound 1948, p. 113.

⁶⁸ See also Reed in 'Aubade' of the sound above the 'first tree' that 'breaks and shakes above my head'

⁶⁹ Garrod 1915, p. 239. R. Joy Littlewood assisted with the translation.

⁷⁰ '*Cras amorum copulatrix inter umbras arborum*' (Tomorrow the lover and the beloved amid the shade of the trees). See Blunden's poem for the 'legendary, lovely bower', *A Garland for the Queen*, xi, and a bower from which all the dancers emerge in the Masque in *Gloriana*, II.i.

⁷¹ George Marson in Morley1601.

⁷² See Alan J. Peacock, 'Introduction', in Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (eds.), *Louis MacNeice and His Influence* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), vii-xvi. and McCabe, 1999.

⁷³ For those who had no Latin it was available in translations by Arthur Quiller-Couch (1912) and Lewis Gielgud (1952). The *Pervigilium* also formed the basis of an unpublished sequel to Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'Prufrock's Pervigilium', of which MacNeice was less likely to have been aware.

⁷⁴ It was certainly noted by *The Spectator* (12 June 1953) which considered it 'an odd choice'.

⁷⁵ MacNeice's wife, Hedli Anderson, had performed the British premiere of *Pierrot*

Lunaire by Arnold Schoenberg in 1942. Critical opinion had changed from ‘Two Freak Works’ as *The Times* put it (30 May 1942, 2d), to pointing out that the works was ‘once thought revolutionary but which has now passed into history’ in the same paper ten years later (9 July 1952, 4f).

⁵⁶ John Pearson, *Façades: Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 81-2; Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London: Faber, 1957).

⁵⁷ William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was already nearly a quarter of a century old by 1953.

⁵⁸ ‘Canzonet’ was also sung at MacNeice’s funeral (Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 480)

⁵⁹ Decca Argo 4402132. Previously: English National Opera Guide, *Peter Grimes/Gloriana* (1983, no. 24) and the 1984 English National Opera television production (Arthaus Musik 102097 DVD).

⁶⁰ *A Garland for the Queen* (1955) (Columbia) 35CX 1063. Performed by Ord’s Augmented Choir of the Cambridge University Madrigal Society.

⁶¹ All the pieces were brought out by their respective music publishers in 1954.

⁶² See *Love and Honour*, Queen’s College, Cambridge, 1993, Guild 7287, and *A Garland for the Queen*, Cambridge University Chamber Choir, 1993, Gamut GAM CD 529.

⁶⁵ For a list of the commissions see White 1975, pp. 222-3.

⁶⁴ Palme Dutt 1953, p. 465.

⁶⁵ Sidney Robinson Charles, ‘Anthology’ or Malcolm Boyd ‘Collaborative compositions’ (accessed 6/12/06).

⁶⁶ Walton 2002, 29.12.52

⁶⁷ ‘Coronation Eve Music: A Garland for the Queen’, *The Times*, 2 June 1953, 10c.

⁶⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2, 4 a-b.

⁶⁹ Unless otherwise cited, reviews are newspaper clippings from the ACGB archive.

⁷⁰ Howes 1966.

⁷¹ *Merrie England’s* jocular depiction of an England of cakes and ale, was both the starting point for Britten’s plans for *Gloriana* and that possibility of pastiche which he feared. Harewood 1981; Malloy-Chirgwin 1999, p. 128.

⁷² Palme Dutt’s book, *The Crisis in Britain and the British Empire* was published that year, for example.

⁷³ See Wiebe 2005, p. 152, for a mapping of the darkness successfully integrated into the hope for change in the Hassall and Rubbra song ‘Salutation’—praised by Martin Cooper in *The Spectator*, 12 June 1953, p. 755.

⁷⁴ ‘Dedications are accepted only very rarely by the Sovereign’, Major W. S. Ford (Assistant Private Secretary to the Queen) wrote to John Denison, 13 Feb 1953. Letters from the Chair of the Arts Council, Sir Kenneth Clarke to Sir Alan Lascelles at the Palace, and a formal request were sent by Bax as Master of the Queen’s Music before the permission was granted 18 March 1953 (AGCB/51/68). See also Banks 1993, p. 11.

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