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Bliss's New England : identity, interdependence and isolation

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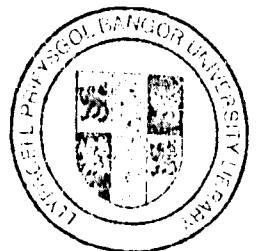
identity, interdependence and isolation

Sam Ellis

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Summary

Never before have the life and works of Arthur Bliss (1891-1975) been subjected to an extended critical examination. Such neglect has resulted in the persistent misrepresentation and oversimplification of his stylistic development: here, Bliss is reassessed through a tightly-wrought chronological narrative, interwoven with key elements of social and cultural history. Some musical commentary is offered, and this invariably centres on Bliss's abstract works, which shed the greatest light on his evolving style and intentions.

Some biographical elements in this thesis are entirely original: for example, a lengthy survey of Bliss's military service during the First World War has been constructed from his unpublished war diaries and letters, all of which are kept with other historical source material at the Bliss Archive, Cambridge University Library. Most emphasis is then placed upon the interwar years, when Bliss was at his most creatively productive. A final biographical chapter demonstrates that, although Bliss's output was prodigious in the last thirty years of his life, he failed almost entirely in that time to engage with contemporary audiences.

Throughout his life, Bliss remained detached from the predominant musical establishment and its associated pastoral trends, yet he attempted – with modest success – to enter the cultural mainstream during the interwar years. The received two-period classification of Bliss's music is therefore challenged and rejected, and a new three-period scheme is proposed in the final chapter, drawing upon evidence concerning Bliss's relationship with his audience: consequently, much is revealed of Bliss's changing intentions and motivations. Bliss experienced lengthy periods of cultural isolation, while his most enduring music was composed at times of greatest social integration. His relationship with national identity in the light of two world wars becomes crucial in this context, as does his changing interactions with urban and rural contexts: it is this interdependence, and others, which defined a British 'identity', if present at all, during the twentieth century.

Declarations

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed

Date *22 May 2012*

SAM ELLIS

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A reference list is appended.

Signed

Date *22 May 2012*

SAM ELLIS

I hereby give my consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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• SAM ELLIS

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Introduction

This is the first extended study of the life and music of Arthur Bliss, and therefore fills a notable gap in historical and musicological scholarship. It is hoped that this work also contributes to our understanding of culture and society in twentieth-century Britain: indeed, many related themes which preoccupied Bliss throughout his life are interwoven into this survey.

Within sections of chronological narrative, greater emphasis is placed on some periods than others, and I make no apology for this. External forces instigate social and cultural change, even within the life of one man, and it is these that have often been the focus of my research. The reader will also observe a tendency for extended passages of musical commentary to focus on Bliss's abstract works, rather than the many programmatic compositions he produced throughout his career: it is Bliss's absolute music that sheds the greatest light upon his evolving style and intentions. Formal analysis, where present, is invariably supported with historical narrative.

I am broadly happy with my approach. Biographical information, rigorously checked, is accurately presented here for the first time, and yet the content of this thesis goes beyond that of a simple life study. Bliss is found to be an 'other' in the story of British music, an outsider who produced his best music only when he was most integrated with his peers and with his audiences. In the sweep of British cultural history, his is a compelling second story. Rather than asking what Bliss's life may tell us about his music, I have asked what his music can tell about his life, and more broadly the societal and cultural mores within which he worked.

Until now, the only two full-length studies of Bliss's life have been the composer's own autobiography, *As I Remember*, and a frankly-redundant hagiography by John

Sugden. The autobiography provides a good deal of biographical information, but much of it is inaccurate, and Bliss's manner is guarded throughout: generally, it is a good source of anecdotes, but it contains few passages of musical or emotional reflection. The more revealing passages are quoted throughout. A better volume is *Bliss on music*, an anthology of Bliss's many and various writings produced during his career, many of which give a clearer impression of his forceful personality. Gregory Roscow deserves much credit for collecting and editing those articles and manuscripts.

This thesis, however, goes beyond a reliance on published sources. Much has been gleaned from the unpublished materials held within the Bliss Archive at Cambridge University Library. These are far from comprehensive: despite the best efforts of Richard Andrewes and others, many important effects are still understandably distributed amongst family and acquaintances.¹ In November 2008, Trudy, Bliss's widow, died at the age of 104, and this was sadly soon followed by the death of George Dannatt, a close friend in the final years of Bliss's life. Relevant materials formerly in their possession are to be placed in the Bliss Archive: this has not yet occurred. When this work is complete, the Archive will prove a rich and rewarding resource.

Bliss is a man and a composer who defies classification. So often, he seems to fall through the cracks. He made music his career, but was always distracted by other forms of artistic expression. He appeared the very model of an Englishman, but had a strong American heritage and also found a wife in the New World. He lived for most of his life in London, but was frequently inspired by the natural world. His music demonstrates a commitment to innovation, and yet he came to be regarded by many as the heir to Elgarian introspection. Ultimately, he proved an isolated figure within British music. The assumptions that have been received by a new generation of musicologists are challenged at length in the final chapter.

This thesis performs several important functions. Most importantly, perhaps, it rejects the simplistic two-period classification of Bliss's creative output, and presents a new three-period scheme, drawing upon evidence concerning his relationship with

¹ In the course of my research, many people have kindly shared with me the contents of their own private collections.

his audience: in this way, more is revealed of Bliss's changing intentions and motivations. Secondly, a number of biographical sources are assimilated in order to fill in missing details, thus creating the most comprehensive life study to date: central to this aim is an entirely original chapter on Bliss's service during the First World War, which draws upon Bliss's unpublished diaries and letters, as well as other sources such as his autobiography and Guy Chapman's record of the 13th Royal Fusiliers, the battalion in which Bliss served. Thirdly, questions are asked of Bliss's relationship with national identities, and whether this might be considered as part of the broader urban-rural interdependence of the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, it is proposed that Bliss's most productive years were those during which he was most integrated into a stimulating artistic community, and that his limited popular success can be attributed to a tendency towards musical, stylistic and social isolation.

This thesis, then, is not only a study of Bliss's life and music: it is also a study of Bliss's England, hence the frequent appearance of historical commentary around which the narrative of his life is woven. The ache of 'urban' and 'rural' has had a profound effect on national culture, and this includes music from early in Bliss's lifetime: speaking in 1898, Hubert Parry urged a 'return to nature', and suggested that rural vitality was the appropriate antidote to urban decadence.² These binary classifications have appeared again and again in scholarship, and only more recently have the polarising tendencies of such observations led many to abandon the 'urban-rural divide' model, and to adopt other terms which enable more nuanced approaches, such as 'urban-rural continuum'³ or even 'urban-rural dependency'.⁴ Some scholars have successfully applied postmodern social theory to the notion of 'place', and have observed a 'post-rural' imposition of rurality on neglected groups and cultures within rural environments.⁵

² See 'Sir Hubert Parry on "The Essentials of Church Music"', *Musical Times* 40 (1899), 815-17.

³ M. M. Bell, 'The fruit of difference: the rural-urban continuum as a system of identity', *Rural Sociology* 57 (2010), 65-82.

⁴ M. Kearney, 'From the invisible hand to visible feet: anthropological studies of migration and development', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15 (1986), 331-361; Y. W. Bradshaw, 'Urbanization and underdevelopment: a global study of modernization, urban bias, and economic dependency', *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987), 224-239.

⁵ J. Murdoch and A. C. Pratt, 'Rural studies: modernism, postmodernism and the post-rural', *Journal of Rural Studies* 9 (1993), 411-427.

Within music, the lure of nature was understandable. It had parallels in literature and the other arts, from William Morris through to Thomas Hardy, and was strengthened by the folksong collectors of the early twentieth century. The interdependence of urban and rural within Bliss's life is therefore examined here, with regard to his predominantly urban existence and his potential sense of identity with rural England. Cities such as London, where Bliss was born and lived for most of his life, are forces for unification. They are great architectural programmes which sit at the centre of national administration. Yet as the English began an industrial migration towards the city, so began a quiet restructuring of the national society: the history of the city is indeed the history of inequality.

Nowhere are the intricacies of inequality more visible than on city streets, hence a strong early-twentieth-century social democratic yearning for and connection with the apparently more egalitarian countryside, a natural world in which the environment is king. As urbanisation continued, so the veneration of the countryside intensified. This, however, was not a modern phenomenon: even Horace, composing his poetry in an urban setting, had mused upon the intrinsic purity and desirability of the rural.⁶ The march of pastoralism was, therefore, as much a response to urban development as to a crisis of national identity.

This was manifested in the demand for and provision of urban parks and gardens, which still allowed city dwellers transient opportunities for the idealisation and culturalisation of nature. Conversely, though, these parks were not wild like the truly rural: rather, they take the best – or most civilised and palatable – of the countryside, and administer this to the urban population. This is reflected in the tendency for cultural responses to the pastoral to idealise and gentrify, whether in the sunlit paintings of Constable, the bucolic musings of Keats, or the bowdlerised folksong transcriptions of Cecil Sharp.⁷ Bliss later inverted this, by having a house built for

⁶ See Diana Spencer, 'Horace's garden thoughts: rural retreats and the urban imagination', in R. Rosen and I. Sluiter (eds), *City and countryside in the ancient imagination*.

⁷ The influence and occasional dominance of a pastoral school of English composition is a recurring theme throughout this thesis, but little space is given to arguments surrounding the provenance and genuineness of English folk music. The identification of rural idealisation above simply acknowledges that much of the source material on which that trend was based was smoothed out by pre-conditioned diatonically-trained ears and middle-class mores, and may not have even originated from England at all. These arguments have been better dealt with, and at greater length, by such writers as Gordon Winter and Maud Karpeles (see Gordon Winter, *A country camera, 1844-1914*, 75; Maud Karpeles, *An introduction to English folk song*, 94-8).

him to an art deco design in rural Somerset, thus taking his best of the city to the countryside.

In preparing this thesis, I am indebted to a number of individuals and organisations. I would not have been able to undertake the necessary research without the generous support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The task of any Bliss scholar has been made easier by the bibliographical endeavours of Stewart R. Craggs, whose excellent and authoritative source book has been a constant companion.

I am grateful to Cambridge University for welcoming me as a visiting student not only in music but across the humanities, and even in social geography when circumstances allowed. The Music Librarian, Richard Andrewes, made great efforts to find and prepare a number of sources for me. The Bliss Trust and the Bliss Society have both given support when required: members of the Society in particular have worked hard to track down items in private collections. I am grateful for their help.

I acknowledge and thank the staff and authorities of the British Library, the BBC Written Archives Centre and the library of the Royal College of Music, as well as civic librarians in Birmingham, Bournemouth and elsewhere, and undoubtedly others that I have neglected to include here. Likewise, I am indebted to all those who threw their private collections of letters and artefacts open to me.

During my studies, I was honoured to serve as a student representative on the Council of the Royal Musical Association. I thank the RMA for that valuable experience, which allowed me to form a subject-specific study group with other graduate researchers, including Joanna Bullivant, Ciara Burnell, Michael Byde and Roddy Hawkins. The opportunity to exchange mutually-beneficial research and ideas with friends such as these was indispensable.

Since 2006, I have regularly attended musicological and historical conferences, and have been fortunate enough to speak at several academic institutions, among them the universities of Leeds, Keele, Manchester, London, Bristol and Oxford. A conference paper on Bliss's 'Parisian exploits' took me to Toronto, a trip which remains the only occasion on which I have been outside of Europe. Such conference papers helped me to structure my research, and provided waymarkers for the direction in which I was proceeding. I have spoken on Bliss as anti-Pastoralist, Bliss

and the Elgar connection, Bliss's war, Bliss's childhood, Bliss and empire, catharsis in Bliss's music, Bliss and the 'minor ninth', and numerous other subjects. These papers form the basis of much of the argument in this thesis, and if I have omitted to give credit by name to any of those who offered feedback during my conference presentations, then I acknowledge them here.

Bangor University has given me some of my happiest years, but most of all I will always be thankful for the time I was given to train in geographical economics and subsequently in pedagogical innovation: I owe my current professional position to that leniency. Of course, I have also enjoyed many illuminating discussions with valued friends and respected colleagues, including Chris Collins, Bruce Wood, David Evans, Thomas Schmidt-Beste, Christian Leitmeir, Pwyll ap Siôn, Stephen Rees, Nigel Simeone and Robert Pascall. Administrative support from Sally Harper, Jo Orr, Helen Roberts and Gillian Griffith has also proved invaluable.

More personally still, I thank Annette Burden, who during the past years has been a help and a hindrance in roughly equal measure, but to whom I owe much of my present professional success and happiness. Without her support, kindness, patience and wit, I could not have hoped to have achieved such clarity of direction. I am enormously grateful for that. Finally, I am grateful to several members of my small family, who instilled in me from a young age a spirit of intellectual self-improvement. This thesis is for them: one grandfather never met, and another only half-remembered; two grandmothers who connected me so securely to my chosen period of study; and most of all, my parents, Lynne and Gen. It is these people to whom I have clung when other distractions have seemed more attractive.

Sam Ellis
Red Wharf Bay, Anglesey

January 2011

PART ONE

1891—1923

“...in the first he is asserting himself
and trying to obtain an audience...”

Old England

1891—1914

Bliss's childhood was relatively carefree. Born into financial comfort in late-Victorian England, his father's executive position in industry allowed a classical English education at Rugby and Cambridge. Having shown musical promise from a young age, he was then encouraged to enter the Royal College of Music, where he was studying at the outbreak of the First World War.

These chronicles begin not in England, nor in 1891, but more than forty years earlier and on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. It was here, in Springfield, Massachusetts, that Francis Bliss was born in March 1847. In New England, Francis's moral fibre was woven. His children later wrote of his commitment to hard work, and of his firm sense of duty and honour, features of character that the first settlers on the north-east American coast had handed down through successive generations.

Having shown great promise as a middle-ranking official of the Virginian Railway under the industrialist Henry H. Rogers, he joined the Standard Oil Company at their New York offices in 1885, and in June 1888 was appointed a Chairman of the subsidiary Anglo-American Oil Company. This post took him to London, where he met and married one Agnes Kennard Davis, a debutant of Welsh extraction.

Their first son, Arthur Edward Drummond, was born at their home, Hawthornden, in Queen's Ride, Barnes, on 2 August 1891. Two more boys soon followed: Francis Kennard in September 1892, and Howard James in June 1894. Sadly, the three pregnancies had left Agnes much weakened and, on a recuperative vacation to the French Alps, she died in March 1895.

After Agnes's death, the family moved to a 'very big and magnificent' house at 21 Holland Park, Bayswater.¹ Here, the three brothers were raised by their father alone, with the assistance of a series of nannies, as was fitting of a family of their station. Their mother had been a keen and accomplished amateur pianist, and it is claimed that from this Welsh family heritage the Bliss children drew their considerable artistic talents.²

Their businessman father was not without cultural sympathy, however: Arthur recalled that, having decided upon music as a career at a young age, he received nothing but paternal support, at a time when a more secure or traditional vocation might have been encouraged:

I was supremely lucky not only in having such a father, to whom indeed I owe all that I may have myself achieved, but also in having one who by his own ability and hard work was able to give me the perfect environment in which to spend the years of my youth.³

This seems both remarkable and admirable at the turn of the century, given Stephen Banfield's contention that at this time music still 'lived a life below stairs in the social context':⁴ assessing the contextual status of music from a modern perspective, he notes that 'we have treated music as an absolute value rather than as a variable in the cultural equation.'⁵ It was this variability that necessitated Bliss's reliance upon a climate of paternal financial security which extended, as we shall see, well into his early adulthood.

¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 16.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁴ Stephen Banfield, 'The Artist and Society', in Nicholas Temperley (ed.), *Blackwell's History of Music in Britain*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

The urban—rural interrelationship in the 1890s

In the year that Arthur Bliss was born, a now-classic of English literature was published, a novel by a writer with whom Bliss would later establish a firmer connection. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy was originally serialised in the illustrated newspaper *The Graphic*, a procedure which harked back to the Dickensian habit of serialisation of deep Victoriana, the mores of which Hardy appeared so keen to challenge. During the Great War, Bliss's fleetingly pastoral incarnation set Hardy's poems; he later called for tea with him during a tour of the south of England in the 1920s.

One of the themes which interested Hardy most – the social and cultural restlessness that he himself labelled as 'the ache of modernism'⁶ – is explored in depth in *Tess*. The modernising social forces of urbanisation and industrialisation are referred to, but the key to the modernism of *Tess* is its exploration of class stratification.⁷ There are also pervasive allusions to an urban-rural divide: despite the novel's predominantly rural setting, Hardy chooses to describe farm machinery with finely-wrought and overtly-industrial imagery, and later observes that milk destined for the city requires dilution with water as those who dwell there are unable to digest it in its untreated form. Tess herself is portrayed as at one with nature and her rural surroundings, whereas the aloof Angel Clare – who leaves her and travels to Brazil, where he falls gravely ill – warns the reader against separation from nature, and by extension against the industrial desecration of the countryside.⁸

In *The Wild Garden*, Angus Wilson assembles a list of dichotomous characteristics which supposedly define 'town' and 'country'.⁹ These contradictory opposites include progress and tradition, art and nature, industry and contemplation, reason and instinct, sensibility and common sense, bohemianism and rootedness. Useful though these indicators are, to define a boy such as Bliss as either urban or rural is riddled with potential difficulties, for to categorise in such a stark manner is to provoke a

⁶ See David J. de Laura, "The ache of modernism" in Hardy's later novels', *ELR* 34 (1967), 380.

⁷ See Malcolm Bradbury, *The social context of modern English literature*, 30.

⁸ Hardy's other important work of 1891 was the short story *The Son's Veto*, which the author considered to be his finest work in that genre. The story, which contains semi-autobiographical allusions, deals again with class stratification, in this case the experience of a woman who marries above herself. The keen cultural biographer will note links between this fictional tale and the life of both Thomas Hardy and Edward Elgar.

⁹ Angus Wilson, *The Wild Garden*, 42.

series of subsidiary judgements. Besides, with reference to Wilson's list above, it will become clear that the young Arthur might already be cast as a bundle of contradictions.

Bliss was the son of a liberal New Englander, yet the recipient of a rigidly-structured classical education; a talented musician, yet equally happy frolicking in the meadows of Worcestershire; a boy frequently on the doorsteps of the Holland Park Circle (a precursor of the Bloomsbury Set), yet rooted by his industrious and financially-secure father. In childhood, Bliss ought not to be forced onto one side or the other of the urban-rural divide, but must already be considered within an urban-rural continuum.

Bliss is joined within this continuum by the urban park. Even today, the urban park brings aspects of the country into the city. The classic city parks of the Victorian era provided opportunities for the populace to come into regular contact with nature, and were believed to contribute to the health and longevity of urban dwellers by promoting outdoor social interaction. Popular features included gothic bandstands, tea houses, glass houses, and variously designed public shelters. Audiences congregated at Sunday concerts and stopped to admire the horticultural displays. During Bliss's childhood, the horticultural element of urban parks dwindled, making room instead for recreational pursuits such as bowling greens and tennis courts. With this, a contribution to the overall environmental and psychological quality of the city remained.

The Blissés now lived in Holland Park, an area of London which took its name from the urban park lying to the west of Kensington Palace, itself located on the most westerly edge of Hyde Park. The area had been predominantly rural until the nineteenth century, when the owners of Holland House, a Jacobean mansion, sold off much of the surrounding land for residential development. The Bliss residence at 21 Holland Park flanked its northern edge, which then and now is taken up by semi-wild woodland. Although Bliss's childhood was predominantly urban, then, this segment of countryside within the city provided a stimulating contrast to the otherwise man-made surroundings.

The urban parks movement may be seen as a reflection of a wider hysteria during Bliss's first years. City suburbs were expanding rapidly to house all levels of society – a trend formalised through public policy during the interwar years – but there also existed a nationwide municipal wish to provide urban residents with greater access to healthier rural environments. The notion and practical application of a 'natural ideal' had begun as far back as the eighteenth century with new and conscious constructions of 'nature' and an evolving relationship between the city and the countryside. Now, too, urban-rural interrelationships were destined to inform British culture and society for many years to come.¹⁰

Childhood and early education

It was fitting that a six-year-old Arthur Bliss glimpsed the elderly Queen Victoria as she passed by on her Jubilee procession. A little more than three years later she would be gone, dead in the arms of her German grandson Kaiser Wilhelm II, whose political machinations contributed later to the single defining event in Bliss's early years.¹¹ For the remainder of Bliss's life, Victoria's empire would unravel and totter with staggering speed. At the time of her death, only a quarter of the population – and only men – could vote, and the Prime Minister, Lord Robert Cecil, had casually referred to the lower reaches of the electorate as vermin.¹² When Bliss died in 1975, he did so under a Labour government elected by universal suffrage.

When Bliss was eight years old, his father deemed that the eldest son was ready to attend a preparatory boarding school. Bilton Grange was chosen, three miles south of Rugby in rural Warwickshire, and close enough still to London to remove the risk of familial disconnectedness. A year later, Arthur was joined at Bilton by his middle brother, Kennard. It was here that he first encountered Edward J. Dent, himself a Bilton alumnus, and then a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge: from this impromptu visit onwards, Dent would be a frequent, and positive, feature in Bliss's

¹⁰ This is explored further by Raymond Williams in his masterly survey *The Country and the City*.

¹¹ K. D. Reynolds and H. C. G. Matthew, *Queen Victoria*, 96.

¹² Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan*, 21.

education and career. He also met Herbert Fryer who, as piano professor at the Royal College of Music, later sought to hone Bliss's executive talent.¹³

During Bliss's time at Bilton, the crippling Boer War, fought over the gold-rich South African plains, caused Britain to begin seriously to question the extent and effectiveness of her dominance – and with just cause. The campaign against the Boers eventually cost around £20 billion in today's equivalence, but the societal damage was arguably even more damaging.¹⁴ In the 1890s it had seemed as if the coming century might belong to Britain again, but by 1902 she was already entering a final and insecure period of political isolation, before relationships, whether good or ill, were confirmed with European neighbours and the sibling America.

It seems more than coincidental that, around this period of national uncertainty, the Folk-Song Society was established in 1898: this retrospective cause paved the way for an important, if not dominant, rural-pastoral strand which would dictate the direction of art music in England during the first half of the new century. The emphasis placed on indigenous tradition seemed to almost anticipate the paranoia associated with Britain's diminishing international influence. It would be Bliss's place to react against this.

In Parry's inaugural address to the new society, he railed against the primitive songs of the urban masses, extolling instead the purity of indigenous folksong. For now, these rural myths held some credibility. They would not for much longer. At the turn of the century Bliss lived in a country of 40 million people and 120,000 square miles: however, this small nation was also attempting to control an Empire of 350 million people spread over 11 million square miles. Because of this imbalance, even minor rebellions became serious threats to an army and navy increasingly stretched to the limit.¹⁵ Social and economic confidence was giving way to concerns that Britain might itself become the subject of invasion: such ideas were promoted quite seriously in youth magazines *Boy's Friend* and *Boy's Herald*, as well as in bestsellers such as Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands* and William Le

¹³ See Cyril Smith, *Duet for three hands*, 30.

¹⁴ Paula M. Krebs, *Gender, race and the writing of Empire: public discourse and the Boer War*, 9.

¹⁵ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought*, 115.

Queux's *The Invasion of 1910*.¹⁶ All of these were hugely popular with literate public schoolboys like Bliss, and added to a national feeling of military unpreparedness.¹⁷

The enlistment process during the Boer War had proved that the nation's male youth was physically substandard. In some towns, two thirds of all volunteers were rejected outright. As Jon Savage has commented, 'it had become clear that the great mass of late-Victorian masculinity had fallen far short of the muscular Christian ideal.'¹⁸ With the future of the Empire lying squarely in the hands of its young, the management of that youth from thereon in was concerned primarily with its fitness for battle. As we shall see, Bliss was not exempt from this preparation.

A voice for the lower strata of Edwardian society came in the form of the social reformers, who continued a phenomenon which had begun in earnest during the nineteenth century. In 1901, Seebohm Rowntree reported on the plight of York's working class: his report, *Poverty: a study of town life*, sought to discredit the widely-held belief that the idleness of the poor was to blame for the nation's social ills. Rowntree, and other social liberals, refuted this myth, broadly demonstrating that the poor were victims of an unjust and unequal ruling order. Such research soon led to sweeping social reform.¹⁹

From Bilton to Rugby

Like around half of his contemporaries at Bilton, Bliss progressed from there to Rugby. He joined his new school in 1905, glad to escape the occasional 'Dickens-like horrors' of Bilton, and finding enormous happiness and stimulation: 'The small but infinitely dramatic and hazardous doings in the microcosm of Rugby absorbed me entirely'.²⁰ He remained at Rugby until 1910, by which time he had spent a decade in the formal public school system, and a decade immersed in a leafy patch of

¹⁶ In March 1906, the publication of Le Queux's novel was even promoted with an elaborate publicity stunt staged by the *Daily Mail*, in which men dressed as German soldiers marched down Oxford Street.

¹⁷ Andrew Boyle, *The riddle of Erskine Childers*, 111.

¹⁸ Jon Savage, *Teenage: the creation of youth, 1875-1945*, 85.

¹⁹ Asa Briggs, *Social thought and social action: a study of the work of Seebohm Rowntree: 1871-1954*, 9-10.

²⁰ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 21.

provincial middle England. In his travel collection *English Hours* of 1905, Henry James wrote of no better way

for the stranger who wishes to know something of England, than to spend a fortnight in Warwickshire. It is the core and centre of the English world; midmost England, unmitigated England. The place has taught me a good many English secrets; I have been interviewing the genius of pastoral Britain.²¹

On the national scale, though, all was not necessarily reflective of this pastoral idyll.

During Bliss's first year at Rugby, British politics took a dramatic turn. In December 1905, Henry Campbell-Bannerman formed a Liberal-led minority government, which won a crushing victory in a general election the following month. Joseph Chamberlain had lost his argument over preferential tariffs, but in resigning brought down Arthur Balfour, the unpopular Conservative Prime Minister, with him.²² At the election, Balfour even lost his seat. This was a transformational election, for it saw the entrance to parliament of 29 Labour members, and effectively ended the country-house politics of the nineteenth century.²³ Six months later, Campbell-Bannerman was struck down by a massive stroke and, in failing health, resigned in April 1908. He died three weeks later. With him, some said, died nineteenth-century Liberalism.²⁴ Now, the age of Asquith, Lloyd George and Churchill could begin.

At Rugby, meanwhile, Bliss's musical activity was constant, led by his capable music master, Basil Johnson. He was introduced to the music of Debussy and Ravel – 'no beetling brows and gloomy looks here'²⁵ – took part in a performance of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, and composed a trio for piano, clarinet and cello – his own instrument and those of his two brothers. It was his participation in *Gerontius* that 'put the seal on [his] fervent admiration' for Elgar, and led him to attempt to unmask the popular image which, he suspected, may have been 'a decoy to lure the inquisitive away from private preserves'.²⁶ His admiration for Elgar's attempt to create a new English vernacular based on current trends soon separated

²¹ Henry James, *English Hours*, 179.

²² Douglas A. Irwin, 'The Political Economy of Free Trade: Voting in the British General Election of 1906', *Journal of Law and Economics* 37 (1994), 75-108.

²³ T. O. Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe* (4th edition), 2.

²⁴ George Dangerfield, *The strange death of Liberal England*, 27.

²⁵ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25. This was also a tactic used in later life by Bliss.

him from the indigenous revivalists, and summer holidays on the Malvern Hills simply ‘made much of his music seem an intimate utterance of our own pleasures’.²⁷

Now, and even earlier, the seeds of the later dominance of the pastoralists were being sown. The first decade of the century saw some of England’s bright young composers already trying to free the national music from the grip of Teutonic influence. Holst composed his *Cotswold Symphony* in 1900, and soon after Vaughan Williams set to work on his Norfolk rhapsodies. These pieces used folksong, yes, but in their titles they also identified explicitly with specific places in England. Yet despite their use of indigenous tunes, none of these works represented a significant progression away from the heavily German-influenced music of Stanford, the all-powerful pedagogue. Perhaps conscious of this, Holst would later experiment with elements of Orientalism, while Vaughan Williams sought instruction in Paris from Ravel, an experience which resulted in a string quartet. *On Wenlock Edge* and the Thomas Tallis fantasia soon followed.

Vaughan Williams’s French sojourn, however, reflects a broader political trend which had brought about the ‘*entente cordiale*’ between Britain and France in 1904. Vaughan Williams and Holst, however, did not yet constitute a musical establishment from which Bliss could seek guidance. During this decade, the growing desire for a national music led some to the aesthetic beauty of the English countryside, and others to the attractions of folksong. Either way, the effect was one of introspection, and just at a time, conversely, that England was becoming more concerned with international politics.

At Rugby, too, Bliss’s lifelong interest in the classical civilisations was initiated, thanks to his master, Robert Whitelaw. He later recalled ‘quivering with excitement’ as Whitelaw read aloud passages from Homer: he remained in thrall to such texts for the rest of his life, even setting some of them to music.²⁸ This is the image, then, that Bliss permits us through his memoirs – of a sensitive, thoughtful, artistic young man, immersed in his own world of music and literature. And yet a body of conflicting evidence must also be considered. Within a context of Baden-Powell’s nascent Scout movement, and the growing popularity of the Boys’ Brigade, records reveal that

²⁷ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 23.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

Bliss revelled and indeed flourished in Rugby School's Officers' Training Corps. He was an able sportsman, competing for his house rugger fifteen and playing in the school cricket final; he even fenced for the school.²⁹

In 1908, the year in which Bliss became a senior member of Rugby's Training Corps, a new picture magazine was launched. *The Magnet* featured stories of 'defiant youths' and 'bronzed, grim-visaged old soldiers'.³⁰ In the first issue alone, there were at least five proper, blood-on-the-carpet fist-fights – more than enough to satisfy even the most self-respecting bully. But what set *The Magnet* apart from its predecessors was its broad, cross-class appeal, with public schoolboys and inner-city urchins alike.³¹ Perhaps this evidence – unrevealed to us by Bliss, who instead portrayed himself as every bit the well-bred aesthete – partly explains why he would so quickly and willingly enlist after Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914. It also helps to explain how he was able subsequently to rise through the military ranks so quickly, and how he managed – by all accounts – to command the respect of nearly all who served under him. This strong character, it seems, was formed on the playing fields of Rugby.

Social change and new public trends were also contributing to a greater dissemination of culture. Distractive periodicals such as *The Magnet* were no longer the preserve of the wealthy. Greater public literacy enabled the expansion of the print media, and the activities of Fleet Street underwent a timely revolution.³² Once-dry political arguments over free trade and tariff reform were sensationalised by a new tabloid press, and this mobilised a fresh wave of political campaigners from all social classes. Alfred and Harold Harmsworth, later Lords Northcliffe and Rothermere, demonstrated a perceptive measurement of public interest by providing short, controversial articles written in the first person. Between them they began the *Daily Mail* in 1896, the *Daily Mirror* in 1903 and crowned their empire with the

²⁹ See John Sugden, *Bliss*, 15.

³⁰ Jon Savage, *Teenage: the creation of youth, 1875-1945*, 89.

³¹ Jeffrey Richards, *Happiest days: the public schools in English fiction*, 289.

³² See E. G. West, 'Literacy and the Industrial Revolution', *The Economic History Review* 31 (1978), 369-83.

acquisition of *The Times* in 1908. H. G. Wells accused them of plastering the nation with rubbish: here, though, was the voice of Britain's emerging democracy.³³

This was a period of technological change, with the first appearances of telephones, cars and even aeroplanes. By 1905, the Bliss family were in ownership of one of the first Renault Type Y automobiles, complete with chauffeur. Perhaps it was this servile culture which, as we have seen, led Bliss to paint a picture of these years in his autobiography of lazy summers, garden parties, and messing about on the river. To some extent, though, Bliss's picture of affluence and complacency holds some truth: deep in rural England, a nation was still sleeping.

Tory peers continuously rejected almost any proposed welfare reforms, and regarded Lloyd George, now Chancellor of the Exchequer, as a dangerous radical. This was not helped by the prospect of recession in 1909, combined with a new appetite for social unrest, stirred by the burgeoning media.³⁴ Like many others, it was at this point that Lloyd George underwent a conversion to anti-German sentiment, abandoning his formerly pacifist principles, and replacing them with a stoic pragmatism. Although he wished to cut defence spending in favour of welfare reform, he now understood the need to arm against the German threat.

On 29 April 1909, Lloyd George stood in the Commons to deliver his 'People's Budget'. Essentially, it was an attempt to balance his two ambitions by introducing redistributive taxation, and included large tax rises for rich landowners.³⁵ A constitutional stand-off formed in its wake, which ultimately necessitated two elections in 1910 in which the Liberals lost their stand-alone majority. Lord Rosebery, himself a Liberal, denounced the budget as pure socialism.³⁶ Lloyd George soon settled upon his abrasive retort: 'a fully-equipped Duke costs as much to keep up as two Dreadnoughts; and Dukes are just as great a terror and they last

³³ See John Carey, *The intellectuals and the masses*, 6.

³⁴ See Bentley Brinkerhoff Gilbert, 'David Lloyd George: Land, The Budget, and Social Reform', *The American Historical Review* 81 (1976), 1058-1066.

³⁵ Bruce K. Murray, 'The Politics of the "People's Budget"', *The Historical Journal* 16 (1973), 555-570 provides a fine redaction of subsequent reflections upon the political fallout.

³⁶ Robert Rhodes James, *Rosebery: a biography of Archibald Philip, fifth Earl of Rosebery*, 469. The rejection of the budget by the House of Lords proved suicidally stupid, for it led to the removal of the Lords' power of veto.

longer.’³⁷ Democracy now began to swamp the aristocracy. By the time that Bliss went up to Cambridge in 1910, Britain had a new king, George V. Fearing that the monarchy would be stripped of function as the Lords had been, he agreed to a flooding of the upper chamber with new Liberal peers. In the context of Edwardian England, this was a momentous scuttling of the aristocratic order.³⁸

Cambridge

In 1910, Bliss went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge. By doing so, he fulfilled the criteria for the classic English middle-class education: public school, followed by Oxbridge. However, even a modicum of class differentiation must be mentioned, for this was Rugby and Cambridge, not Eton and Oxford. The Bliss family was comfortable, prosperous even – but young Arthur was by no means a wealthy aristocrat. He was a child of industry, a rougher diamond than some of his artistic peers, and his affluence could be attributed to his father’s own hard work rather than several generations of inherited money. The Bliss family was neither old nor titled.

Nevertheless, his experiences of Cambridge were much the same as those that have been handed down to us in several other Edwardian reminiscences:

There were long afternoons spent reading in punts, long evenings with heated discussions about everything and nothing ... What I discern in these flashbacks is, with the days, the weeks, the months imperceptibly slipping by, a reluctance to concentrate, except haphazardly, on the central core of my being, my music ... I think that I mortgaged the immediate future by this dilettantism, just when I should have closed the doors on a good slice of life and locked myself in with my work.³⁹

Despite his rigorous discipline in adulthood, a fear of deficient application – stemming, no doubt, from this relative indolence at Cambridge – would dog him throughout his life. And, despite his retrospective self-criticism, it was in this late-Edwardian tranquillity that work on an early string quartet would soon begin.

³⁷ David Lloyd George, quoted in Brian Short and John Godfrey, “‘The Outhwaite controversy’: a micro-history of the Edwardian land campaign”, *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007), 45-71.

³⁸ This, and the subsequent Parliament Act of 1911, is explained more fully in David Southern, ‘Lord Newton, the Conservative Peers and the Parliament Act of 1911’, *The English Historical Review* 96 (1981), 834-840.

³⁹ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 28.

At Cambridge, Bliss studied music and history, and experienced his first personal encounters with some important figures in British music, such as Vaughan Williams:

It was at Cambridge in 1911, and there on many pianos in students' rooms were copies of the *Songs of Travel*. The young readily recognise a new voice, and here unmistakably was one. So, it was natural that when we learnt that the composer himself was coming for a performance of his *On Wenlock Edge*, all of us, who could, squeezed into the music room over the fish shop in Petty Cury to have a look at him. What we saw was a massively built man with a magnificent head and with the eyes of a dreamer. My recollection does not play me false if I associate this first sight of him with an utterance by Epstein, when modelling a bust of him: "It is a head from which one draws strength."⁴⁰

Vaughan Williams's song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* had joined the *Songs of Travel* on Bliss's piano, and his admiration for these pieces reached fever pitch after he participated in a performance of the then-new *Sea Symphony*. The entire text of that symphony derives from the poetry of Walt Whitman, whose words Bliss later set in *Morning Heroes*. Similarly, it may have been this early encounter with Vaughan Williams that inspired Bliss towards his own attempt at a Housman setting. What could be more English, or more rural? Housman's nostalgic depictions of the English yeomanry soon became a calling-card for any composer keen to contribute to a national conversation.

So it was that, while at Cambridge, Bliss composed a setting of "'Tis time I think by Wenlock town' from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. Here indeed was the young man reaching out to England's rural literary tradition. The introduction is presented in triple time, after which Bliss manages a transition to 4/4 with the tell-tale clumsiness of inexperience. The harmonies here are modal, with the music hovering between major and minor (see ex. 1): the first two stanzas are set to almost identical material. The melancholia of the text is reflected by some Elgarian falling sequences, concluding at a pianissimo whisper.⁴¹ The impression is one of intense stylistic derivation, yet built upon a sound technique and impressive musical literacy.

While at Pembroke, Bliss studied the piano with Ursula Creighton, who had herself been a student of Ferruccio Busoni: he also saw the Italian in performance, and commanded a thorough knowledge of his theories. In Busoni, he was attracted to 'the combination of performer and creative artist that gave his interpretations their

⁴⁰ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 26.

⁴¹ The manuscript of this song is located in the Bliss Archive, Cambridge University Library.

authority and confident justification'.⁴² Busoni provided a further link to Edward Dent, first met at Bilton, and now a 'most stimulating influence, bringing into a somewhat provincial backwater a keen breeze from musical Europe'.⁴³

Ex. 1 Bliss: 'Tis time I think by Wenlock town', opening

In 1912, Bliss made contact with Elgar for the first time. Having met Lady Elgar through a mutual acquaintance, he was invited to Severn House to take tea, whereupon Bliss and Elgar spent the afternoon engaged in discussion on Shakespeare's histories, and in particular on the character of Falstaff, which at that time was providing inspiration for Elgar's impressive symphonic study. The Elgars would remain 'sympathetic friends' during the coming years.⁴⁴

Bliss's Cambridge years were exhilarating times. Two great artistic contributions of *fin de siècle* England appeared, produced by two Cambridge alumni: first, in 1910, Forster's exploration of social connections in *Howards End*, quickly followed, of course, by Vaughan Williams's symphonic essay on the sea, drawing upon texts by Whitman, the laureate of the New World. But there would be tragedy, too – Scott's failure in the Antarctic was a national blow and, infamously, the sinking of the

⁴² Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 27.

⁴³ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

Titanic further stripped away a confidence in urbanisation and mechanisation. For now, though, Bliss had his first substantial composition to distract him.

He composed a String Quartet in A major in about 1913, his final year at Cambridge. His continued training subsequently took him home to London, for further technical honing under Stanford at the Royal College of Music. The first public performance of the quartet was given on 9 June 1914 at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge: it can be safely classified, therefore, as a student work, a compositional exercise of sorts, written at Cambridge and revised during later study at the Royal College. Bliss designated the work 'Opus 4', and dedicated it to his tutor Dent.⁴⁵

String Quartet in A major

Even in the opening few bars of this three-movement work a sense of whimsy emerges, and there is a strong scent of the Edwardian salon in the air. The first accidental, for example, does not arrive until the seventeenth bar – a case, surely, of harmonic stability being pushed to its limits. Even when that accidental does arrive, it simply pushes the music gently towards the subdominant. The motivic organisation of the first movement observes all the principles of sonata form, and has a tonal scheme inspired by the tritone relationships in the opening movement of Elgar's First Symphony.

Indeed, the primary organising principle here is tonality. There is not a single passage in the entire work which lacks a distinct tonal centre. When one compares this with the musical practice of an established English figure such as Elgar in, say, his string quartet of 1918, the differences are stark. In the first movement of Elgar's work, section after section demonstrates the rejection of an explicitly-stated tonal centre. Complex sequences are found in Elgar too, not only for modulatory purposes, but also as a device for thematic development.

Sequencing is a useful weapon in a composer's armoury, but a fiercely complicated one. Bliss wrote fondly of Charles Wood, his composition teacher at Cambridge and

⁴⁵ According to Bliss, Dent 'used to say that *all* young composers embarrassed him by putting his name at the head of their earliest and most immature chamber works' (Bliss, op. cit., 47).

a rigorous exponent of contrapuntal and fugal training.⁴⁶ Even if Wood did devote some teaching time to imaginative modulations, which seems likely, might those reflections on life at Cambridge hold the clue to Bliss's as-yet underdeveloped technique? As well as admitting to 'a reluctance to concentrate', he confesses to having 'revolted against what seemed unmusical drudgery'.⁴⁷ The finer technical points of composition may have been brought into sharper focus by a new group of talented peers at the Royal College – which now included Howells, Goossens and Gurney.

Given the context in which Bliss composed the quartet – which included his attendance at the Diaghilev ballets at Drury Lane – it is surprising how much of the work is so harmonically unambiguous. Again, the difference in technical facility between Bliss and a contemporaneous Elgar is striking: with Elgar's experience had come the confidence to compose lengthy passages with seemingly obscure modulatory goals. This gives further credence, then, to the argument that Bliss's quartet was conceived as an undergraduate exercise.

Bliss proudly commented of his rebellion against Stanford at the Royal College that 'I regarded the defiant attitude of the great Hector [Berlioz] towards the Paris Conservatoire as the only right one for a student'.⁴⁸ There is, however, little evidence of this in Bliss's early musical language. His harmonic landscape is one of English late-romanticism: furthermore, the unfussy consonance with which his themes are constructed seems directly reliant upon the modes of folk music. His occasional use of the more exotic Phrygian mode (see bars 124 to 127, for example) also suggests influences from foreign folk traditions. Folk themes are not quoted directly, but the tonic-subdominant relationships which predominate give the music a palpably pastoral quality. There is no evidence here of any assimilation of Russian influences; nor is there even the mosaic-like approach to structure advocated by the French impressionists, or the intense chromaticism associated with that school.

In the second movement of the three, the viola introduces a pastoral theme employing an Aeolian flattened sixth in the fourth bar (ex. 2). Afterwards, there is

⁴⁶ Charles Wood was himself an accomplished composer of string quartets.

⁴⁷ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

little thematic development of note; rather, the tool for the creation of interest is textural variation. For example, the next two restatements of the theme – now heard on the cello – are accompanied first by relaxed quaver and triplet patterns above, and then by more agitated, iridescent semiquavers. The harmonic structures of the two phrases are identical. However, it would be entirely incorrect to level at Bliss the accusation of developmental banality, for similar techniques may be found in great works by, say, Tchaikovsky, or, to look back further still, Schubert.⁴⁹ Indeed, is this preference for textural contrast over harmonic development really a sign of Bliss’s limited powers of invention? Or rather, does it actually demonstrate a deeper interest in the raw science of timbre and ‘sound’ than in harmony?



Ex. 2 Bliss: String Quartet in A major, II, bb. 1-9, opening viola theme

At last, in the middle of this second movement occurs some evidence of Bliss’s studious interest in the French musical panorama. Between bars 83 and 86 he presents a passage which is immediately compelling: drone-like cello triplets underpin not only warbling violin semiquavers but also quietly percussive viola pizzicatos (ex. 3). Above this commotion of sound, Bliss introduces a soaring violin melody, characterised by a Lydian raised fourth. Harmonically, he places the tonic major and the supertonic major next to one another, a technique also encountered in Vaughan Williams’s String Quartet in G minor of 1908, which may have served as a model for the young undergraduate.

We are left to wonder whether the example here was set by Vaughan Williams, or by genuine continental influences – or more likely a combination of the two. While this movement does not come close to emulating the harmonic complexity of Bliss’s established contemporaries, it represents a tangible deepening of musical thought, and an admirable degree of technical competence. Indeed, texture and timbre emerge

⁴⁹ Both Schubert and Tchaikovsky tended towards self-developing melodies, a *modus operandi* adopted by Bliss particularly in the final years of his compositional career.

as key tools on Bliss's compositional palette: he would begin to deploy these features with brutal effect five years later.



Ex. 3 Bliss: String Quartet in A major, II, bb. 83-86

To summarise, we can learn much from this early string quartet about Bliss's pre-war aptitude and musical mentality. Melody is the primary structural tool in this work, but with these themes generally reappearing in the same keys, some harmonic dexterity for structural reinforcement is desirable – particularly in a sonata-form first movement. Harmonically, Bliss demonstrates a fondness for the subdominant, and he frequently initiates modality by juxtaposing relative majors and minors. His themes are seldom treated to extensive development, instead being rescored again and again, confirming Bliss's early interest in texture and timbre: the Stanfordian principles of development through variation, if nothing else, were seemingly adopted by this otherwise unwilling apprentice.

Bliss's early harmonic language, as demonstrated in the string quartet, was by no means individual, nor did it react against conventions. This young voice is undeniably closer stylistically to Vaughan Williams and Elgar than it is to such European luminaries as Debussy, Schoenberg or Stravinsky.⁵⁰ However, he does not come even close to matching the complexity, sophistication or technical assurance of his English antecedents: on occasion, his harmonies are almost pre-Romantic in their unambiguousness.

It seems almost certain, therefore, that the string quartet is a product of Cambridge which, as we have seen, Bliss described rather unjustly as 'a somewhat provincial backwater'. It was not until his return to London that he began fully to absorb the

⁵⁰ Bliss's string quartet is perhaps closest stylistically – but certainly not in terms of scope – to John Ireland's two early string quartets, both composed when Ireland himself was also a student at the Royal College.

music of Stravinsky, Debussy and Ravel. This chronology may explain Bliss's near-Classical simplicity: at Cambridge, he had come under the tutelage of Charles Wood, a committed Beethovenian, and that 'stimulating influence', the string quartet's dedicatee, Edward Dent, himself an expert on Mozart as well as the contemporaneous European vista. It is most likely, though, that the absence of indulgence, formlessness and exaggeration in the quartet is not a conscious rejection of romanticism, but rather that this artistic straightforwardness was simply born of a lack of inspiration and maturity.

A difficult year at the Royal College

In June 1913 Bliss completed his studies at Cambridge, and in November he entered the Royal College of Music. By the time that Britain entered the war in Europe in August 1914, he had spent several months studying composition and theory under Stanford and Parry, alongside contemporaries such as Arthur Benjamin, Eugène Goossens and Ivor Gurney. However, it was Herbert Howells who most caught Bliss's attention: 'His quickly written scores, showing a beautifully resolute calligraphy, with their technical maturity simply disheartened me. I had to learn one of the most painful lessons in life, that there are others who are born with more gifts than oneself.'⁵¹ Bliss found the talent around him intellectually intimidating, and was already beginning to self-identify as a man who was not a natural composer, not a natural creative personality. Despite this apparent disheartenment, he became lifelong friends with Howells, Goossens and Benjamin.

Importantly, Bliss's period of study at the Royal College had brought him back to London, away from the provincialism of Rugby and Cambridge. This more cosmopolitan lifestyle also exposed him to continental trends, which included Schoenberg's fundamental break with functional tonality only five years earlier.⁵² In that very year, 1913, atonality and a rejection of traditional forms were synthesised in Webern's *Six Bagatelles*, a collection of rigorously serial miniatures for string

⁵¹ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 28.

⁵² Schoenberg's *Second String Quartet*, op. 10 (1908) was remarkable for its pioneering tonality, but is equally noteworthy for its strict adherence to a four-movement scheme, as well as its use of standard forms such as theme and variations, a scherzo, and sonata form.

quartet. They make use of extended string techniques, but have been described as ‘economical to the point of unintelligibility’.⁵³ Experimentation in chamber music was very much in vogue, and it would be through this medium that Bliss continued his musical development after the interruption of the Great War.

More relevant to Bliss, though, who through his piano repertoire at Rugby and Cambridge was more inclined to look towards France, was the cultural invasion of Paris by the Russians, particularly Stravinsky, Diaghilev and their Ballets Russes. The first performance of *Le sacre du printemps* needs no discussion here, but Bliss was most taken with the Russian productions at Drury Lane: ‘These evenings were shot through with unexpected excitements, as the opening notes of a Stravinsky score were heard ... On a return home from such a feast we [Bliss, Howells, Goossens and Benjamin] seemed to board the bus with the dash of a Nijinsky leap’.⁵⁴ Indeed, this was a seminal moment of his early years.

As he leapt from the Tilling bus, Bliss was already experiencing alternatives to the musical leadership of Germany, presented here in London in the form of France and Russia. Besides, public suspicion of imperial Germany had been increasing for several years. Germany had represented a diplomatic threat for some time, having become engaged in a race with Britain for naval supremacy. The ensuing national paranoia was underpinned musically by Cecil Forsyth’s extraordinary anti-Teutonic polemic, *Music and Nationalism*, published in 1911. Forsyth argued with some dexterity that England was little more than a musical colony of Germany, and that the only solution was to banish all foreign (specifically German) involvement in musical activity. This position was extreme, but as uneasy peace gave way to war, Forsyth began to get his wish.⁵⁵

As we have seen in the foregoing discussion of Bliss’s early quartet, the influence of the new English tradition cannot be underestimated either – indeed, inspired by Vaughan Williams at Cambridge, Bliss was already setting the words of Housman, that staple of English song and of rural England, still unburdened by the shackles of

⁵³ Andrew Porter, ‘Modern German Chamber Music’, in Alec Robertson (ed.), *Chamber Music*, 406.

⁵⁴ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 28.

⁵⁵ It seems inconceivable that Bliss should not have at least leafed through this volume, and his forthcoming experiences on the Western Front would instil in him an anti-German sentiment that took years to fade.

satire. Although interested in issues of English identity and national heritage, he would never be drawn by the temptations of the folk tradition. As Giles Easterbrook has suggested: 'if [Bliss's early quartet] nods reverently to Vaughan Williams, it is homage to VW as a friend, supporter, encourager and commanding figure, and even then a VW under the spell of Ravel, not of folksong.'⁵⁶

Path to war

It is now impossible to consider these Edwardian years in isolation, or to close our historical view to the horrors of war which were soon to follow. Eight months into the Great War, on 4 April 1915, a sonnet was read in St Paul's Cathedral during the Easter Sunday sermon. Its author, a temporary sub-lieutenant in the Naval Volunteer Reserve, died three weeks later on active service. That sonnet, *The Soldier* by Rupert Brooke, came later to be associated with the discredited idealistic attitudes of England in those years prior to 1914. Perhaps Brooke died too early in the war for his style to encompass the more graphic depictions found in the work of, say, Isaac Rosenberg or Wilfred Owen. But what surely draws modern readers to Brooke's sonnet sequence is the way in which he combines a number of themes around the underlying subject of national heritage, and then discusses his own personal loyalty to it. For all those who fought in the Great War, this uneasy relationship created an inescapable dilemma.

The impact of the First World War on international politics, society and culture is, ultimately, incalculable. Figures can – and have – been placed on its human and financial cost, but it is impossible to quantify the sweeping social change that was set in motion. As A. J. P. Taylor wrote in his famous study of the war, 'it cut deep into the consciousness of modern man. Its memorials stand in every town and village. Even now, the experiences of it are not entirely stilled.'⁵⁷ The war, and its immediate aftermath, ushered in a modern age, and brought an end to Eric Hobsbawm's 'long nineteenth century'. It was the First World War, after all, which eliminated many of the fashions and territorial agreements of the nineteenth century proper.

⁵⁶ In an address by Giles Easterbrook to the Bliss Society Luncheon, Harrogate, 31 July 2004.

⁵⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War*, 13.

But had the Edwardian era simply been an extension of the Victorian age? As we have seen, economic and social changes created an environment in which social mobility seemed more possible than ever before. These changes included a rising interest in socialism, greater attention to the plight of the poor and the status of women, and an increase in economic opportunities as a result of rapid industrialisation. The founding members of the Labour movement were elected to Parliament for the first time, and shortly afterwards Asquith's Liberal government passed bills which introduced the National Health Insurance and the old-age pension. In short, the seeds of the modern Welfare State had been sown in the first decade of the twentieth century.

We have seen Bliss's own recollections of his youth. Despite the premature death of his mother, almost unremembered by the three Bliss brothers, he casts a happy scene – and one full of cultural diversity. In his autobiography, *As I Remember*, he writes of Chinese vases, of Greek verses, and of afternoon walks along the Thames. He gives us vignettes of dance classes with one wantonly-dressed Mrs Wordsworth, summer holidays in the Malvern Hills, and the excitement of the annual pantomime at Drury Lane. Of his years at Cambridge, he admits to being the very model of Edwardian indolence. But is it possible that this happy veneer was merely a retrospective one? It seems inconceivable that Bliss, seemingly intelligent and sensitive, was oblivious to the lengthening shadows at home and abroad. He was, after all, a child of England – a child of Empire – of an Empire within which the individual was subordinate to 'imperial acquisition and maintenance'.⁵⁸

At the Royal College of Music, Bliss began to mature as a composer within a small community of associates, and immediately clashed with and rebelled against Stanford. The influence of the Austro-German tradition continued to loom heavily over British music. There were Parry and Stanford, both apparently haunted by the ghost of Brahms; Charles Wood, the committed Beethovenian at Cambridge; and Elgar – Bliss's first musical hero – fashioning a new English musical idiom, but one which adopted a familiarly German accent. An important trend of fetishising the English folksong had also begun to emerge.

⁵⁸ Jon Savage, *op. cit.*, 84.

The String Quartet in A major is the work of an emotionally contented and financially secure young man. The impending war brought the Edwardian era crashing finally to an end, and altered irrevocably Bliss's personal and musical outlooks. Within days of the outbreak of war in August 1914, Bliss enlisted into the Inns of Court Officers' Training Corps. He had seen his string quartet through the presses of Stainer and Bell by the time he reached the front line. Did this work accurately reflect Bliss's pre-Somme outlook? To what extent had he already been influenced by his British contemporaries? Had the dualities in his life already begun to take root?

First war

1914—1919

The Great War changed the social and cultural landscape of Britain almost beyond recognition. Bliss's generation, now coming to maturity, would be decimated on the battlefields of Europe. It was there that the seeds of Bliss's later anti-Teutonic chauvinism were sown – like many others, his family suffered personal loss and grief. In this chapter, the full story of Bliss's war is told for the first time.

The full details of the Great War have always received remarkably short shrift in the few biographical accounts which have been undertaken of Bliss's life. Descriptions are kept to a bare minimum, often amounting to little more than 'was injured at the Somme' or 'was mentioned in despatches'. This is, perhaps, due to the wealth of literature which has already been published on that conflict, and the resulting assumption that any educated reader will be equipped with at least some estimation of, for example, the terrible conditions in which soldiers on both sides fought.

In his autobiography, Bliss shied away from direct reminiscences of his wartime experiences, choosing instead to construct a narrative using his own letters and diary entries. This is understandable, and is certainly an improvement upon the biographical crumbs described above, but is still less than satisfactory for modern historians. Besides, as Andrew Burn has asserted, 'in the makings of Bliss as man

and artist the experience of the Great War was incalculable.’¹ Yet despite Burn’s confident and accurate claim, Bliss’s war experiences have still never been described comprehensively, and archive materials – which include further war letters and diaries – have, until recently, lain unread. This is nonsensical: Bliss’s war service defined the course of the rest of his life. The story of those years deserves to be told.

Declaration and enlistment

A. J. P. Taylor once claimed that ‘until August 1914 a sensible, law-abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the state, beyond the post office and the policeman.’² For Bliss, this was entirely true, as is evinced by the foregoing account of his relatively carefree, middle class childhood and youth. If he wished to travel abroad, as he had done for the first time on a family holiday to France at the age of twelve, he could do so without a passport or official permission. His family was bourgeois enough not to be directly affected by the welfare reforms of Asquith’s Liberal government, nor by the introduction of national health insurance and old-age pensions.

Bliss and his peers existed, by his own later admission, in a rarefied climate. Indeed, the first days of war in the summer of 1914 found him exercising his penchant for amateur dramatics, playing Caliban in a production of *The Tempest* at Leintwardine House in Herefordshire. Bliss was a child of industrial success, one of that generation which had been ‘sent to public schools, to Oxford and Cambridge, and [which] too often fell in love with the country-house style of life, probably the most seductive of all styles’.³ After Bliss’s weekend at Leintwardine, there was no longer space for such seduction.

The declaration of war with Germany on the evening of 4 August 1914 would irrevocably alter Bliss’s hitherto detached relationship with national authority. It was

¹ Andrew Burn, ‘From Rebel to Romantic: the music of Arthur Bliss’, *Musical Times* 132 (1991), 384.

² A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945*, 25.

³ J. B. Priestley, *The English*, 124. Priestley later recalled how, as a soldier, he had encountered ‘various specimens of the English ruling class, and listened to accents so extraordinary that they might as well have been foreigners’ (Priestley, *The Edwardians*, 56). Although by no means an aristocrat, Bliss could have made a similar assessment of the proletarian infantry.

on that evening that he became, along with millions of other young men, a potentially active British citizen. It was now the duty of every British subject to serve the state first, and themselves second. Rationing was introduced. By the end of the summer newspapers were, if not censored, then certainly monitored with a new zeal by state officials. Newly-defunct areas of industry were wound down. Although these state-driven restrictions and controls were ultimately relaxed again in peacetime, a return to Edwardian deference never materialised. For the first time, too, millions of Britons were to experience the full force of modern warfare.

Like Bliss, the Prime Minister enjoyed a relaxed weekend in the country at the beginning of August. Despite Asquith's previous reformist successes, so began a public and critical perception of weak leadership.⁴ It was left to Lloyd George and Churchill to take control. Earl Kitchener was soon installed as Secretary of State for War, and by September his accusing finger had recruited nearly three quarters of a million men.⁵ It was the largest civilian army ever raised and, with the promise of great adventures ahead, most were anxious not to miss out.

The call to arms in the wake of the declaration drew an extraordinary response, with a huge rush of voluntary recruitment. Two-and-a-half million men enlisted in the first sixteen months, and by the time the Armistice was signed five million British men had entered the armed forces, with only a minority doing so under compulsion. The success of the recruitment drive owed much to the Victorian legacy of masculine networks, whether they were groups of factory workmates or public school old boys: the role of the Edwardian sporting code – 'all men together' – in this mass conscription cannot be overstated.⁶ Imperial paranoia and new principles of schooling had, belatedly, turned men of all classes into disciplined potential soldiers.

While Bliss may have been swept along by a sense of missionary zeal, it was more likely a sense of duty and obligation that provoked the first wave of volunteers in August and September 1914.⁷ Many of the landowning and social elite played a

⁴ Cameron Hazlehurst, 'Asquith as Prime Minister, 1908–1916', *The English Historical Review* 85 (1970), 502–531.

⁵ Kitchener's complex character, and the public reception of him, is explored further in Keith Surridge, 'More than a great poster: Lord Kitchener and the image of the military hero', *Historical Research* 74 (2001), 298–313.

⁶ W. J. Reader, *'At duty's call': a study in obsolete patriotism*, 111.

⁷ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: the making of the New Armies, 1914–1916*, 187.

central role in local war preparation, believing that the twin notions of privilege and responsibility had wider ramifications than simply for individual communities.⁸ Such paternalistic pressure to enlist later found expression in the lines of Siegfried Sassoon: 'Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight / (Under Lord Derby's scheme) I died in Hell – (They called it Passchendaele)'.

As a former public schoolboy with some physical training, Bliss was an ideal candidate to rise above the ranks of the infantry, with sure potential to achieve at least a middling position of command. On presenting himself at a west London recruiting office within the first two weeks of hostilities, he was assigned to a dockers' battalion. By the end of August, he had been enlisted into the Officers' Training Corps of, curiously, the Inns of Court Regiment.⁹ On 4 October he was discharged on appointment into a commission, and the next morning was appointed a second lieutenant in the 13th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers.

When Bliss joined up, he may have feared that he was leaving behind him an England in which musical activity of any kind would dwindle to the merest whisper. After all, in those first frantic months most of the provincial festivals were cancelled, and the schedules of choral societies were thrown into disarray. Just a few weeks after the declaration of war, the *Musical Times* reflected:

It is not only that the sudden and alarming restriction of means on the part of practically every section of the community forces even hitherto well-to-do people to question expenditure, but that the intense obsession of the mind in following the evolution of stupendous events produces a sort of stupor and a feeling that the ordinary concerns of individual life are jejune and insignificant.¹⁰

Once this initial feeling of shock passed, the war still had inevitable consequences for the national music. Some concert halls were used exclusively as military stations, and there was a concurrent fall in the number of concerts and recitals. However, orchestral performances continued thanks to the efforts of the London Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Society: the Promenade concerts, for example, ran uninterrupted for the duration of the war. Festivals located in the

⁸ Keith Grieves, "'Lowther's Lambs': Rural Paternalism and Voluntary Recruitment in the First World War', *Rural History* 4 (1993), 68.

⁹ The Inns of Court Regiment consisted almost exclusively of members of the Law Association, an organisation to which Bliss had no obvious link.

¹⁰ Anon, 'Occasional Notes: The War and Music', *Musical Times* 55 (1914), 575.

provincial resorts benefited, with affluent holidaymakers previously accustomed to foreign travel no longer able to make their summer trips to the continent.

The most marked effect of the ongoing conflict was, unsurprisingly, the rejection of works by German composers, particularly in these early stages of the war. At Queen's Hall, for example, Wagner concerts were replaced by the Russians. Indeed, Russian and French music grew in popularity as a result, even after the war, and this trend undoubtedly had some impact upon the following generation of British composers. Where the younger orchestral performers gradually exited to the trenches, women – like in many sectors of the new industrial society – were called in to take their places. Some London theatres engaged orchestras consisting entirely of women.

The rejection of Germany was wholesale. Just before the war, Oscar Schmitz had expounded his '*das Land ohne Musik*' analogy, the first attributable use of a phrase which later proved a motivating factor in the renewal of English music. When the first air raids began at Christmas in 1914, any semblance of tolerance towards Germany disappeared. The invasion of neutral Belgium had been one thing, but attacks on British soil were quite another. After all, the war had supposed to have been won by Christmas. Cecil Forsyth, so stringent in his desire for a cultural divorce from Germany, was beginning to have his wish.

Military training

For Bliss, though, there were now more immediate concerns. As a freshly commissioned second lieutenant, his military career had begun. His advancement through the ranks of the British Army would bring the impression of his years at Rugby into sharper focus. By the autumn of 1914, the 23-year-old Bliss had started rigorous training. His first experience of trench warfare was still nearly a year away.

Bliss spent the autumn of 1914 and the following winter in training at Shoreham and Worthing. At these camps, Guy Chapman, Bliss's fellow junior officer, recalled a distinct drabness and lack of focus:

It was not so much the circumstances; the dull little south coast watering-place in winter; the derelict palazzo; the headquarters, facing on one side the tumbling grey sea and on the other an unkempt field; it was not the men in shabby blue clothes and forage caps with their equipment girt about them with bits of string; it was the obvious incapacity and amateurishness of the whole outfit which depressed.¹¹

The 13th battalion was commanded by three retired officers, two of whom had served in the Indian Army. Beneath these was an array of civilian officers, who

displayed only too patently their intention of getting through the war as quietly, comfortably and as profitably as they could manage. They effectively discouraged the juniors from demonstrations of excessive zeal, and by sheer negation tried to stifle our hunger for information. They failed, but nevertheless, the miasma of petty jealousy, bickering and foolish intrigue, which surrounded them, was the cause of much melancholy and profanity in us juniors.¹²

In short, both training and the military society were rudimentary. The new recruits frequently embarked on exercises only to find that training drills were to be led internally. Soldiers like Bliss and Chapman, juniors yet already responsible for individual platoons, improvised their way through command routines by referring to and learning by heart the information supplied in official pamphlets, most of which were still more suited to the combat conditions of the Boer War.

Early in 1915, Bliss set the words of 'The Hammers' by the Georgian poet Ralph Hodgson. Given Bliss's circumstances, the textual connotations are apt. The poet introduces allusions to decay and futility, and questions the longevity of human industry. Indeed, the themes here are remarkably modern and violent, and the choice of text gives a glimpse of a novice soldier already grappling with the legitimacy of large-scale combat, even before his first experiences of trench warfare. In the introduction of his setting, Bliss gives a titular nod to the 'Hammerklavier' sonata, with reiterated quavers and octaves in both hands. The first vocal entry is sustained, but the sense of unease grows in the accompaniment with the octaves becoming fuller chords and the rhythms growing increasingly fast and restless. The song dies away to the 'muffled hammers of decay'.

By now, Bliss's military career was beginning to take shape. With his experience in Rugby's Officers' Training Corps behind him, by the end of March 1915 he had impressed his senior officers sufficiently to be promoted to lieutenant, an elevation no doubt aided by the quality of his educational background. During the Great War,

¹¹ Guy Chapman, *A passionate prodigality*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

Bliss was one of thousands of former public schoolboys who found themselves thrust into positions of command over their proletarian comrades.

In the spring and summer of 1915, some of Bliss's early works received public performances, although whether the composer was able to attend is unclear: in particular, the String Quartet in A major was heard at Aeolian Hall on 25 June. By then, Bliss's first taste of frontline action was drawing near. As he prepared for mobilisation, the tide of public feeling began to turn against both Asquith and Kitchener. The *Daily Mail* ran an editorial by Northcliffe himself which suggested that Kitchener had restricted the provision of costly modern military equipment, leaving British troops to employ useless Boer shells in the face of the German heavy artillery.¹³ Although circulation fell dramatically as a response, and copies of the paper were burned at the London Stock Exchange, this public breaking of ranks precipitated a slow questioning of the acumen of authority. In the trenches, however, that process had already begun.

Active service

Throughout his frontline service, Bliss's letters home to his father sounded a persistently optimistic note, and the descriptions of his war experiences in his autobiography are also far from forthcoming. However, by examining letters to his youngest brother Howard, as well as extracts from his surviving war diaries, we find Bliss in a far more candid vein.¹⁴ These unpublished sources are presently housed in the Bliss Archive at the Cambridge University Library.

Francis and Howard Bliss, Arthur's father and brother, both in London for the duration, now also had their own small experience of war.¹⁵ In May 1915, Zeppelin bombing raids were launched on London for the first time, with the first devices falling near Stoke Newington and Hoxton. Targets were predominantly military, but

¹³ The implications of this editorial are revealed in Jean K. Chalaby, 'Beyond the prison-house of language: discourse as a sociological concept', *The British Journal of Sociology* 47 (1996), 684-698. This reportage, combined with the losses sustained at Gallipoli, led directly to the formation of a Coalition government which in turn paved the way for Asquith's eventual resignation in December 1916.

¹⁴ Howard Bliss had been rejected for military service on medical grounds.

¹⁵ This is in addition to the sound of machine-gun fire from the Western Front, which reportedly could be heard in London on a still day.

poor intelligence led to much indiscriminate bombing. For a public not visually accustomed to mechanical flight, the effect was terrifying, to the extent that the government implemented restrictions on the press reporting of such raids. However, these raids are now cited as a contributory factor to the galvanising of the public into a tightly coordinated war effort.¹⁶

On 25 July, Bliss attended a farewell lunch at his regimental mess at Andover. From here, the battalion convened and was taken by train to the Kent coast.¹⁷ Five days later the regiment set sail from Folkestone, arriving at Boulogne at two o'clock on the morning of 31 July. Bliss noted in his diary: 'men very excited ... very thrilling voyage – beautiful weather ... marched to [Ostrohov] rest camp ... up a terrific hill'.¹⁸ The next day Bliss, having slept in the open air, was woken by local women offering apples for sale. He bathed in the sea at Boulogne and then marched to the rail station at Pont de Briques, from where his battalion was transported through the night in cattle trucks on a slow train to Watten.

The relative ease of the train journey proved to be misleading, for the next week was filled with relentless marching. From Watten, the battalion marched the seven miles to Nortleulinghem on 1 August, and rested the next day, Bliss's birthday. The village had been cleared of all civilians, and here the troops were drilled in gas-mask procedure. The relative respite was brief, as marching continued on 3 and 4 August, but only once the battalion had taken communion in an orchard. Guy Chapman was struck by the vigour of his comrades, many of them from the more poverty-stricken areas of east London:

As I watched [them] marching into billets, the men, their jackets soiled with the dust of the road, their faces scarlet beneath the layer of grime through which the sweat had streaked furrows, their shoulders bent and narrowed under the strain of the ungainly packs burdened with all the little extras by which kind friends and mothers had tried to lighten the moment of farewell; the young platoon commanders anxious, and though as laden as their men, energetically passing up and down the ranks, exhorting and encouraging, sometimes bearing two, even three rifles of those they found faltering; the robust sergeants, also bearing an extra rifle, grimly determined that at least their little lot should not fail, giving the step in voices hoarse with reiteration, with parching, with reproof; I was overwhelmed by

¹⁶ See Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, 59. Grayzel also records some of the broader social trends, such as the employment of women in munitions factories and the death of 'Edwardian woman' with new requirements for simple clothing and short hair.

¹⁷ Chapman recalled how, while preparing to march to the branch line, he noticed 'with an uneasy eye that the sergeant of the platoon in front was hiccupping gently and swaying on his feet' (Guy Chapman, *op. cit.*, 15).

¹⁸ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 31 July 1915, Bliss Archive.

the simplicity of all these men, with the comely innocence which in spite of the obscenity and profanity breaking from harsh throats, was borne above them like a banner.¹⁹

Their route took the men to Campagne-by-Arques (where they billeted in the wooden attic of a pub), and onto St Silvestre via Hazlebruck: it was a 'ghastly march ... [the] platoon on the whole stuck it well'.²⁰ They arrived at the divisional headquarters on 6 August, where Bliss was required to carry out guard duty and 'endless inspections'.²¹

During this time, the battalion had been moving slowly up the line, receiving occasional instruction from more experienced troops. They had been marching solidly for a week, and on 8 August, a Sunday, a scheduled rest day was lost to yet more relocation. Bliss's men were required to dig fresh lines of defence, and by nightfall they had reached Bailleul, where they 'slept in [an] ill omened room':

To keep our spirits up the housekeeper told us that our room held most gruesome memories. It seemed that other English officers had been billeted there from time to time, and all without exception had come to a tragic end. One had been gassed, another had lost both legs, a third had gone off his head, and still another had been blown to bits by a shell that he was taking home as a souvenir. Perhaps to her disappointment we slept soundly.²²

They finally arrived at the frontline at Armentières on 9 August, securing billets on the Rue Sadi Carnot, in a 'fine old house ... [with] fine big rooms all lit by candles'.²³

It was here at Armentières, on the Belgian border, that Bliss experienced an enemy shelling raid for the first time. This occurred while he and his men were digging defence lines to the east of the town:

We were lucky to get our first experience of shelling with but a few light casualties; but I think there are few more unnerving experiences than leading a slow column of men from A to B, knowing that over a stretch between these two points we are observed and present an easy target to the enemy's guns.²⁴

Shell attacks were now coming thick and fast, and one unfortunate soldier was mutilated as he ran across a road: this uneasy feeling of exposure would be repeated

¹⁹ Guy Chapman, *op. cit.*, 22.

²⁰ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 5 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

²¹ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 7 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

²² Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 34.

²³ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 11 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

²⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 35.

throughout Bliss's service. However, prolonged raids during the following week ensured that he became quickly acclimatised to such events. The high point here was a chance meeting in Armentières with Dick Rawlinson, a friend from his years at Cambridge who was serving with the York and Lancaster Regiment: Bliss was even able to spend some time playing a piano at the Café Marguerite.

He was, however, forced to return briefly to Bailleul to have a tooth extracted, and afterwards was quickly re-posted to Armentières to continue digging trenches, as he reported in letters to two nurses who had long been in service with the Bliss family: 'the French roads are rotten – nothing but cobbles which hurt the feet badly';²⁵ 'ghastly thunderstorm – worst I've ever had ... billets always being shelled ... man hit in latrines ... my billet struck by shell – roof broken ... I have got quite used to all the noise and firing now, which goes on incessantly'.²⁶ He was now billeting in a disused girls' boarding school, with comfortable dormitories on the upper floors in spite of the constant shelling.

The rest of Bliss's battalion arrived at Armentières on 17 August, and a period of intensive instruction began the following morning with a lecture on trench warfare. The training was hands-on, and was combined with tentative forays to the frontline. This practical training was hardly adequate, however, dispensed as it was by members of the regiment's 9th battalion, who had at that time themselves been in France for only two months.

On 19 August, Bliss found himself in the firing line for the first time, although it was 'very quiet on the front'.²⁷ His platoon was forced to negotiate another exposed road between two communication trenches, a stretch that was again watched over by enemy machine guns. Under the cover of darkness, every man crossed safely. Bliss spent the whole of that night with his platoon in a frontline trench: he suggested in a letter to his father, perhaps by way of reassurance, that 'I think they all enjoyed the experience'.²⁸

²⁵ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to 'Duddle' (Miss Whitefoord, a family servant), 14 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

²⁶ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to 'Turtle' (an unidentified family nurse), 16 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

²⁷ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 19 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

²⁸ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 21 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

By 21 August, the Allied and German trenches were only 200 yards apart, the lights from enemy flares illuminating returning soldiers as they dropped over the parapet and back to temporary safety. As Guy Chapman surveyed the morning scene of no-man's land, he was surprised by what he found:

What I had expected, I do not know; certainly not this derelict dump which lay between us and ... the German line, guarded by its leaf-brown belt of patched and rusty wire; not the diseased stumpy trees in the orchard behind; not the tumbled-down gape-roofed house over there on the left, nor the unkempt skyline, growing stronger every moment as the sun rose.²⁹

Bliss's platoon was soon on the move again. The trenches at Armentières dug, and their rudimentary training complete, the men marched back to Bailleul. From there, between 25 and 28 August, they marched on towards Godwaerveldt, took a military train to Doullens, and then continued to march to Grenas, 'a very dilapidated little village'³⁰ where Bliss had a boil removed.

Here, the frontline was even quieter. Fresh lodgings proved a welcome change to Bliss's experience at Armentières, where he noted that his billets had been 'in rather a dangerous place and we were daily expecting a bombardment'.³¹ It was at Grenas that Bliss and his men heard news of a German naval defeat, the first significant military briefing since he had arrived in France:

The Russian naval victory was received with great enthusiasm here. We had an immense board rigged up, with 'The Kaiser's Navy Sunk Again' written on it in chalk, and set it up between our trenches and the Germans' one night. We set a bomb to it so that, if they tried to drag it down next night, the whole thing would go off. We also arranged to have a machine gun to fire on it if necessary. Next morning the Huns saw it and riddled it with shots. We went out of those trenches that evening, so I don't know what happened to it.³²

It was these youthful high spirits that Bliss was at pains to report to his father throughout his service: greater candour was forthcoming only in letters to brother Howard.

After spending the first three days of September marching, to a new base at Hannescamps, Bliss was greeted by the true squalor of war. Until then he had been fortunate with lodgings, usually securing comfortable indoor accommodation when

²⁹ Guy Chapman, *op. cit.*, 29.

³⁰ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 29 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

³¹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to 'Duddle', 31 August 1915, Bliss Archive.

³² Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 29 August 1915, Bliss Archive. The line of celebrants was subjected to heavy bombardment about five hours later.

away from the front, and dry, newly-dug trenches while on guard duty. Hannescamps presented a stark alternative, as he described in a letter to Howard:

I am now in quite the last place God made – I am sure of that – in a little village completely battered down by shells. There are a few isolated walls standing, otherwise everything else is a mass of bricks, clay, mud, rubbish, interwoven with masses of villainous looking barbed wire, and trenches half full with water! Everybody lives underground. I go down 12 steps under earth to my habitation, which I have with another officer. I have made it quite comfortable; it is very well built with a roof of bricks with feet of earth and grass above, a stone floor, two small beds with straw and a rough table and a couple of shelves. The smell is, of course, rather bad, and the rats abound, with numerous other less pleasant neighbours; but it is surprising how used to that sort of thing we get, and after a couple of nights in the fire trench without sleep, we are ready to throw ourselves down anywhere for a rest.³³

Bliss's diary entry reported 'nothing but cesspools and open lat[rine]s'.³⁴ Even in this foulness he maintained an impressive stoicism, although his fortitude surely wavered on 5 September when he was sniped at for the first time, whilst walking to Fonquevilliers.

After a two-day stay in the support trenches, Bliss's platoon resumed frontline duties by relieving the French troops: it was now that Bliss made a rare admission in a letter to his father that 'if you are working at all in the open at night, you are constantly getting shot at from behind and the side'.³⁵ The trenches here were dug differently from those that Bliss had only recently encountered in Flanders: the new style was to dig six or seven feet into the ground and place the resulting earth mound behind the trench, leaving little protection at the side.

Over the next few days, letters to Howard provided a vivid running commentary on the heavy shelling that the platoon suffered on the frontline. On 13 September, Bliss joined a bombing party:

I crawled out over our trenches, and took a couple of high explosive bombs in my pocket and my revolver ... we crept out continuously, taking two hours to go 500 yards ... if you are spotted you have got to lie down and make a noise like a cabbage ... we let drive when we got within throwing distance ... we hared back as hard as we could ... I am, I admit, very scared of bombs.³⁶

The next day, Bliss's section of the line was shelled. His assessment was reserved for his diary: 'very hot few minutes ... could not sleep for slugs and mice – felt very

³³ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Howard Bliss, 4 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

³⁴ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 4 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

³⁵ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 13 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

³⁶ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Howard Bliss, 16 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

tired – snipers very active’.³⁷ Finally, the battalion was relieved by the 11th Royal Warwickshire Regiment on 15 September, and Bliss and his men were able to move back again into the reserve trenches, where they let off steam in the traditional way: ‘hopelessly drunk – great confusion – very dark night’.³⁸

This tactical relief was timely, for a lack of frontline supplies had meant that some of the less healthy men were becoming dangerously undernourished. In fact, Bliss was surprised that all of the men safely negotiated the long march through Bienvillers and on to Humbercamps that followed:

One has to be continually on the look out for men falling asleep at night while on duty. I am sorry to say we seem to have quite a lot of that knocking about, and of course it means in a good many cases that the fellow is shot, but luckily no one in our lot yet.³⁹

At this time, Bliss’s musical stimulation was found in a score of Elgar’s *Enigma* Variations: he claimed to be ‘teaching [himself] orchestration by degrees out here’.⁴⁰ Now Bliss required another, more recent Elgar score, *Falstaff*. He had been making notes – of both music and prose – on loose sheets of manuscript paper that he had begun to lose, and so for the sake of efficiency he also requested of his father a small manuscript book.

On 17 September the platoon began to dig trenches that had been started by French troops: this task would take five days. To break the monotony and to promote a positive attitude towards training, Bliss initiated a daily programme of football matches and cross-country running. He also used his own spare time to seek musical diversion, as he reported to his middle brother, Kennard, who by then was in training with the Royal Field Artillery:

I had an amazing time this morning trying to put into order one of the two pianos that [Humbercamps] possesses ... It was in the most ghastly state imaginable, not a note in tune, treble lower than bass, and everything rusty and filthy. I tinkered at it, and with the aid of a spanner got it fairly right in the two middle octaves, but it would return after a minute or so to its former state; so I had finally to give it up as a bad job. Our first fortnight [30 July—9 August] taken in getting here was the hardest I have ever done; and I would much rather remain in the trenches and get no sleep than do the marching and shifting about again.⁴¹

³⁷ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 14 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

³⁸ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 15 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

³⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 17 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Kennard Bliss, 18 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

Some relief arrived on 24 September in the form of the requested score of *Falstaff*, but now Bliss and his men were commanded to prepare for an advance. Bayonets were sharpened, and a final dinner was enjoyed on 26 September, a day on which Bliss was recommended for a captaincy by his divisional General. His leadership skills had obviously impressed: one wonders whether his officer's meal tasted any sweeter that evening. Bliss recorded the *carte du jour* in his diary as 'turtle soup; roast beef, potatoes, peas; plum pudding, whisky – not bad for dinner'.⁴² Certainly, this was better fare than usual: a full roast dinner preceded by mock turtle soup – a hearty broth generally made with the brains, organ matter and feet of calves and younger cattle.

Conditions worsen, and the fighting intensifies

Bliss would earn this sustenance. The next day he led his men to relieve the 11th Warwickshires on the frontline at Hannescamps, where they remained for almost a fortnight. On 30 September he read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and wrote to both Elgar and Parry of his complete demoralisation. This prompted Elgar to send him a signed score of the *Cockaigne Overture* – a timely reminder of Bliss's home city – which he had inscribed 'Good luck!'⁴³

Bliss's scant diary entries reveal his worsening mental condition as the days at the frontline drew on. Fine weather at the beginning of 1 October was no relief – 'Beautiful morning, but rather tired and cross all day'⁴⁴ – and when the rain came a few days later, Bliss found himself 'in [a] damned bad temper'.⁴⁵ A welcome reprieve arrived on 9 October, and Bliss's men withdrew to a rest camp three miles behind the frontline. By now the Expeditionary Forces were operating a strategy of posting men to the line for around twelve days, and then resting them for a further twelve. Bliss could now focus on his own mental recovery for an extended period.

It was during these rest days that Bliss attempted to begin work on an overture for a *War Suite*, soon abandoned, 'with scraps of the Marseillaise, ending with a drum

⁴² Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 26 September 1915, Bliss Archive.

⁴³ The score remains in the Bliss Archive, complete with mud from the French trenches.

⁴⁴ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 1 October 1915, Bliss Archive.

⁴⁵ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 4 October 1915, Bliss Archive.

roll'.⁴⁶ He also spent four days leading a work party of two hundred men at Souastre, digging yet more trenches. On their return to the rest camp, Bliss helped to prepare a pitch for an inter-battalion football match, in which Bliss's 13th Royal Fusiliers beat the 11th Leicestershire Regiment by seven goals to two.

On 21 October, the day after the football match, Bliss's battalion replaced the 11th Warwickshires on the frontline at Hannescamps, the two divisions now operating in rotation. Bliss was stationed there until 2 November. Autumn was now turning into winter, and on this particular tour he noted that it was 'pouring wet – trenches still frightful'.⁴⁷ He also allowed his father a rare glimpse of life in the trenches:

One develops a new kind of walk in the trenches, I find, a sort of half slide, half push, holding on to both sides of the muddy walls with one's hands. One can only go about one mile per hour, and it takes me a good half hour to get from one end of my section of line to the other.⁴⁸

After a retreat to the rest camp at Humbercamps, Bliss and his men spent several days repairing various sections of Lulu Lane, the main communications trench, which was by now mostly submerged under water. He took a working party of two hundred men to Bienvillers in order to carry out necessary improvements. On 8 November, Bliss refused to sign a pledge of temperance, in solidarity with the men beneath him.

Musical activity was far from Bliss's primary concern, but on 12 November his String Quartet received a second London performance at Aeolian Hall. In France, meanwhile, conditions were worsening, and the fighting was becoming significantly more brutal. Indeed, the action was so intense that the twelve-day rotation policy had been replaced by a three-day rotation. Bliss's platoon was sent to the support trenches behind the line at Hannescamps on 14 November, but even trench maintenance was fraught with risk. The enemy continued to shell strategic positions, regardless of their immediate worth, as Bliss found to his cost:

Just above Piccadilly Circus [a communications trench], a salvo had burst among a working party of the Loyals. Blood and limbs seemed to be strewn about the road. Mangled bodies lay silent or groaning. A memory of a coster's barrow spilt among the traffic and splashes of fruit on the pavement

⁴⁶ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 15 October 1915, Bliss Archive.

⁴⁷ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 2 November 1915, Bliss Archive.

⁴⁸ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 28 October 1915, Bliss Archive.

shot into my mind. Arthur Bliss, very white and resolute, was holding a man's arm which fountained blood, while its owner strove to control the screams his torn body wanted to utter.⁴⁹

A week later the men moved back to Bienvillers, and resumed their position at the front on 23 November. Now Bliss faced another stern test. That night, he led a platoon of thirty men over the top and into no-man's land, in the face of heavy machine gun and rifle fire. Two men were shot, and Bliss stayed with one, a Corporal Price, and carried him back to the trenches with the help of a Sergeant Mackenzie. The next day, he ventured out alone into no-man's land to retrieve five rifles which had been lost the previous night.

It was at Hannescamps, then, that Bliss and the others earned their spurs. Of that battle, Guy Chapman later wrote:

This broken village and its defences was the school where this battalion grew to manhood, and though we passed through many worse as well as easier periods, it is by Hannescamps that the originals swear. To have been at Hannescamps made you free of the battalion. A late comer, however gallant, however loved, had to earn his right to that primitive integrity before he was admitted to the brotherhood. Years later when I was asked to do something, I forget what, and shyly protested my unworthiness in the face of better men, I was reproached with, 'Ah! but you was at Hannescamps.' And for those words, I summon as powerfully as my poor words will command, the ghost of that devastated hamlet once more to fill a skyline.⁵⁰

However bad the conditions there, though, the 13th Royal Artillery could count themselves fortunate to have avoided the Battle of Loos, a particularly deadly skirmish which had occurred concurrently only a short distance along the line.

On 29 November, Kennard was posted to within a few miles of Arthur, having now completed his basic training. Letters between the two, both before and after Kennard's deployment, reveal similarly artistic personalities, with many references to their current literary predilections: these included the poems of Wordsworth and Shelley, the essays of Bacon, and even Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The love for Wordsworth's florid descriptions of a bucolic England is particularly striking: it is clear that both Arthur and Kennard cherished each transitory encounter with living, unadulterated landscapes.

Kennard's deployment coincided with a welcome period away from the frontline for his brother. On 30 November, Bliss took a working party to Fonquevilliers for trench

⁴⁹ Guy Chapman, op. cit., 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 44.

digging, only resuming a frontline position on 8 December, and then in heavy rain and relentlessly freezing conditions. Gas was by now a new and real threat. The German troops had also resorted to heavy shelling tactics, and it was in attempting to escape a shell that Bliss's close friend, a Captain Anthony, was killed by machine gun fire. Such is the necessity of war that a devastated Bliss was promoted almost immediately in his place.

After heavy bombing, and more trench digging at Hannescamps, Bliss was granted leave, and returned to the family home in Holland Park on Christmas Eve. Guy Chapman recalled the joyful contrast of life in England to that in the trenches:

England was an intoxication. The houses seemed of unparalleled cleanliness, the train offered cushions of down; the dull fields and hedges of Hampshire, the beeches assumed a new radiance; the bacon and eggs from the buffet at Basingstoke were ambrosial, Waterloo Station a palace. ... London had not yet reached the pitch of exasperated egoism, which it later touched. London was Elysium and seven days there were seven days won.⁵¹

Indeed, Bliss was at home for barely a week. On New Year's Day 1916 he prepared to return to France. He called on Elgar, who was not at home, and then made his way to Waterloo station, from where he caught a train to Southampton. The following day, he sailed with his battalion to Le Havre. It would be more than three months until he was next in England.

Return to the trenches, and an act of heroism

Tortuously, the 13th Royal Artillery was redeployed immediately to Hannescamps: they arrived on 4 January, and were thrust into a week-long tour of duty at the frontline. During the week that followed, Bliss performed his greatest act of wartime heroism, which subsequently earned him a mention in despatches. On 9 January, during a heavy mortar bombardment on Hannescamps, he ran to the affected area across open country in the face of machine gun and rifle fire. He cleared a trench of all troops, preventing many casualties, and was then thrown down himself by an exploding bomb. He escaped unharmed, albeit with severe shaking, and did not subsequently report sick.

⁵¹ Guy Chapman, *op. cit.*, 63.

The battalion continued to operate in rotation with the 11th Warwickshires, and relief arrived on 12 January. Now a member of the officer class proper, Bliss was driven to Wallencourt on 16 January to dine with fellow captains and commissioned officers. A five-day tour of duty followed, this time in Humbercamps: the Allied forces had lost ground to the German troops and, ominously, the former reserve trenches now formed the Allied frontline.

Later in the month Bliss visited Amiens and attended a service at the cathedral there. He stayed the night at the Grand Hotel du Rhin before returning to Hannescamps the following morning and acquiring fresh lodgings. The winter was still bitter as Bliss's battalion returned to the frontline on 1 February. His platoon came under heavy shelling during this five-day tour, and Bliss received his official promotion to Captain. He spent one of his subsequent rest days walking to Henu and back, in order to visit the grave of Captain Anthony, his friend who had been killed in December.

The 13th Royal Artillery now moved to a quieter section of the front, and began to operate in three-day rotations. On 20 February, amid occasional shrapnel bursts, Bliss and another officer became disorientated and were discovered in Berles, later being returned to new billets at Bailleument by water cart. There were now three-foot drifts of snow on the frontline. In Bliss's letters and Chapman's recollections, a picture emerges of the communities that formed naturally within each battalion. Each area of the front seemed strangely local, and each group of men operated tacitly within the class divisions of home. This increased when compulsory conscription was introduced in February 1916, which resulted in an even greater proportion of the British male population being deployed suddenly to foreign fields.⁵²

At the beginning of March, Bliss's battalion received news that they were to be moved to a section of the frontline closer to the sea, relieving French troops there. This was delayed until 22 March in order to facilitate four more three-day tours, with relief provided by the 2nd Royal Lancashire Fusiliers, and permanent cover brought by the 2nd King's Own Regiment on 21 March. That night, Bliss marched his men

⁵² Gary Sheffield's exploration of this subject is masterly. Amid his comprehensive investigation, he finds that marked class barriers seldom interfered with the extraordinarily close relationships formed between men of all ranks. See particularly Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the trenches: officer-man relations, morale and discipline in the British Army in the era of the First World War*, 165-177.

twelve miles to Halloy, and a further ten miles the next morning through Doullens and onwards to Barly. Snow was still in evidence at the reserve billets, despite the rising spring temperatures: 'this place looks awfully pretty in the sun', Bliss noted, 'with any amount of flowers about'.⁵³

Bliss soon learned that he and his men were to be inspected by Field Marshalls Haig and Kitchener. Consequently, he began to parade and drill his troops, and also organised a steeplechase. General Sir Douglas Haig arrived on 29 March, and Earl Kitchener of Khartoum on 31 March: between these visits, Bliss maintained a breathless schedule of route marches, boxing, cross-country running and inter-platoon football. Two such high-profile inspections seemed to indicate a coordinated advance, and Bliss later recalled of Haig how curious it was 'to see at close quarters the man whose final orders probably put in motion one's chances of life or death.'⁵⁴ He reported in his diary that 'Kitchener looked very well preserved – but has a curious habit of looking at both ranks at once, the result, I suppose, of too many inspections'.⁵⁵ Guy Chapman remembered Haig as genial, but Kitchener as forbidding.⁵⁶ In two months Kitchener would be dead, his ship torpedoed due west of the Orkney Islands.

The next few days were far quieter, with no frontline tours, and on 1 April Bliss duped his platoon with a faked divisional order calling for the immediate closure of all estaminets (temporary troop pubs): this was a particularly fine ruse considering Bliss's earlier rejection of a temperance order. The next day he walked to Mezzeroles to see his battalion take on the 10th Royal Fusiliers, a game in which they recorded a rare loss, by a goal to nil. The rest of the week was concerned with wiring practice, before rumours of leave began to abound on 6 April. A day later, Bliss was home.

⁵³ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 24 March 1916, Bliss Archive.

⁵⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 39.

⁵⁵ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 31 March 1916, Bliss Archive.

⁵⁶ Guy Chapman, *op. cit.*, 73.

Leave, return and devastation

During his week in London, Bliss finally caught up with Elgar. Over tea, they listened to new gramophone records of Elgar's *Starlight Express*. Leave was, by now, not an easy experience for many members of the 13th battalion: this anticipated the difficult task of societal reintegration after the Armistice. Having been in the grip of war for almost two years, England too was a changed country. Chapman, who also took leave around this time, described it as 'a little foreign and a little queer. "Business as usual" seemed to mean spending more money and drinking just one more than was good for you, to the health of the army or of anyone else who happened that way. London appeared a little drunk and rather vulgar.'⁵⁷

As ever, it was soon time for Bliss to head back to Southampton, and then on by boat to Le Havre. He arrived at the front on 16 April, and then marched along a now-familiar section of the line, through Cantileux, Doullens and Henu, reaching St Amand by Easter Saturday. He stayed there the following day for an Easter parade, and spent the next week working on the wiring for a new communication line. The battalion received orders to relieve the 2nd Essex Regiment on 30 April, and marched to Gastineau, a short distance north of where they had previously defended the frontline at Humbercamps and Bailleulmont. It was on this day, too, that Bliss was recommended by Haig for decoration in a despatch.

For now, the war seemed almost too easy – a sure sign, then, that a new wave of fighting was soon to follow. Chapman remembered these weeks with some affection:

High on the airy hill-side, in the heat of the sun, one was almost persuaded that the war was but a mimic battle ... From one point to the left, [we] could see the road running behind the enemy lines, and each day would harry the [German] post-corporal as he arrived with the mail. The game, I gathered, was not so much to hit him, as they nursed him up the road (although, of course, an accident might occur), as to make him drop the letters ... The summer evenings almost conjured one to believe that war was a pleasant state.⁵⁸

Surprisingly for Bliss, and perhaps irksomely in light of this relative comfort, he stayed in the frontline trenches for only a single day. A new push was expected during the coming summer, and so he was sent for a month of special training at the

⁵⁷ Guy Chapman, *op. cit.*, 82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

3rd Army School of Instruction alongside 120 fellow officers. Ominously, much of the training was concerned with the effective use of machine guns.

There were moments of levity too. On 6 May some of the men took a bus trip into the countryside, and they enjoyed a game of football the following day. A week later Bliss informed his father that ‘the country round here is most beautiful – in places it reminds me of Herefordshire – and is a most refreshingly varied change from the flat land of the trenches’.⁵⁹ During his training, Bliss displayed a good degree of technical proficiency: on 20 May, the men were taken by bus to the 4th Army School, where Bliss won a bayonet combat training competition. Two days later, he happily recounted the details of a fishing expedition to Kennard:

This is one of the prettiest places you can imagine, in fine weather! There is a small river – very much like the upper river at Cambridge towards Grantchester – with heaps of may and poplars all along its banks ... I went out with several others who tried their luck at fishing. We weren’t very successful, I am afraid; but we all flogged the stream in great style, and got our lines tangled and knotted up in true professional manner...⁶⁰

This bucolic gaiety was met on 24 May with a lecture entitled ‘The Personal Characteristics of Good Commanders’. At the end of the month, the officers left the school and returned to their battalions in the trenches.

The next day, 1 June, the Bliss brothers happened upon one another during bayonet practice. They arranged to meet for dinner the next day, at Kennard’s billets. Arthur duly cycled over to Bienvilliers, where they dined on a captains’ banquet of roast beef, chips, lobster mayonnaise and asparagus, and toasted their health with liqueur brandy. It was to be the last time they saw each other.

A fateful summer was now upon them. Returning to the trenches at Gastineau on 3 June, Bliss saw many comrades killed or injured in three days of raids on enemy lines. The rest of the month was no different, with a series of five- or six-day tours, the fighting in each seeming to grow in intensity. When not on the frontline, Bliss’s men were engaged in the greatest course of trench digging yet. A new strategy was surely on the horizon. A big push was planned and, in spite of the heavy losses sustained the previous autumn at Loos, the ground troops were united in mind that success was the certain outcome.

⁵⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 12 May 1916, Bliss Archive.

⁶⁰ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Kennard Bliss, 24 May 1916, Bliss Archive.

Bliss was ordered to keep his men distracted even in their spare time, and this he achieved with a standard programme of sports and artillery drills. This command also gave him an opportunity to exercise his creative side, and he and six other officers prepared a production of *Dead Men's Tales*, a revue of their own devising which they performed for their men at a rest camp on 23 June. Bliss wrote to his father that 'Our Cinema Burlesque was a great success, the place was crammed, and I think the men greatly enjoyed seeing the Officers making fools of themselves.'⁶¹

The time for such distractions was now over. By 27 June there were many rumours of an imminent battle. Sure enough, on 1 July, a massive, now infamous offensive was launched on the Somme sector.⁶² Still away from the main action, Bliss nevertheless experienced heavy bombing at Gastineau, and a retaliation was ordered with prolonged shelling of enemy positions. His battalion was relieved by the 6th North Staffordshire Regiment at dusk on 3 July. Only two officers and thirty-five men arrived: the rest had been mown down by enemy fire earlier in the day, running futilely towards German troops safely cocooned in concrete chambers. Bliss and his men now knew what to expect. They marched through Humbercamps to Labret, experiencing heavy shelling the whole way. They were taken by bus to Busieux – 'very cold night – again bad billets – no food'⁶³ – and from there marched to the reserve trenches at Albert.

Despite the bad tidings imparted by the survivors of the 6th North Staffordshires, the courageousness of youth remained. On the march to Humbercamps, Guy Chapman remembered that the men were still in collective high spirits:

Up to the beginning of July, 1916, that is, during our first eleven months, the war for us had been purely stationary; and warfare a matter of learning the job. There had been no fighting save a few encounters of patrols. All we had learned had been to try to keep our trenches healthy, and to suffer shell and trench mortar fire, if not with equanimity, at least with a cynical humour. Our wastage had not been high. In consequence, our spirits were not yet damped. Actually we knew very little; and if the battalion did not expect a walk-over, it still had the illusions bred of propaganda and the picture papers.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Francis Bliss, 25 June 1916, Bliss Archive.

⁶² Almost twenty thousand British troops were killed on this first day alone. See Paul Kennedy, 'The Degeneration of War', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 21 (2004), 15-18.

⁶³ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 5 July 1916, Bliss Archive. An officer from the 6th North Staffordshires reported to Chapman at the time that he had slept for five hours and had three meals in the previous four days (Guy Chapman, op. cit., 90).

⁶⁴ Guy Chapman, op. cit., 92.

By 6 July, Bliss was on the Somme line, moving to the front at La Boisselle and finding a scene akin to 'Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday painted by a madman'.⁶⁵

In the assault which followed the next day, he was struck by a bullet in the left leg: the platoon had climbed out of the trenches at around half past eight in the morning, and had then advanced in an extended line. After he was shot, Bliss crawled into a shell crater where he saw out the rest of the day. Later on he was discovered by the small army of weary stretcher bearers. His injury was serious enough to require repatriation to a London hospital, and on 9 July he was sent by train from Abbeville to Le Havre, and sailed two days later. On 12 July he was back in London, and was admitted to a hospital in Grosvenor Square. For now, at least, Bliss's war was over.

While in hospital, Bliss received a series of comically satirical letters from Kennard, who was still at the front. Kennard toyed mischievously with his older brother:

I suppose you are looking forward to returning to the front, aren't you? Isn't the joy of sacrifice and the lust for honour hot within you again? Away with a life of ease and idle pleasure! Why waste money on an opera ticket, when you can present the Empire with a hand grenade?⁶⁶

Kennard's sacrifice was no joy for Bliss. Leading a unit of infantry amid heavy shelling on 28 September, he was killed by enemy shrapnel. The loss was felt acutely by the whole family:

Poet, painter, musician, he was the most gifted of us all and to me his rebellious nature would have been a stimulant, his caustic comments a sharp corrective through those years when I was struggling on my own for musical expression.⁶⁷

He was buried at Aveluy two days later. During his concurrent sick leave, Bliss began to explore his grief and reflect on his own harrowing experiences on the Western Front for the first time in almost a year.

⁶⁵ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 6 July 1916, Bliss Archive.

⁶⁶ Kennard Bliss, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 31 July 1916, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 42.

⁶⁷ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 45.

Recovery

As he recuperated at home in October, Bliss attempted a setting of Robert Service's 'The Tramps', published later by Boosey in 1918.⁶⁸ A public, large-scale response to Kennard's death was still some years away, but this song gives an insight into Bliss's mental state in the immediate aftermath of so terrible a bereavement. By this point in the war, Bliss's direct experiences had been so vivid and his sense of human brotherhood had become so engrained that the poem's text seems to encapsulate Bliss's response to a broader human suffering: it has been described by Alan Cuckston as 'a ballad to the common man'.⁶⁹

The image shows a musical score for the song 'The Tramps' by Arthur Bliss. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a vocal line on a treble clef staff and a piano accompaniment on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The vocal line begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and the lyrics 'We tramped the road to A - ny - where, the ma - gic road to A - ny - where, the'. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics 'tra - gic road to A - ny - where, such dear, dim years a - go' and is marked piano (*P*). The piano accompaniment includes a *rall.* (rallentando) marking and a fermata over the final chord.

Ex. 4 Bliss: 'The Tramps', excerpt from final stanza

Service's poem is dedicated 'To all hoboes', which is surely how Bliss and his nomadic troops must have felt by the autumn of 1916, even after repatriation to England. The comrades are found following the 'tragic road to Anywhere', and the poem concludes by yearning for 'such dear, dim years ago' (ex. 4). This evokes the fraternal journey taken by Arthur and Kennard, which met its tragic end on the 'Anywhere' of the Somme. Bliss's music is restrained and conservative – a kind of gruesome march in C minor – but which is reconfigured in the major as the words reflect upon a safer past. The 6/8 metre gives the music a sense of relaxed propulsion: this is not a formal military route-march, but rather a calm stroll with an unexpectedly brutal conclusion.

⁶⁸ At that time, Service had become known as 'the Canadian Kipling'.

⁶⁹ Alan Cuckston in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 122.

The disaster at the Somme had swift and direct political consequences. Asquith had lost his own son in the carnage, and now he was also stripped of his prime ministerial duties. The Tories had held a majority in his Coalition war cabinet; the Liberals, meanwhile, were split irrevocably down the middle, with one faction behind Asquith and the other behind Lloyd George. Asquith's resignation was driven by a negative campaign in the Northcliffe press and, with both Balfour and Bonar Law declining to take the premiership, Lloyd George became the head of a five-man Coalition cabinet, and led Britain into a new age of parliamentary dictatorship.⁷⁰

By the end of 1916, France was crippled and her army mutinous. Russia had inflicted great losses on the Austro-Hungarian military, but in doing so had incurred the sharp financial wounds which soon instigated social revolution. The USA was still resistant to entering the war, and in Britain pressure on imports led to a dangerous shortage of food. It was the British food crisis of 1917 that precipitated a change in the German strategy, which began to concentrate even more on those vital imports delivered by the British merchant navy and American ships.⁷¹ US engagement in the war was ultimately hastened by the obdurate submarine campaign on the American fleet which followed.

Germany lost this naval gamble, and so attempted to press home any remaining advantage before a full-scale American intervention. In Britain, the severe fuel and food shortages resulted in queuing on a national scale, and a legion of smallholders brought agricultural activity closer in line with a governmental desire for self-sufficiency.⁷² Merchant ships arranged themselves in convoys and were protected by British and American warships: it was this timely obsession with the security of imports that saved Britain from total defeat.⁷³

This turning point of the war came in 1917, and it coincided with a year of profound global change in which the course of twentieth-century international relationships

⁷⁰ J. M. McEwen, 'The Struggle for Mastery in Britain: Lloyd George versus Asquith, December 1916', *The Journal of British Studies* 18 (1978), 131-156.

⁷¹ Holger H. Herwig, 'Total Rhetoric, Limited War: Germany's U-Boat Campaign, 1917-1918', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds), *Great War, total war: combat and mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, 189-206.

⁷² L. Dudley Stamp, 'Wartime Changes in British Agriculture', *The Geographical Journal* 109 (1947), 39-54.

⁷³ Brock Millman, 'A Counsel of Despair: British Strategy and War Aims, 1917-18', *Journal of Contemporary History* 36 (2001), 241-270. Millman charts the British government's objective, prior to assured American intervention, to avoid defeat rather than achieve outright victory.

was set. This was the year during which the two new superpowers of the twentieth century emerged, and when Britain's diplomatic strength appeared certain to fade. A. J. P. Taylor has constructed a useful thesis, using Napoleon Bonaparte as a contextual model.

If Napoleon had been able to experience the European vista at the beginning of 1917, Taylor claimed, he may not have been surprised by what he found. For example, he would have seen broadly similar political alliances as those of his own lifetime, engaged in a not-dissimilar mode of warfare, albeit on a slightly grander scale, namely with the involvement of more heavy machinery. He might even have been familiar with the prevailing modes of government. But by the end of 1917, he would have been entirely baffled. 'At one end of Europe was Bolshevism, an entirely new system of thought and government. At the other end of Europe the United States, a power unconnected with Europe, was beginning to intervene on a scale which would eclipse all the traditional Great Powers put together.'⁷⁴ In 1917, then, more so perhaps than in any other year, the course of European history was altered forever.

For Bliss, the year proved rather less chaotic, particularly when compared to his twelve months of active service. Having recovered from his leg wounds, he was eased gently back into military life. His divisional superiors saw potential in him as a trainer, having demonstrated impressive leadership capabilities during lengthy frontline engagement. He was now posted to Prior Park in Bath as an instructor, where he led drills and physical training, and taught map reading, signalling and surveying. He also oversaw rifle practice and trench warfare exercises.

At Bath, he met the poet Robert Nichols, a fellow Royal Artillery officer who had also been invalided from the Somme. Nichols had seen his volume *Invocations* published in 1915, and was now concerned with his new collection *Ardours and Endurances*: later, Bliss set these poems in some of his most successful works. He also recalled their first meeting, remembering that Nichols had 'entered like some attractive young faun in uniform, elated at the success of his first published poems.'⁷⁵

⁷⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War*, 165.

⁷⁵ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 46.

While stationed at Prior Park Bliss also met Rudyard Kipling, but only in the somewhat abstract course of an inconsequential drill on the rifle range. A more important event came in his first meeting with Adrian Boult, who became a lifelong friend and occasional musical ally. Boult later described their first encounters:

I first met him in 1917 when he was a Guard's Officer doing a special course near Bath, where I, strangely, was interviewing the local boot retailers on behalf of the War Office. A musical friend put me up for the night, and asked Arthur to dine with us ... We next met in the Courtyard of Buckingham Palace where he was in charge of a large group of the women who had done war jobs and were being inspected by King George V and Queen Mary. I was also on duty but as a Special Constable!⁷⁶

Indeed, later in the year Bliss was redeployed from the Royal Artillery to the Grenadier Guards, and was posted to the Chelsea Barracks in London. For a time he took a flat in Sloane Square and became a fixture at society dances, finding at these a distinct shortage of male contemporaries. While serving at Buckingham Palace, he even participated in the Changing of the Guard.

After the transfer to the Grenadier Guards, and faced with the prospect of a return to active service, Bliss sought spiritual comfort. His belief in his own immortality had weakened considerably:

As a family we had never held deep religious convictions: my father had a stern New England consciousness of what was right and what was wrong, and a formal outward observance seemed superfluous ... But now I felt the urgent need for some reassurance that sudden death did not automatically annihilate the human soul: perhaps Faith could prove stronger than a stubborn disbelief.⁷⁷

He was received into the Catholic Church, yet hardly another mention of religious belief appears in any of his later writing. Comment on spiritual matters is restricted to the secular, with fleeting references only to Plato and other classical texts. So it was that Bliss's religious inclinations remained largely passive for the remainder of his life.

The seriousness of Bliss's injury had barred him from active service for the whole of 1917, but on 16 April 1918 he was appointed to a commission as a Lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards' Special Reserve of Officers. A month earlier, Germany had launched a new and final offensive: it proved so successful that Kaiser Wilhelm had

⁷⁶ Adrian Boult, 'Sir Arthur Bliss', *Royal College of Music Magazine* 78 (1982), 61.

⁷⁷ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 48.

declared 24 March a national holiday. For now, though, there were family matters to attend to, as in June Bliss's father remarried, with his eldest son acting as best man.

The wedding coincided with a conspiracy theory to end them all. Noel Pemberton Billing, an extreme right-wing Member of Parliament, had launched a homophobic campaign against alleged espionage within the British establishment, asserting that the German authorities planned to achieve 'victory through sodomy'. The lurid details were claimed to be inscribed in the so-called 'Berlin Black Book': even Margot Asquith, wife of the former Prime Minister, was targeted by Billing.⁷⁸ In June 1918 he faced a libel trial at which he represented himself and won. For a time, this climate of suspicion and media sensationalism caused a Russian-style revolution to appear a distinct possibility, alleviated only by the characteristic British aversion to civil unrest.⁷⁹

Final action

By 20 July 1918, American forces had pushed the German stormtroops back across the Marne, and from that day the Central Powers never regained initiative.⁸⁰ British, Canadian and Australian regiments then began to swarm through the German lines. On 8 September, Bliss travelled on his often-sailed route from Southampton to Le Havre, but this time was accompanied by around 1500 American troops. This was his first meaningful contact with an assemblage of his father's countrymen. However, the formative experience did little to lift his rotten mood, for on 11 September he confided to his diary that the day had been spent 'sat in the Café Tertin – drank bad coffee, and felt depressed'.⁸¹

Bliss was not simply depressed – he was also ill. Having been in France for only four days, he was admitted to Havre General Hospital with suspected tonsillitis, and remained there for almost two weeks. On 15 September he was diagnosed with

⁷⁸ Philip Hoare, *Oscar Wilde's last stand: decadence, conspiracy, and the most outrageous trial of the century*, 40.

⁷⁹ Stephen R. Ward, 'Intelligence Surveillance of British Ex-Servicemen, 1918-1920', *The Historical Journal* 16 (1973), 179.

⁸⁰ David Chuter, 'Triumph of the will? Or, why surrender is not always inevitable', *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997), 381-400.

⁸¹ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 11 September 1918, Bliss Archive.

toothache, and had a wisdom tooth removed: during his recuperation, he read Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*. He left the hospital on 24 September, and travelled by train from Le Havre to Rouen. From here he continued on foot to Berles au Bois, a journey which took him across familiar ground, through encampments well-known to Bliss such as Doullens and Bailleulmont. He noted in his diary that 'it was curious to come over the old land again – a beautiful evening, which made the country look splendid'.⁸²

The first half of October found Bliss once again leading a familiar routine of trench digging and occasional training: he was now personally responsible for the laying of drains on the road from Ribécourt to Marcoing. From 11 October the battalion began to experience heavy shelling at Quiévy, and five days later they were moved to fresh billets away from immediate danger at Carmières. However, on returning to the front at Cambrai, Bliss experienced two night attacks and was gassed during the second of these. He was moved back alongside the other casualties to Rouen General Hospital, and on 27 October entered Trouville General Hospital, clutching a copy of *Gulliver's Travels*.

In his autobiography, Bliss made no mention of the signing of the Armistice: in truth, the day brought no great spirit of celebration amongst the ground troops, and the administrative business of war continued as before. Communications still needed sending, lines defending and prisoners guarding. In early December Bliss was granted a week of leave, which he spent visiting Lourdes: here he attended Mass at the Church of the Rosary on 8 December, and found that 'the organist was not bad – played a little Bach – the choir execrable'.⁸³ He started back to his divisional headquarters three days later.

Bliss spent Christmas Day guarding German prisoners-of-war, an activity which ensured the ossification of his anti-Teutonic chauvinism: he witnessed German non-commissioned officers bullying their rank-and-file, and was quick to intervene. Intriguingly, at the back of Bliss's diary is scrawled a quotation from Edward Cook's *Literary Recollections*, which appeared in two volumes in 1918 and 1919: 'The conventional biography records what the person did – the true biography reveals

⁸² Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 28 September 1918, Bliss Archive.

⁸³ Arthur Bliss, diary entry for 8 December 1918, Bliss Archive.

what the person was.' Was this added retrospectively, as a reminder to an older Bliss to record the spirit of the war years as faithfully as possible?

While Bliss was watching the war to its close in France, back in London the Education Act 1918 was passed: this captured the national desire for positive reconstruction at the war's end. This sense of ambition was recalled by H. A. L. Fisher, the author of the Act's first draft:

The vast expenditure and harrowing anxieties of the time, so far from extinguishing the needs of social progress, helped to promote a widespread feeling for improvement in the general lot of the people ... The country was in a spending mood and eager to compensate the wastage of war by some contribution to the arts of peace.⁸⁴

Artistic festivals were reinvigorated for a time, and accessibility to national heritage – to which a new historical layer had just been added – was renewed and refocused on the young. Spirits were understandably low, but confidence for the future was high.

Fisher was a brother-in-law of Vaughan Williams, and in his bill he was able to recognise the national importance of indigenous folk music. Folk music became a feature of the education of every schoolchild; indeed, this was still the case for the present author some seventy years after the passing of the Act. Whether in 1918 or 1988, it seemed that the prominence given to folk music in rural primary schools far outweighed the practical reality of direct experience. Rather, it was in urban educational settings that the dissemination of folk traditions had its greatest impact.

The role of the Great War in producing this commitment to the national tradition, and in elevating the folksong movement to a central position in English music, cannot be overstated. Before the war, Elgar with his creative and technical brilliance had held sway. But as his artistic voice softened, and the mania for a defined and strengthened national culture increased, folk music soon became equated with 'national' music. The rural idyll, and the invocation of the natural world, would soon rise to overwhelming prominence.

In the midst of war, most of England's young musicians were encountering experiences too immediate to illicit instant responses. Little could be said directly

⁸⁴ H. A. L. Fisher, *An unfinished autobiography*, 94.

with music, in the same way as with more literal arts such as, for example, the now-celebrated poetry of those years, much of it composed on the front line. Little serious art music of note was composed in Britain during the Great War, not simply because of the energy required for the war effort, but because the function of music inclined towards a viable means of distraction from grimmer realities: indeed, any observer of music popular during the war will be struck by its lightness, its disposability. There had been enough patriotic music written during the Edwardian years to satisfy a nation's thirst when required – instead, music had been designed to create and maintain the highest spirits possible. The time for musical reflection came later.

Enfant terrible

1919—1923

Bliss's return to post-Armistice London came at the age of twenty-seven, with some of his most potentially fertile years already behind him. Conscious of this, he began to compose, conduct and lecture with renewed vigour, and also demonstrated his interest in modern trends by making visits to the Continent: here, he met such luminaries as Ravel and members of Les Six. Later, he completed A Colour Symphony, his first major orchestral commission. Despite its positive reception, Bliss decided in 1923 to accompany his father on what became a lengthy sabbatical in America.

On 15 February 1919, Bliss was demobilised from the British Army after more than four years of military service. In addition to his leg injury at the Somme, his tours of duty had seen him gassed at Cambrai, and even mentioned in despatches. At 27, he was by no means a young composer: because of his war service, though, he was both inexperienced and culturally impressionable. Living again at the family home at 21 Holland Park, Bliss found himself in a markedly different London to the one he had left in 1914.

In Europe, the war had not even been decisively resolved: the Allies' failure to regulate sufficiently the German army meant that the seeds of another global conflict

were already being sown. There was widespread upheaval all over the continent: this was manifested in industrial strikes, riots in famine-stricken cities, and massive political polarisation. The reaction to the Armistice had been cautiously celebratory, but in Britain this was soon replaced by dark sobriety: more than three quarters of a million men had been lost during the long war.¹ The nation required reconstruction for a modern age, as the imperial Britannia faded from view.

Bliss had at least survived. The same could not be said of several of his contemporaries. Of this 'lost generation', George Butterworth and Ernest Farrar were perhaps the most prominent musical victims, but two more aspiring pastoralists, Denis Browne and Frederick Kelly, were also killed. Ivor Gurney and Ernest Moeran were both wounded, Gurney ultimately confined to an asylum and Moeran scarred by a head wound which left a legacy of manifest eccentricity.

With the physical and psychological scars of the British public still unhealed, one young man came to epitomise the sense of national loss. That man was Bliss's fellow Old Rugbean Rupert Brooke, who had died on active service in 1915. Brooke's case highlights the paradoxical effect of war on art because, as a contemporaneous article in *The New York Times* pointed out, it was the war which both ended his career and made him immortal.² In March 1919, a memorial for Brooke was unveiled in the Rugby School chapel, featuring a portrait based on Sherril Schell's profile photograph of Brooke as the naked young Apollo.

Of course, given the context, such images seemed easy to idolise. Here, after all, was an embodiment of the fresh-faced idealism so yearned for in returning veterans like Bliss. The reality was rather different. The journalist Philip Gibbs wrote that the returning soldiers

put on civilian clothes again and looked to their mothers and wives very much like the young men who had gone to business in the peaceful days before August 1914. But they had not come back the

¹ J. M. Winter, 'Britain's "Lost Generation" of the First World War', *Population Studies* 33 (1977), 449-466.

² Anon, 'A Genius Whom the War Made and Killed', *New York Times*, 12 September 1915. A musical equivalent may be found in Butterworth: Cecil Sharp's young protégé, a glittering career in art music ahead of him, yet slain defending his nation – and its evolving cultural ideals – against the German foe. See also Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: a biography*, chapter 14.

same men. Something had altered in them. They were subject to sudden moods and queer tempers, fits of profound depression alternating with a restless desire for pleasure.³

In these recollections, there were already flashes of the cynical and pleasure-seeking nation that Britain would become. Bliss's contemporary Robert Graves also found the transition from war to peace particularly challenging:

Not only did I have no experience of independent civilian life, having gone [almost like Bliss] straight from school into the army: I was still mentally and nervously organised for war. Shells used to come bursting on my bed at midnight ... strangers in daytime would assume the faces of friends who had been killed.⁴

Bliss too was haunted by recurring nightmares of trench warfare. Indeed, the war forced him to reappraise a set of values he had always taken for granted. He had now experienced both brutality and humanity on a massive scale, and for the first time had come face to face with the common man. He was also painfully aware that military service had robbed him of some vital years of development, as this letter to Herbert Howells demonstrates:

It is dreadful ... to approach 30 with all one's ambitions held back from fruition by fate. How I hoped to be a modern da Vinci stamped with the characteristics of an Englishman – instead a humble subaltern of the Brigade of Guards with a leaning to musical expression, which no-one thinks much of, least of all the author.⁵

Bliss resolved to seize every opportunity, and threw himself into whatever cultural activity London had to offer. This was a new Bliss: he withdrew all but one of his pre-Armistice works on his return from active service, that one work being a 'pastoral' for clarinet and piano, conceived originally for Kennard.

His interests were now broad and numerous: he became acquainted with artists Claude Lovat Fraser and Edward Wadsworth, the composer John Ireland and the novelist Arnold Bennett, and soon established a series of chamber – concerts at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Having been little more than a technically-promising composition student before the war, Bliss found himself thrust towards a central position in this now-sparse generation. For him and his remaining artistic peers, maintenance of an Edwardian status quo was an unpalatable option.

³ Philip Gibbs, quoted in Ben Shephard, *A war of nerves: soldiers and psychiatrists in the twentieth century*, 144.

⁴ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to all that*, 302.

⁵ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Herbert Howells, undated (but written early in 1919), quoted in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells: a centenary celebration*, 28.

A wholesale reassessment was now the order of the day, and one founded, unsurprisingly, upon geographical borders. Bliss and his contemporaries were keen to reject the failures – both political and artistic – of Edwardian England, which had already become linked so inextricably to the Great War. But few can have been keener to do this than Bliss himself. His feelings of loss following the death of his brother at the Somme were so acute that his emotional scars began to heal only in the wake of his cathartic requiem *Morning Heroes*, composed as late as 1930. To be sure then, Germany was out. But what was in? Were musical thoughts to be supplied by England?

The answer, for some, was yes. The English folk revival, already with significant pre-war momentum, led to the formation of an increasingly dominant Pastoral School: some young composers – such as Peter Warlock, Ernest Moeran and Ivor Gurney – found this fresh interest in the English vernacular attractive and exciting. Many attempted to assimilate foreign developments with elements of native folksong, some with great success. Bliss, by contrast, had no time for such nationalistic navel gazing. For him, this simply continued the defunct tropes of pseudo-romantic, bleeding-heart liberalism.

With an eye on the future, a reliance on overtly-English thematic material to the exclusion of broader influences seemed inward-looking and stifling. Away from the pastoral, even Bliss's once-beloved Elgar had begun to disappoint. Recalling later the first private performance of Elgar's Violin Sonata on 7 March 1919, Bliss asked: 'Was my disappointment due to the far from brilliant performance or to the belief that its musical substance had little in common with the genius of his earlier masterpieces?'⁶

Certainly, the style of those later works seemed to confirm Elgar's adherence to Teutonic principles and procedures. G. B. Shaw, who was with Bliss at that private performance and who had long been a public champion of Elgar, persisted naively in comparing Elgar with the German masters and highlighting his indebtedness to them.⁷ Outside the immediate Elgar circle, the critical reception of the Cello

⁶ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 24.

⁷ See Dan Laurence (ed.), *Shaw's Music: the complete musical criticism of Bernard Shaw*, 717-723.

Concerto and late chamber works was initially as cool as Bliss's had been. H. C. Colles wrote in *The Times*:

An immediate effect of listening to Sir Edward Elgar's Opp. 82, 83 and 84 in succession is to give one a new sympathy with the modern revolt against beauty of line and colour ... One craves an antidote to the Elgarian type of beauty.⁸

Of course, Colles's modern revolt placed an emphasis on national music, in which Bliss was already displaying a distinct lack of interest. He would revolt against beauty of line and colour, certainly, but he would not turn to pastoralism in order to achieve this. Colles had also correctly speculated (though unintentionally so) on a new artistic platform for those of Bliss's mind-set: 'As the poets of today have come from the trenches, may we not expect that the British musical future is being born in the fields of France?'⁹ In fact, Bliss soon looked not towards the fields of France for inspiration, but to its cosmopolitan capital. Thus Bliss's semi-isolation began, with his very refusal to engage with the pastoral trend.

Despite a slew of later critical connections between Elgar and Bliss, such caution from Bliss towards his illustrious forebear in the wake of the Armistice must also be considered in relation to his own measure of himself as 'modern'. At this time, Elgar was surely the perfect yardstick by which to measure one's own progressiveness, given his status as a towering figure of pre-war British music. Certainly, those who were beginning to invest heavily in the reinvigoration of the folk movement were all too willing to leave Elgar in the *fin de siècle* where he supposedly belonged.¹⁰

Elgar's influences and self-training had relied upon the Austro-German tradition, and Bliss knew it. Before the war he had been able to accept that fact, but now he desired English music to escape its derivation from such a reviled source. Bliss would have been dismayed by Georges Jean-Aubry's description of England as, in musical terms, 'a mere German colony':¹¹ now, in 1919, this would simply not do. For some, post-Armistice London felt like the centre of the universe, but Bliss soon realised that his fledgling cultural loyalties lay elsewhere. Celebrity and glamour became an

⁸ H. C. Colles, 'Music of Yesterday and To-day', *The Times*, 24 May 1919, quoted in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: a creative life*, 740.

⁹ H. C. Colles, 'Britain's Musical Genius', *The Sunday Evening Telegram*, 22 July 1917, quoted in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: a creative life*, 710.

¹⁰ See Charles Edward McGuire, 'Edward Elgar: "Modern" or "Modernist?" Construction of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Press, 1895-1934', *Musical Quarterly* 91 (2008), 8-38.

¹¹ G. Georges Jean-Aubry, 'British Music through French Eyes', *Musical Quarterly* 5 (1919), 198.

industry, but Bliss, as haunted as any by his wartime experiences, quickly grew tired of such amusements. Through careful detachment, he found a way to make his own contribution to the artistic flowering of doomed youth. Too old and too hardened to be a 'Bright Young Thing', he maintained some of the stoic patriotism of the Edwardian generation: some of his stylistic proclamations began to betray an intense chauvinism which would take years to fade.

Tentative offerings

In August 1919, an article in the *Musical Herald* offered a set of criteria for musical modernism.¹² The technical details themselves are so prescriptive as to be barely relevant, but the list includes the usual suspects of irregular modes and scales, discords, metrical freedom, and bitonality. The author suggested that, while 'modern' composers had sometimes employed some of these features in their music prior to the Great War, true modernists could be identified by their insistent use of such tricks. As we shall see, by this measure it is questionable whether Bliss ever scaled the heights of such modernism, even when critical reaction to his works suggested that he had.

In fact, a far earlier article is possibly of greater taxonomic use. Here, the unnamed author offers a distinction between 'modern' and 'progressive'.¹³ A modern composer, so goes the argument, is one who contributes in some way to the evolution of the musical art, while a progressive is one who activates that evolution by performing musical experiments. Neither 'modern' nor 'progressive' is given preference; one exalted no more than the other. Simply, under this taxonomy, we must consider Bliss a 'progressive', for the next years would be spent performing a series of 'experiments in sound'. His progressive ambition was in keeping with the general milieu of experimentation in literature and in politics – certainly more so than the concurrent trend towards folk traditions.

¹² R. Dunstan, "'Futurist' and 'Modernist' Composers", *Musical Herald* 857 (1919), 268. It is clear where Dunstan's preferences lay: he noted that 'while the classic composers gave us solid food with occasional condiments, the others give us condiments with occasional solid food'.

¹³ 'Some Tendencies in Modern Music', *The Edinburgh Review* 204 (1906), 381-99, also cited in Charles Edward McGuire, 'Edward Elgar: "Modern" or "Modernist?" Construction of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Press, 1895-1934', *Musical Quarterly* 91 (2008), 19.

Just four months before the appearance of the *Musical Herald* article, in April 1919, Bliss's growing friendships with Claude Lovat Fraser and Edward Wadsworth had led to his involvement with a Stratford production of *As You Like It*, with Bliss supplying some incidental music. This music was unremarkable, and contained little original material, drawing instead upon Elizabethan sources and some songs by Thomas Arne. Nevertheless, he revived the arrangements at a chamber concert at Hammersmith the following year.

Bliss initiated and took charge of a concert series at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith from October 1919, under the auspices of a new 'Hammersmith Musical Society'. This provided him with an opportunity to gain valuable conducting experience, although his technical competence was already clear: within a year he had conducted the first London performance of Stravinsky's *Ragtime* at Acolian Hall. In fact, Bliss's intention at Hammersmith was to provide a reliable platform for the performance of new music, but for now he restricted himself to offering only his own selections of Purcell act tunes and dances.

By now, though, Bliss was engaged in the serious task of composition. Some years later, commentators and critics would draw on evidence from these first works to crown him almost unanimously as the then-*enfant terrible* of British music. That sobriquet was well chosen, for its language reveals much as to the placement of Bliss's musical loyalties. Although he was living and working in London, his artistic inclinations were elsewhere. On consideration of Malcolm Bradbury's description of Bliss's home city, albeit from a literary perspective, this seems perhaps unsurprising:

Although [London] sustained and generated a vital sequence of experimental movements and phases, it is also in the record as one of the dullest and most deadening of capital cities – there was no real artistic community, no true centres, no coteries, no cafes, a metropolis given to commerce, and an insular middle-class lifestyle either indifferent or implacably hostile to the new arts.¹⁴

Indeed, at that time, Bliss relied on the patronage of the wealthy hostesses; his method of making his name was still sub-Victorian. Not in Hammersmith the neon lights of 'Le boeuf sur le toit'.

¹⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, 'London, 1890-1920', in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds), *Modernism: a guide to European literature, 1890-1930*, 172.

With typical endeavour, Bliss took positive action to find those lights. Having fought in the trenches of France over a period of more than four years, he returned there as a civilian twice in quick succession, once in late 1919, and again in early 1920, immersing himself in the musical life of the great Parisian cultural crucible. The first visit, in November 1919, was arranged by Josef Holbrooke, and was designed to enable both Bliss and Holbrooke to participate in performances of their own Piano Quintets. However, the trip ultimately descended into farce: Holbrooke had failed to obtain a passport, and after a rough crossing was forced to endure a return sailing almost immediately. The recitals had to be rearranged, at some expense, and Bliss was eventually able to perform in the premiere of his Piano Quintet in front of a handful of people at the Salle Gaveau on 26 November. This was given with the Philharmonic String Quartet, which featured Eugène Goossens on the second violin.

The manuscript of Bliss's Piano Quintet, which was never published, has now been lost, but we can assume that it was composed with a French audience in mind, or at least that Bliss revised the work to reflect his Parisian exploits prior to further performances in London. Such a claim derives from the assessment of the quintet by Edwin Evans who, in reviewing Bliss's output in 1923, observed a work 'so truly Parisian in character that it may be regarded as the effect of an inoculation resulting in immunity after the immediate effects had passed.'¹⁵ After Christmas, Bliss soon sought a further dose.

Having officially resigned his Commission in the Grenadier Guards on 28 January 1920, Bliss set off for a second visit to Paris. On this occasion he had numerous encounters with at least four of those who were soon to be transformed from *Les Nouveaux Jeunes* into *Les Six*, including Darius Milhaud, with whom he would form a close friendship.¹⁶ Thanks to an introduction from Edwin Evans he spent an afternoon with the polymath Maurice Delage and, through him, enjoyed a long lunch with Maurice Ravel.

Most important, though, was a general exposure to the sense of excitement and anarchy in Paris at that time, although Bliss insisted later that he had 'not stay[ed] in

¹⁵ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 23. So it was that these Parisian features were soon incorporated into an original voice.

¹⁶ The others were Honegger, Poulenc and Auric.

Paris long enough to be much affected by its capricious excitements'.¹⁷ On his way back to England, Bliss, accompanied by his close friend Adrian Boult, visited Amsterdam to hear Arthur Nikisch conduct a concert. The effect on them was impressive: at the time, Bliss admitted that 'meeting Nikisch was like being confronted with some giant of the past, of whose titanic exploits one had read, but whose personal existence one felt must be a myth founded on legendary lore ... he is still the leader of indomitable fire and energy, the inspirer of enthusiasm and loyalty.'¹⁸

Once home, there were some capricious excitements to be had in London too, despite Malcolm Bradbury's assertions to the contrary. Paris had its cultural advantages over London, but there was plenty to be found in the English capital if one knew where to look. Jazz was already an established presence, and was threatening to usurp the ragtime which had been the predominant musical import from America before the war. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, for example, had taken a three-month residency at the Hammersmith Palais de Dance – this brought American jazz standards to a neighbourhood often frequented by Bliss.¹⁹

Such was the success of jazz – and the associated dancing it provoked – that by 1924 a live band was a must for a successful club, as a contemporary report testified: 'Every legitimate night-club owner ... knows that he might as well be out of business as to be without a saxophone performer.'²⁰ Gone were the days of sedate string bands leading halls full of dancers – the Charleston and the fox-trot were the new shows in town. But jazz also drew attentive listeners, and was appreciated for more than its role as a background for dancing. The British scene even attracted praise from a Frenchman, no less than Darius Milhaud himself:

In the course of frequent visits to Hammersmith, I tried to analyse and assimilate what I heard. What a long way we have travelled from the gypsies who before the war used to pour their insipid, mawkish strains intimately into one's ears.²¹

¹⁷ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 57.

¹⁸ Arthur Bliss, 'Stray musings in Amsterdam', in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 6.

¹⁹ Bliss understandably fell under the spell of jazz in these early days, but later grew to fear its spread at the expense of more serious art music.

²⁰ W. W. Seabrook, quoted in Sydney A. Mosley (ed.), *Brightest spots in brighter London*, 139.

²¹ Darius Milhaud, *Notes without music*, 118.

Others welcomed the associated loss of inhibitions, and the rise in power of the single woman – the self-sufficient respectable young lady who could happily attend dances without a chaperone, and then remain there until all hours of the night. In short, jazz brought a new, conspicuous eroticism to British shores.

All of this was too much for the establishment. Speaking to the Incorporated Society of Musicians in 1922, Hugh Allen – a cultural conservative who was gaining considerable influence – complained that

Freak music is becoming more and more aggressive owing to commercialism and the desire for notoriety, and pleasure is being taken too easily in noises and barbaric rhythms, although, while listening, the public is usually primarily engaged in eating or dancing. Because musical taste is not sufficiently educated to appreciate good music, composers, to attract promiscuous and indiscriminate appetites, have adopted unsound procedures and make foul noises. Such pieces are written from a low motive and a bad impulse.²²

It is true that jazz became a valuable commodity, a useful tool for a composer to attract attention toward his new works. Bliss was young and vigorous, and so was this new medium – those associated with jazz were admired by the post-Armistice generation, and this was presumably not lost on Bliss. R. W. S. Mendl acknowledged the cathartic flavour of the idiom, writing that

Jazz is the product of a restless age: an age in which the fever of war is only now beginning to abate its fury; when men and women, after their efforts in the great struggle, are still too much disturbed to be content with a tranquil existence ... when America is turning out her merchandise at an unprecedented speed and motor cars are racing along the roads ... when the extremes of Bolshevism and Fascismo are pursuing their own ways simultaneously, and the whole world is rushing helter-skelter in unknown directions.²³

This sat well in the London of the early 1920s. In 1919, Kate Meyrick had opened her first nightclub in Leicester Square, and soon expanded her empire to Soho. Here, new money rubbed shoulders with the old aristocracy.²⁴ For some, the rapidity of this social change was too much: Sir William Joynson-Hicks, the Conservative Home Secretary from 1924, attempted to reassert governmental authority by closing down nearly fifty of the new clubs.²⁵ Of course, it was far too late: two of Meyrick's daughters had already married into the aristocracy.

²² Hugh Allen, quoted in E. D. Mackerness, *A social history of English music*, 248.

²³ R. W. S. Mendl, *The appeal of jazz*, 186.

²⁴ See Fergus Linnane, *London: the wicked city*, 322.

²⁵ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England 1918-1951*, 277-278.

New works

On 23 June 1920, Bliss conducted the first performance of his *Madam Noy* at Wigmore Hall, the solo part being taken by Anne Thursfield, the work's dedicatee. In fact, Bliss had started work on *Madam Noy* as early as 1918, demonstrating that his belief in economical instrumentation stretched at least as far back as his war service. This 'witchery song' sets words by Edward Meyerstein, an English writer two years Bliss's senior who had spent the war working at the British Museum after being discharged from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. The text for *Madam Noy* is taken from a slim 1915 volume entitled *Symphonies*.

The work requires the unusual combination of flute, clarinet, bassoon, viola, double bass and harp, which are in general equal partners to the soprano 'soloist'. This innovative scoring confirms Bliss's attentiveness to pre-war musical currents in Europe: Ravel's *Trois poems de Mallarmé* and Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* were both composed in the two years before the Great War, and both similarly exploit the voice as an ensemble instrument. Given the work's long genesis, it anticipates Bliss's two visits to Paris in its reaction against huge late-Romantic forms and forces, clearly mirroring similar sentiments being expressed in France by Stravinsky and Les Six.²⁶

Madam Noy is replete with whole-tone scales, in both melody and harmony, and Bliss referred to this feature in a lecture the following year: 'often I hear the whole-tone scale discussed as if it were a phenomenon remarkable and daring, whose continuance threatened the actual existence of composition'.²⁷ This remark highlights the completeness of Bliss's belief in a progressive musical language, unsurprising for a man who had worked his way through the piano music of Debussy during his teenage years, and who was so keen to be culturally forward-looking in the wake of the Great War.

²⁶ After completing *Le sacre du printemps*, for example, Stravinsky abandoned his formerly expressionistic approach to composition with two shorter works for smaller ensembles: the Three Pieces for String Quartet, and the *Pribaoutki* for voice and eight instruments. Bliss was familiar with this second work. Constant Lambert, too, would soon embrace jazz and French sensibilities in his own song settings.

²⁷ Arthur Bliss, 'What Modern Composition is Aiming at' in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 20.

Of course, whole-tone elements appear frequently in the music of the Romantics, and in even the most English of models such as Elgar and Vaughan Williams, and so Bliss's comments merely reflect an understandable weariness towards the conservatism of an older generation of commentators. Indeed, the modern listener will, upon reflection, find a work such as *Madam Noy* remarkably genial. Nevertheless, it was this work that set a long course for critical suspicion. A review in the *Westminster Gazette* struck an indifferent tone:

This was a setting of some verses of the nonsense order, ... though what there was in such childish lines to induce anyone to expend so much energy in the setting of them it was hard to discover. Nor was there anything in the resulting music to explain matters either, since, apart from its piquant scoring, it seemed no more inspired than the lines which it illustrated.²⁸

Stephen Banfield, with customary suspicion, has suggested that 'all Bliss is trying to do is move text, voice and instrumentation closer together in a gesture towards abstraction':²⁹ such a quest certainly corresponds with Bliss's contemporaneous lifestyle and circle of friends including vorticists Wyndham Lewis and Edward Wadsworth, the latter of whom provided the cover illustration for the printed score of *Madam Noy*. Indeed, this is not serious music: Banfield rejects the text as 'simply whimsical', and maintains that the setting 'is treated like a vocal scherzo'.³⁰

Further experimentation

Bliss had been searching for a new voice throughout 1919, and he came close to finding it in 1920. He would soon become a minor celebrity, and quickly achieved critical notoriety: clearly, his two visits to Paris achieved much in further sharpening his focus. That summer, memories of the trenches were fresh in his mind: in August, Bliss and his friend Ulrich Nisbet took a cycle tour of the old battle lines in Belgium and France.

Now, Bliss began work on two innovative chamber works: *Rout*, a single movement work of approximately seven minutes' duration, for an unusual combination of ten instruments; and *Conversations*, a five-movement suite for the novel quintet of flute

²⁸ *Westminster Gazette*, 25 June 1920, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 55.

²⁹ Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English song*, 365.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 365.

(doubling bass flute), oboe (doubling cor anglais), violin, viola and cello. In these two works, he went beyond a simple rejection of the Austro-German tradition: rather, he was rejecting more broadly a nineteenth-century heritage by turning from the subjective to the objective.

Preparation for Bliss's most searching experiments came in the form of a short *Rhapsody*, which was performed at Mortimer Hall on 6 October 1920. This is a relaxed work, more conservative than *Madam Noy*, and was therefore more favourably received. At the centre of the ensemble is Bliss's use of two solo voices, a soprano and a tenor as ensemble instruments, vocalising on the word 'Ah'. It was this that led Bliss to dub the work an 'essay in timbre', the companion piece of another rhapsody, now lost. The remaining instrumentation comprises flute, cor anglais, string quartet and double bass. Edwin Evans found it to express 'gentler emotions' than Bliss's contemporaneous music,³¹ and this was a view shared by the critic of the *Musical Standard* when the work was repeated a week later:

Bliss has as yet produced little, but every work bears marks of a unique personality. His *Rhapsody* is one of the few works precisely corresponding to that title, exquisitely coloured, but without preciousness or anaemic poeticism ... Bliss's music is a musique féérique, made up of dreams moving in the realm of emotional imagery of a curiously imaginative mind. But he is no vague visionary: he knows the value of instrumental timbre, and has a keen sense of fluid form. Above all, he is aware of that elusive quality we term beauty. He is certainly a musician who counts.³²

The singers who brought such critical success to these first performances were Dorothy Helmrich and Gerald Cooper. Bliss's next works would prove far more divisive.

Work on *Rout* continued throughout November, although Bliss was distracted with preparations for his first engagement as conductor of the Portsmouth Philharmonic Society. This came on 9 December with a performance of Berlioz's *Faust*. By then the score for *Rout* was complete, and on 15 December it was performed in private at 139 Piccadilly, the home of the Baroness d'Erlanger. Bliss's imaginative selection of instruments in this work created a vehicle for his planned exploration of new and inventive colours.

³¹ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 21.

³² *Musical Standard*, 23 October 1920, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 55.

The soprano voice is often employed as an ensemble instrument, but there is little doubt that she is the soloist. Bliss does not provide a text, but instead sets nonsense syllables ('ja ca la vi stun di a', for example) as he explains at the head of the published score: 'The title *Rout* is used in the old sense meaning revelry, and the voice part is given a string of syllables corresponding to the scraps of a song that would reach a listener watching a carnival from an open window.' The ensemble is completed by flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet, harp, string quartet, double bass, and a single percussionist.

This scoring represents something of a departure from that found in Bliss's two previous chamber works. Both had employed a combination of either flute or clarinet with a double-reed instrument: *Madam Noy* used flute, clarinet and bassoon; *Rhapsody* flute and cor anglais. In contrast, *Rout* exploits the softer tones of flute and clarinet only. Here, Bliss also uses a string quartet with double bass (as he had done in *Rhapsody*), making possible the broadest spectrum of string sound. *Rout* is the first of Bliss's chamber works to require percussion but, given the intended intimacy of the performance,³³ he opts for what one might call 'lighter' percussion: glockenspiel, side drum and sleigh bells.

In the first section, ends at bar 50, Bliss's use of ostinati is extensive. By the time a violin and viola melody begins in the third bar of the piece (ex. 5), Bliss has already introduced three ostinati: on harp (ex. 6), on cello (ex. 7), and on flute and clarinet (ex. 8). All are marked *fortissimo*, yet Bliss's carefully-constructed textural balance allows each ostinato and a subsequent melody to be delineated clearly. The harp ostinato, in a high register, is naturally the most audible, followed by the low cello pizzicatos. The flute and clarinet ostinato is at the same pitch as the violin and viola melody, but the dissimilar wind and string timbres ensure that the two components are audibly discernible. Bliss's instrumental technique was by now showing promise.

Occasionally, Bliss constructs entire textures from ostinati. At bars 17 and 18, the second violin, viola and cello repeat a propulsive, syncopated rhythm, while the double bass punches out uncompromising minims beneath. Side drum rolls help to articulate each minim beat, and the harp joins the first violin with a glissando

³³ At the head of the score, Bliss added: 'The work ... is scored for a chamber orchestra, [and] should be performed ... in a small hall suitable for chamber music.'

flourish. Even the soprano repeats a dotted rhythm four times, reiterating the syllables ‘co sa li co sa li’. The effect is akin to that of a record stuck momentarily in a single groove, creating textural and harmonic tension which is only resolved at bar 20 by the introduction of a more jaunty string accompaniment.

Violin I
Viola

ff (au talon)

Ex. 5 Bliss: *Rout*, bb. 1-4, violin and viola melody

ff

Ex. 6 Bliss: *Rout*, bb. 1-4, harp ostinato

pizz.
ff

Ex. 7 Bliss: *Rout*, bb. 1-4, cello ostinato

Flute
Clarinet in B \flat

ff ³

Ex. 8 Bliss: *Rout*, bb. 1-3, flute and clarinet ostinato

The critical reception of *Rout* confirmed the uneasy response to Bliss’s experimental style. The critic of *The Times* reviewed the first performance thus, describing

... a number of rakish tunes for the voice, the clarinet, the flute; and the strings tumbling over one another in wild confusion, while the double bass cuts capers; the harp thrums accents, and the orchestral ‘kitchen’ behaves according to its kind.³⁴

This was, of course, press sensationalism: the degree of care and executive skill with which Bliss constructed the textures of *Rout* will have become clear in the brief foregoing analysis. The *Times* critic also ignored a two-minute-long central section of delicate serenity, and an overall semi-adherence to the principles of sonata form.

³⁴ *The Times*, 17 December 1920, 10.

Indeed, the perplexed tone speaks more of the reviewer's own conservatism than of Bliss's music, confirming Andrew Burn's assertion that *Rout* was then 'regarded as the acme of modernity'.³⁵ The review continued:

Having heard several of these whimsical excursions one begins to wonder where they are leading. Are they forming an individual style with which Mr Bliss will be able to say something when he has really got something to say, or is he becoming a fashionable joker?³⁶

This very question was later addressed by Edwin Evans, the self-educated music critic and champion of young English composers, in two articles for *The Musical Times* in 1923. Evans attributed Bliss's growing celebrity to the energetic and uncompromising quality of his music, noting that 'the music in which energy predominates will always enjoy a certain advantage'.³⁷

Conversations

At the beginning of 1921, Bliss joined the teaching staff of the Royal College, and was put in charge of the score-reading classes. Following Parry's death in 1918, a successor to the Directorship of the Royal College had soon been found in the form of Hugh Allen, also elevated at that time to a Chair at Oxford. Allen had studied at Cambridge in the 1890s, and there had formed important friendships with both Vaughan Williams and Edward Dent. His rise to prominence after the Great War confirmed his position, for a time, as 'the acknowledged but unofficial head of the music profession in [the] country'.³⁸

Bliss's relationship with Allen was a potentially complex one: after all, his new employer disapproved vehemently of the 'unsound procedures' and 'foul noises' with which Bliss was then experimenting. Born in 1869, Allen was a cultural combatant of the old guard: he revered the German tradition – he professed a scholarly interest in Schütz, for example – and emitted sympathy for the developing pastoral school. And yet, he later proved himself to be an educational moderniser,

³⁵ Andrew Burn, 'From Rebel to Romantic: the music of Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 132 (1991), 384.

³⁶ *The Times*, 17 December 1920, 10.

³⁷ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 21.

³⁸ Obituary of Hugh Allen, *The Times*, 21 February 1946, 7.

and something of a liberal humanist.³⁹ Indeed, his reforms secured the place of the Royal College as the primary vehicle for nurturing interwar musical talent.

Allen's musical tastes may not have been modern, but as an administrator he achieved progress. Bliss was not Allen's only appointee: by the time Bliss joined the staff, more than twenty other teachers had also arrived, foremost among them Vaughan Williams and Holst, who both became part-time professors of composition. Allen showed an interest in the early development of radio,⁴⁰ and developed an increasingly fractious relationship with Stanford before the latter's death in 1924.⁴¹ The figures of an impenetrable establishment seemed to hold sway – leaving Bliss and his experiments, for now, somewhat isolated – but there at least existed a spirit of progress, within which Bliss himself operated.

However, when Bliss's next work was first performed in private on 19 January 1921, it pushed the weary establishment's patience to greater limits. The size of the chamber ensemble required for *Conversations* – five players – is rather more conventional than that of *Rout*, but this smaller size did not prohibit novel scoring or instrumental combinations. Like *Rout*, the work was produced with extra-musical stimuli in mind: among its five movements are the unambiguously-titled 'The Committee Meeting', 'In the Ballroom' and 'In the Tube at Oxford Circus' – a reflection, surely, of Satie and the new modernism emanating from France.

In *Conversations*, we find perhaps the earliest example of a British composer fusing his art with everyday life – an aspiring kitchen-sink drama-of-sorts, or at least an affirmative nod to a new age of social realism. In 'The Committee Meeting', Bliss disguises his tongue-in-cheek subjectivity behind a façade of objective innocence. Here, Bliss uses a set of ostinato-like cells in his response to an external stimulus, with each of the instruments anthropomorphised to evoke a formal assembly. The invariable contributor is the violin, the 'ineffectual but stubborn chairman vainly trying to get his motion carried amid the frequent interruptions of his colleagues'.⁴² Indeed, the text at the top of the score instructs that 'all the instruments *except* the

³⁹ See Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English musical renaissance, 1840-1940: constructing a national music*, 92.

⁴⁰ H. C. Colles, *The Royal College of Music: a Jubilee record, 1883-1933*, 46.

⁴¹ C. Bailey, *Hugh Percy Allen*, 73: a sure indication of personality!

⁴² Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 61.

violin are to play with the utmost force and vigour throughout. The violin is to play a monotonous *mf* except where marked *ff*. This meandering three-bar phrase (ex. 9) is heard fully six times, before the chairman finally loses his temper on the seventh. This impassioned conversation has something in common with the first of Stravinsky's *Three Pieces for String Quartet*, a movement which is replete with ostinati, and which makes a central feature of friction between simple, repeated cells.



Ex. 9 Bliss: *Conversations*, I, bb. 1-3, violin 'chairman' motif

'In the Wood' and 'In the Ballroom' both threaten to revert to Romantic type, but are saved by a wealth of Milhaud-esque 'wrong notes', which had until then been absent from Bliss's harmonic language. In these staple locations of the romantic tradition, Bliss achieves a modern iteration by never allowing the repose necessary for conversation. The jolted and fractious finale, 'In the Tube at Oxford Circus', fits into the contemporaneous background of urbanism and machine music, and surely bears aesthetic comparison with Milhaud's *Machines agricoles*, or even Honegger's *Pacific 231* – which, in 1921, was still three years on the horizon. This movement, more so than any of the preceding four, demonstrates the completeness of Bliss's interest in aural effects following his return from France.

The overlap in the composition of *Rout* and *Conversations* offers in these two pieces an interesting model for comparison. 'In the Tube at Oxford Circus', for example, is more superficially modern than *Rout*: while *Rout* is cast predominantly in either triple or quadruple metres, Bliss's final *Conversation* finds 3/4, 4/4 and 5/4 bars in close proximity, with any sense of a regular metre frequently destroyed. The movement is also more harmonically adventurous than *Rout*, with an unrelenting minor-second ostinato throughout the first 15 bars.

In *Rout*, save for a long passage of gradual intensification between bars 166 and 201, Bliss maintains a remarkably high frequency of textural contrast. In 'Oxford Circus', however, this policy is reversed, with Bliss opting instead for gradual transition. This is not to say that there are no definite points of textural change – simply, there are far fewer. In a movement of 151 bars – and more than five minutes – there are only four

distinct points after which a sustained passage employs an entirely new texture: these occur at bars 30, 54, 101, and 125. All other textural and timbral transformation is achieved gradually.

A fine example of such transition exists between bar 31 and a general pause at bar 43. Bliss establishes a harmonically-bare ostinato on viola and cello which persists for the following 13 bars. Then, by subtly adding and withdrawing instruments, and combining textures, he gradually builds a textural climax. The continuity of a texturally-static ostinato is a key element in achieving this, for Bliss experiments with the tone colours of the flute, oboe and violin, while relying on the string ostinato for stability and consistency.

There are, of course, some simple explanations for Bliss's different approaches in the two works. The most obvious of these pertains to timbre and ensemble size. In *Rout*, Bliss had ten players at his disposal, which permitted a larger number of possible instrument combinations. Their timbral potential, therefore, is far greater than that of the five instruments available in 'Oxford Circus', especially when we consider the presence of voice, harp and percussion in the larger group. Bliss was thus able to create far more noticeable, almost orchestral, articulations with the tone colours of *Rout*. Indeed, it was not long before *Rout* received its first performance in a new orchestral arrangement, and became a minor staple of the ballet interludes.

Movement, more accurately propulsion, is crucial to both pieces of music – a procession in *Rout*, an underground train in 'Oxford Circus'. We are not now concerned with the notion of the listener as a member of a concert-hall audience, but as an active participant in Bliss's aesthetic whole. The critical question, therefore, concerns the perceived location of an imagined listener within the direct context of the music. We know that in *Rout* Bliss was attempting to 'evoke the sound of a carnival heard at a distance'.⁴³ At the head of the score he suggests that the sound might reach the listener through an open window. One might imagine our listener sitting in an upstairs room, with a carnival passing along the street below. This added dimension of movement can help to explain the abruptness of textural contrasts Bliss presents in *Rout*. It is easy to visualise the different characteristics of a procession, with each section of the pageant clearly articulated by each new textural phrase.

⁴³ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 59.

'In the Tube at Oxford Circus' presents more of a contextual problem, for Bliss is less forthcoming apropos of his use of non-musical stimuli. Is he on the tube train as it passes through Oxford Circus station? Or is he on the platform, watching the trains rush through? The gradual textural changes and sustained use of a vehicular cello ostinato might suggest that he is aboard the train. Bliss's most striking and unexpected textural effect in this movement is his imitation of a train's horn. The effect occurs four times during the movement, and always penetrates an already-full texture.

Innovation and novelty seem to abound here, and also in *Rout*. Certainly, this was the general opinion of press notices at the time, with a good deal of the reception either negative or confused. In Edwin Evans's review of Bliss's early career in the *Musical Times* he found space to acknowledge *Rout*'s 'lengthy spells of consistent melody' and the 'sentimental idyll' to be found in the last of the *Conversations*.⁴⁴ Such facets were ignored almost entirely in the popular press when *Conversations* was repeated in a concert of selected 'new music' in April 1921. The *Daily Mail*, for example, expressed the kind of indignation we have come to associate with its modern reportage. A review was printed under the headline 'Blare Music: Bellowing trombone & Tango Rhythms':

... we had bellowings on the trombone, dissipated cries from a cornet, tango rhythms, an outdoing of the brutalising circus 'orchestration', a soprano ejaculating in Dadaistic-French 'Marin cou le pompon moustaches mandoline, Linoléum en trompe-l'oeil, Merci, Cinéma nouvelle muse,' etc ... It is an irreverent age. Was music once a holy art? Did the masters once contrive sublime syntheses of Love, Life and Death? We are much too knowing nowadays for any such hollow romance. Nothing today sounds more absurd than a grand symphonic apotheosis ... Mr Arthur Bliss composes 'A Conversation in the Tube at Oxford Circus'. It is really the triumph of Nietzsche, with his motto, 'Let instinct live', over his pretentious old enemy.⁴⁵

It is difficult to ascertain whether the intention of the reviewer was to titillate or infuriate his conservative readers.

⁴⁴ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 21.

⁴⁵ *Daily Mail*, 4 April 1921, quoted in Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 61.

A work for stage, and further 'studies'

The dawning of 1921 brought Bliss a further opportunity to compose for the stage, and a chance to improve upon the derivative Stratford arrangements of 1919. Now he set his own music next to that of Arne and Sullivan, for a production of *The Tempest* at the Aldwych Theatre. At that time the Aldwych was under the management of Viola Tree, who allowed *The Tempest* to be overseen by Hugo Rumbold.⁴⁶ A year earlier Rumbold had produced Darius Milhaud's ballet *Le Boeuf sur le toit* at the Coliseum Theatre, under the title of *The Nothing Doing Bar*.⁴⁷

The first performance on 1 February 1921 helped to bring Bliss to a wider, dramatic audience, and also caused him to catch the ear of Ernest Newman for the first time. It was Bliss's music that soared through:

The only music that matters is that of Mr Arthur Bliss, who, with a fearsome array of kettle-drums, has given us a storm in the opening scene that is not only terrifying in an imaginative way, instead of the merely noisy way of the old stage thunder, but has the additional and great merit of reducing the scenery and the actors to their native insignificance ... Mr Bliss has written some music that I should like to hear again under more satisfactory conditions than those of the theatre. It has a strange remoteness and mystery: here one felt, as nowhere else, unfortunately, during the whole play after the storm scene, that Shakespeare's vision of an island enchanted had been realised. It is the most imaginative piece of theatre music that I have ever heard.⁴⁸

Bliss would soon employ timpani to similar effect in his first major orchestral work, *A Colour Symphony*.

On 3 February, he travelled to Portsmouth to conduct the Philharmonic Society there, with an early orchestral arrangement of *Rout* on the programme: on 17 February he conducted his *Two Studies* at the Royal College of Music.⁴⁹ The *Two Studies* were composed in something of a hurry, for their very composition owed much to the limited opportunities available for young or not-yet-established composers to have their orchestral music performed. The pieces were produced for the Royal College's Patron's Fund Concerts: these amounted to little more than

⁴⁶ Rumbold's obituary described him as 'essentially a Bohemian and a clubman, who was witty and amusing and who always tried to pass on his zest for life to others ... He was indeed something of a dilettante and dabbler in many pursuits. Had he been more of a "sticker" he would have made more of a name for himself' (*The Times*, 25 November 1932, 19).

⁴⁷ See *The Times*, 12 July 1920, 12.

⁴⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 February 1921, quoted in Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 64.

⁴⁹ Robert Meikle has questioned the accuracy of the date of first performance. Some sources record this as 17 February 1920 (Roscow and Foreman, for example), but the programme in the archive of the Royal College of Music clearly shows the year to be 1921.

public open rehearsals, but they provided a rare and valuable chance to hear one's music brought to life by a full orchestra.

The autograph manuscript, which was deposited at the Bliss Archive some years after the composer's death, is labelled (in Bliss's hand) 'Studies for Full Orchestra, Nos 2 & 3'. Giles Easterbrook has suggested that the missing first study may have been recycled into the Concerto for Piano, Tenor Voice, Strings and Percussion (now also lost) or even the fifth of the contemporaneous Conversations, 'In the Tube at Oxford Circus'.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Stewart Craggs posits that it became 'Night', an Edgar Allan Poe-inspired dance that Bliss composed for Tamara Karsavina shortly afterwards.⁵¹ Bliss himself recalls only that he submitted two studies, 'one grave, one gay'.⁵²



Ex. 10 Bliss: *Two Studies*, II, bb. 8-11, second violin, main pentatonic theme

Holst helped in the preparation of the score, most likely with elements of the orchestration – but the musical material itself bears the hallmarks of a student in a hurry: it lacks the fresh originality of Bliss's other music of the time. Robert Meikle has observed a tendency towards the Aeolian mode in the first study (*Adagio ma non troppo*, originally 'No 2'), and a folk-like pentatonicism in the main theme of the second (*Allegro*, ex. 10), which he suggests 'would not be out of place in Vaughan Williams's *London Symphony*'.⁵³ (By contrast, Easterbrook has called this tune 'Chinoiserie'.)⁵⁴ This is revealing, given Bliss's apparently invariable rejection of the English folk tradition during these years. Indeed it is surprising, given a context of Stravinsky, the Ballets Russes and Les Six, that the *Two Studies* are so free of Russian or French influences: these are perhaps Bliss's most 'English' works – whether consciously or otherwise – of the period.

⁵⁰ Giles Easterbrook, programme note for a 1980 broadcast performance, copy in Bliss Archive.

⁵¹ Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a preliminary survey and synthesis of materials for the study of his music*, PhD thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1982, vol. 2, 166.

⁵² Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 65.

⁵³ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 13.

⁵⁴ Giles Easterbrook, 1980 programme note.

Of the Two Studies, Edwin Evans noted that

it is enough to state that they are exactly what they purport to be, that is to say, studies in orchestral colour. One resembles a nocturne, and the other is more animated; both abound in venturesome moments, but, although they have had several public performances, it is doubtful whether Bliss attributes permanent value to them.⁵⁵

Even without the benefit of ninety years of hindsight, Evans's summary is perfectly accurate: this lack of 'permanent value' is clear from the casual disposal (or possibly reuse) of the first study, while the musical interest, if any, is in the detail of the scoring rather than in the inherent material – which, as ventured above, is far more 'English' and modal in style than Bliss's more Stravinskian efforts of the period. This explicit interest in orchestral technique, however, anticipated *A Colour Symphony* by almost twelve months.

The spring of 1921 found Bliss again on conducting duty in Portsmouth, leading the Philharmonic Society in a performance of Bach's B minor Mass on 17 March. On 20 April, the five *Conversations* were performed in public for the first time at Aeolian Hall, and a first public performance of *Rout* followed soon after on 4 May. In this recital, at Steinway Hall, Grace Fraser, wife of Claude, took the soprano part, and also sang two of Bliss's new text settings.

In these *Two Nursery Rhymes*, Bliss retreated to the world of childhood – a temporal arena which may also have inspired *Rout*, with its curious redolence of a distant memory, an aural evocation not clear yet never quite forgotten. The instrumentation speaks openly to childhood memories, with the absent brother recalled – one of the songs is for voice, piano and clarinet, the other for voice and clarinet alone: the clarinet, of course, was the instrument of Kennard.

The two songs use texts by Frances Cornford, a contemporary of Bliss at Cambridge and a granddaughter of Charles Darwin. 'The Ragwort' is irrepressibly positive in nature, set in a bright E major, with a nimble clarinet line augmented by rich harmonies in the piano. 'The Dandelion' is altogether more sombre, although the clarinet introduction and interlude are sprightly, and there is some acciaccatural imitation in the dialogue between voice and clarinet.

⁵⁵ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 95-6.

At this time Bliss was also making revisions to the orchestral version of *Rout*, which was performed at Aeolian Hall on 6 May. Wigmore Hall was chosen for the premiere of the Concerto for Piano, Tenor Voice, Strings and Percussion the following month. This potential partner of the *Two Studies* is now lost, caught in the destruction of a publisher's warehouse by a bomb during the Second World War. However, contemporaneous press notices prove that the work was taken seriously at the time, and some even demonstrated a renewed interest in Bliss's use of textual abstraction:

This we take to be one of his recent compositions, and, if so, it is good evidence that he is not degenerating, as we have occasionally feared, into a mere musical 'stuntist'. For, whatever may be its defects, there is genuine music in the work. It is true that it rests on the perverse idea of using the voice as an instrument, and allowing it words merely as a means of securing the right sonorities. The words are not meant to be heard, and generally we did not hear them. This is irritating at first; afterwards one feels almost ashamed of having caught such a phrase as 'triumphing still, man shall endure', and it is difficult to pass it by without attaching any particular importance to it. But we are told that we must; 'there is no programme and no literary reason for employing the combination of voice, pianoforte, strings, and percussion' ... Apart from certain wilful excrescences of sound, the music moves through finely impulsive ideas with strong contrasts of mood and yet preserves identity by thematic development. One does not catch the composer waiting for his next idea and filling in the blank spaces with mere antics. It is substantial music, and it was received with what seemed like genuine enjoyment by the large audience.⁵⁶

On 23 June, Bliss introduced Holst's one-act opera *Savitri* to his concert series audience at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, and the following day the orchestral version of *Rout* was heard during an interval at the Diaghilev Ballets at Sadler's Wells, sung by the Russian contralto Zoia Rosovska.⁵⁷

Controversial proclamations

In the summer of 1921, Bliss was invited to give a speech to the Society of Women Musicians: this he delivered on 21 July, under the heading 'What Modern Composition is Aiming At'.⁵⁸ The very title of the lecture made claims at progress, or at least a progressive ideal, and in it Bliss outlined his hopes for the direction of that progress. Fifteen years earlier, Elgar had used his controversial Birmingham lecture series for much the same purpose. Elgar's lectures, under a united theme of

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 12 June 1921.

⁵⁷ See Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 395-98.

⁵⁸ A full transcript appears in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 15-24.

'A Future for English Music', happily acknowledged the label of 'English progressivist' that Richard Strauss had by then bestowed upon him.

Elgar delivered some indirect though barbed attacks on the highly-derivative leanings of Stanford, the like of which were subsequently scorned by Bliss himself during his fractious rejection of the Stanfordian creed as a student at the Royal College. However, the obvious influence of the Austro-German tradition in Elgar's music is plain to hear, and his Edwardian quest for a 'new movement' of national culture drew heavily on the Shakespearean model: it was rural, provincial and driven by emotion. By contrast, Bliss in 1921 was keen to lead an urban charge centred in London, abandoning the persistent provincialism of England for more continental influences. His approach was clinical, led by the head rather than the heart.

Bliss was proud of the cultural diversity captured by his small artistic sphere, and of the drive for progress that was engendered within it. This made any veneration of the past hard for him to bear, particularly when that past was one of European romanticism, held aloft at the expense of modern English aspirations. Now, the Society of Women Musicians lecture built upon an article Bliss had contributed to the *Musical News and Herald* three months before, which he had titled 'Unexplained superstitions: the cult of the dead'.⁵⁹ Here, Bliss delivered a eulogy to the present: 'We have living today, in Europe, several musical minds that an unprejudiced posterity will rank as high in musical achievement as Haydn, Weber, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Schumann'. That such minds remained unacknowledged was blamed squarely on the prevailing cultural conservatism of the press, yet Bliss also urged more than lip-service to home-nurtured music:

I abhor the narrow provincialism that performs English works simply and solely because they are English; it is judging by a wide cosmopolitan standard that I affirm that it is here in England that we have the surest signs of musical enlightenment, as far apart from the neo-Chaminade school in Paris as from the neo-Strauss school in Berlin.

Bliss called for column inches to be devoted to music of the here and now, citing Goossens's new Piano Quintet and the latest experimental works of Darius Milhaud.

⁵⁹ Arthur Bliss, 'Unexplained superstitions: the cult of the dead', *Musical News and Herald*, 23 April 1921, 523. See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 8-9.

In his speech on 21 July, Bliss launched a devastating attack on the Austro-German tradition:

You can keep all of your Strauss *Domestic* and *Alpine* symphonies, your Schreker, your Bruckner and your Mahler. I fear I cannot say a good word of German music: it is to me anathema, not because it is Teutonic, but because to my mind it is at the same time ponderous and trivial, or, in the jargon of present-day science, boundless, yet finite.

His claims for neutrality now seem a little disingenuous: indeed, this is surely a case of a chauvinistic war veteran protesting a little too much. Admittedly, he later wrote that 'I confess to blushing on re-reading what I then said, an embarrassment shared, I am sure, with many who later discover their hollow arrogance.'⁶⁰ Bliss is most betrayed by his own reference to Les Six who, he then claimed, 'truly stand as a body for vitality and simplicity in music, and express hatred of the humbug and pomposity attributable to their neighbours across the Rhine'.⁶¹

Whatever his personal prejudices, Bliss knew that to win over his audience he needed to cite convincing alternatives. These included Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and *A Soldier's Tale*, Goossens's *The Eternal Rhythm*, Bax's *The Garden of Fand*, Ravel's Piano Trio and Falla's *Vida Breve*. The national persuasions were diverse: Stravinsky – a Russian working in Paris; Bax – English with Celtic leanings; Goossens – an Englishman of Belgian extraction; Falla – Spanish; Ravel – French with Basque roots. There is healthy representation from across Europe, yet not a German in sight.

It is striking how Bliss's post-Armistice musical tastes mirrored Britain's simultaneous political relationships with its European neighbours: with these predilections, he was continuing personal trends set in motion during his school days at Rugby.⁶² After the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, Britain had seemed to favour a strong Germany, seeking balance against the traditional enemy, France. But when Germany began extensive naval construction plans, thus rivalling those of Britain, this stance shifted. France, looking for an ally to balance the new threat from Germany, found one in Russia. Austria-Hungary, facing a threat from Russia, sought

⁶⁰ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 62.

⁶¹ Bliss's hackles were raised, perhaps, by the speed at which the German canon had been reintroduced to the English concert hall after the Great War. His statement is also widely symptomatic of his neo-classical anti-romanticism.

⁶² See chapter 1.

support from Germany. When war broke out in 1914, these relationships determined who entered the war on which side. Clearly then, for returning veterans, they also had some bearing on post-war cultural prejudices.

In his fellow composers hailing from the Allied nations, Bliss was fortunate to have such adequate musical models. We can be sure that he drew inspiration from the rich colouring of Stravinsky's *Rite*, and from works such as the lyric tale *The Nightingale*. Closer to home, Holst – mentor for the *Two Studies* – emerged from an early Wagnerian phase to become an English pioneer of instrumental combinations designed with sources of colour in mind. Bliss's repeatedly disparaging remarks against the Austro-German Romantic tradition aligned him with Debussy who, for many years before his death in 1918, had ill-concealed his abhorrence of the 'orchestre-cocktail' of Wagner and Strauss. The cultural politics of the Great War had also allowed Henry Wood to introduce Russian music to British shores with great frequency.⁶³

Bliss's lecture also underpinned his commitment to instrumental experimentation and economy, hitherto manifested in the many of his works of the period which find him railing against the huge forms and forces of Strauss and Scriabin. He condemned 'musical camouflage and dope' and urged his peers to 'aim at sincerity and simplicity' by '[making] instruments function in the most independent way possible'. He asserted that 'the judicious use of a few instruments ... produces a richness and diversity impossible to obtain with the old method of mass treatment'.

This quest for a modern music confirms that, despite an occasional tendency towards English small-mindedness, the Great War had changed London: the old guard of Parry, Stanford and Mackenzie had drawn its last breath. Four years of anti-German sentiment had truly swept aside any potential for a new school to rely explicitly on the musical language of this latest adversary. The foregoing press quotations demonstrate a gradual acceptance of Bliss's technical procedures, and the frequency of performances of his music was also impressive: the following spring he would

⁶³ A. E. Hull wrote in 1918 that 'in our desire to be rid of the music of the heavy German type of Bruckner, the megalomania of Mahler and the risky sanity of Schoenberg, we have thrown ourselves somewhat thoughtlessly into the arms of the lachrymose Russians, and at the present moment we seem inclined to swallow anything under a Slav patronymic' (Arthur Eaglefield Hull, *Cyril Scott: the man and his works*, 180).

travel to Liverpool for a concert devoted entirely to his music. His exploration of new areas of musical interest, while regarded with suspicion by some, was now palatable in a manner entirely inconceivable a decade earlier.

Loss and response

Bliss's next work was dedicated to Claude Lovat Fraser, described by the composer on the title page as 'a great and lovable artist'. Fraser had died suddenly on 18 June 1921 of an illness thought to be related to the gas attack he had suffered during the Great War. It was Fraser's productions of *As You Like It* and *The Tempest* for which Bliss had provided original music; he had also designed the costumes and sets for Holst's *Savitri*, the first performance of which Bliss had conducted just five days after his friend's death. A response came in the orchestral *Mélée Fantasque*, which was composed during a period of understandable grief: the work is undoubtedly imbued with the spirit of Fraser, that is, the modern spirit of the Russian ballet.

Many features of Bliss's maturing style are found in *Mélée Fantasque*, particularly his attraction to crotchet triplets against duple metre: indeed, his music of the 1930s, his most productive decade, is replete with such cross-rhythms. Present also are suggestions of an adroit orchestrator in the making – surely the defining technical progression in his post-Armistice music – and his impatience with the restrictions and restatements of sonata form: the work is through-composed, as are several of Bliss's contemporaneous efforts. The first performance occurred at a Promenade Concert on 13 October 1921, with the composer conducting.

Such exposure owed much to the support and encouragement of Henry Wood, whose generosity in allocating rehearsal time was impressive. Bliss later recalled that

in those days the Promenade Concerts had just one orchestra and one conductor. It was a real tour de force to get through the season – just the morning rehearsal for the evening concert. Henry Wood would skimp the time for the classical symphony and other repertoire works, to allow the young composer or the young soloist a really generous slice of the morning's rehearsal.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Arthur Bliss, in a BBC interview broadcast on 2 March 1969, in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 270.

In general, Wood 'was indefatigable in his wish for new music of a reasonably professional standard ... To work in any capacity with [him] was to work with a man free of conceit or megalomania, one wholly devoted to music, and generous to those younger and less secure than himself.'⁶⁵

Bliss's sense of artistic security might well have been rocked by the *Observer's* assessment of the new work, had he not begun to develop a sufficiently thick skin. Bliss later claimed that the article merely constituted an academic response to an unrepresentative programme note, which had not been penned by Bliss himself. That note had poured scorn on the 'subjectivity of the nineteenth century', and lauded Bliss's apparent objectivity. The critic rightly responded:

I consider 'absolute objective' music as elusive a conception as 'simple impersonal truth', and very likely a good deal of my honest, innocent enjoyment of Mr Bliss's work during the last twelve months has been of the wrong sort—enjoyment of the passages in which he most markedly fails to attain his object. Analysing my memories, I believe one cause of my pleasure in many of his creations has been that abounding youthful vitality of his, which often compels him to sweep on one side his theories, and write down what he feels, in all its native heat.⁶⁶

In truth, *Mélée Fantastique* is not an objective work, and nor did it set out to be. The *Observer* critic, however, reveals much of the mild hypocrisy of Bliss's youthful protestations: often, his rhetoric was not matched by his music.

Such rhetoric filled a contemporaneous newspaper article which Bliss supplied to the *Daily Mail*, a contribution full of anti-German sentiment. Here, Bliss came close to proclaiming London's place as the centre of the civilised world, pouring scorn on German isolationism and the anaemia of its creative spirit. 'They have machinery in abundance for making music,' he claimed, 'but not enough raw material with which to feed it.'⁶⁷ Of course, with such claims Bliss was either pandering to or exploiting a growing appetite for press sensationalism, yet there are also allusions to earlier prejudice: in another context, the epithet presented above might have sat comfortably alongside Oscar Schmitz's infamous denunciation of *fin de siècle* England in general.

⁶⁵ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 67.

⁶⁶ *Observer*, 16 October 1921, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 68-9.

⁶⁷ Arthur Bliss, 'London leads in music', *Daily Mail*, 20 October 1921, 6.

At this time, Bliss was experiencing his own generous dose of ‘native heat’, having become embroiled in a complicated affair with an unnamed London dancer – which eventually led to the destruction of some of Bliss’s early songs. He revealed some of the details of the affair in a moment of unusual candidness in his autobiography:

My inner life at this time was far from being of that orderly disciplined kind which best conduces to creative work; it was indeed very much the reverse ... She was a wonderful dancer, and her beauty exhaled an animal magnetism which immediately enticed the male. At all times she needed men, and knew how to get them. The attraction being almost entirely physical was all the more exciting and unsettling.⁶⁸

The girl was eventually sent by her guardians to Switzerland, to where she was pursued by Bliss, only to find her ensconced with another. After confronting her and her new lover, he destroyed a number of his own songs ‘like some character in an Aldous Huxley novel’. The chastened Bliss resolved never to allow himself to again become so enslaved.

A new opportunity

1921 had been an extraordinary year for Arthur Bliss: major works, the death of a dear friend, national acclaim, a torrid love affair and a thirtieth birthday. But in the context of his career trajectory, one of the most significant events was still yet to occur. On 16 December, he was invited, alongside his friends Howells and Goossens, to a lunch hosted by Elgar at the Royal Societies Club. Over drinks, the three young men were commissioned to provide large-scale works for the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival of 1922. Here, in the mind of Elgar at least, was the bright hope of British music – three composers of a similar age and experience who would ‘do away with the remnant of the notion that everything must be a sort of Ch. of E. propaganda.’⁶⁹

Excited by the unexpected opportunity to compose on a symphonic scale, but struck dumb by the anxiety of producing absolute music, Bliss began a life-long habit of searching for an external stimulus:

⁶⁸ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 69.

⁶⁹ Edward Elgar, in a letter to Herbert Brewer, quoted in Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar*, 295. Bliss was a Catholic convert, Goossens had been raised in the Catholic tradition, and Howells was yet to make his name as a prolific composer of Anglican church music.

For weeks I sat before a blank sheet of manuscript paper trying to make up my mind what shape, what character this new big work should have. And then one day, looking over a friend's library, I picked up a book on heraldry and started reading about the symbolic meanings associated with the primary colours. At once I saw the possibility of so characterising the four movements of a symphony, that each should express a colour as I personally perceived it. There was to be no attempt at a semi-scientific basis whatever, if there *is* such a thing. I was fully aware that colours arouse quite different emotions in different people, and that I was speaking only for myself in composing this symphony. For that reason I did not at first give it any name except 'Symphony in B'. Later I was won over by the argument put forward by Percy Scholes that if I *had* found the initial inspiration in the idea of colour, it was timid not to proclaim it. Hence its title *Colour Symphony* with the sub-titles to the movements of Purple, Red, Blue, Green.⁷⁰

Not long after, Percy Scholes laid out his own defence of the title he had encouraged:

the popularity of much ... great music has been impeded by such repulsive, meaningless and algebraic-looking titles-that-are-not-titles, as '*In A flat, Op. 55*', and that such works as Beethoven's *Heroic Symphony* or Tchaikovsky's *Pathetic Symphony* have gained by their more alluring titles. '*Symphony in A flat, Op. 55*' means absolutely nothing to the man in the street, for it is not a name but a mere means of official reference, like the numbering of a car or a convict. The title [of Bliss's symphony] is, therefore, legitimate, and I think it is also attractive; whilst the sub-titles given to the various movements are, I feel sure, likely to be of service to many readers, by revealing (in a very general way, of course) the underlying feeling of each.⁷¹

After the first performance, Ernest Newman came out strongly against Bliss's use of colour associations with this three-pronged attack:

The first is that, as everyone knows, hardly two people have the same colour associations when they hear musical tones. Secondly, the people who dogmatise most upon the subject are only imperfectly musical. Thirdly – and I am surprised at Mr Bliss overlooking this – no one movement of a musical work can possibly be characterised by one colour, because of the constant changes in it not only of orchestration, but of harmony and of *idea*. He should not put non-musical ideas into our heads that cannot have the same logic for us as for him.⁷²

It seems impossible that Bliss, the colour-experimenter *par excellence*, should not have considered Newman's third – and most scathing – criticism during the symphony's composition. Certainly, this brings Bliss's need for external stimulus into focus. An abstract title alongside an unacknowledged inspiration may, indeed,

⁷⁰ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 71-2.

⁷¹ Percy Scholes, *A few notes upon the work of Arthur Bliss and especially upon his Colour Symphony*, 7. The present writer, like many others, has seldom paid heed to the list of colour associations, but rather has admired the work for the quality of its music. This possibly owes something to my profound colour-blindness. In a 1970 letter to George Dannant cited elsewhere, Bliss suggested that he may have suffered a similar affliction, not uncommon in males: 'I think I concentrated on colours of a rather primitive kind, as my own colour sense is not actually very sure – sometimes I find it difficult, for instance, to pick out red berries in green foliage!'

⁷² Ernest Newman, *The Sunday Times*, 10 September 1922. This was typical of Newman's philosophy of the 'Physiology of Music'.

have proved a better compromise. On the other hand, whatever longevity the work has enjoyed probably owes much to its unusual title.⁷³

In the most recent Boosey & Hawkes edition of the score, which includes Bliss's 1932 revisions, the title of each movement (and its specific associations) is presented in the frontispiece. These are:

- I. Purple – The Colour of Amethysts, Pageantry, Royalty and Death.
- II. Red – The Colour of Rubies, Wine, Revelry, Furnaces, Courage and Magic.
- III. Blue – The Colour of Sapphires, Deep Water, Skies, Loyalty and Melancholy.
- IV. Green – The Colour of Emeralds, Hope, Youth, Joy, Spring and Victory.

In a letter many years later, Bliss clarified these descriptions further:

First movement – a funereal or ecclesiastical shade of deep purple.

Second movement. a real scarlet, or the hue of embers hotly glowing.

Third movement – what I should call a Picasso blue – not a deep Prussian? blue, but one observes it in the sky early and late in the year.

Fourth movement, a spring green gradually deepening through yellow green to a fierce dark green.

Colours were very vivid in my mind during the composition, though not in the sense the Trumpets might be red, and Flutes blue.⁷⁴

Here, then, is confirmation that Bliss's inspiration provided only initial stimulation, and that the colours do not relate to any orchestral 'colouring'. It is also striking how Bliss's descriptions refer frequently to phenomena in the natural world: precious gemstones, embers in furnaces, deep water, equinox skies, and the colours of the changing seasons. This seems a long distance from musical depictions of the modern drudgery of the committee meeting, or the mechanical trappings of an underground train. The very essence of heraldry and pageantry that apparently pervades the work rejects the modern urban, and looks back inherently to the 'rural' of antiquity.

From the symphony onwards, Bliss's compositional processes almost invariably required an element of non-musical inspiration – yet how important was this to the

⁷³ The symphony was performed at the BBC Proms in July 2006 (complete with coloured lighting effects); the Proms 'theme tune' for BBC Television was until 2010 an extract from the end of the second movement, 'Red'.

⁷⁴ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to George Dannant, 15 October 1970 (private collection, copy in the Bliss Archive), also quoted by Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 25.

actual music? In the context of colour, Eric Blom had already become unconvinced of its relevance by 1932:

The extra-musical scheme of the *Colour Symphony* always seemed to me superfluous. The music was so interesting that I, for one, refused to feel quite so blue during the slow movement as the composer desired, or to think him quite so green as he pretended to be in the finale. I did not even see red, as some people did, on hearing the scherzo.⁷⁵

Edwin Evans later concurred: ‘The title may be a convenient means of identification, but it is not much more than that, and the work really gains by being regarded as a “non-progressive” symphony in four movements.’⁷⁶

Bliss’s adherence to such a conventional four-movement structure is perhaps surprising. The first movement is slower than that schema might imply, a stately *Andante maestoso* which, in keeping with Bliss’s colour descriptions, conjures an air of ceremony, interspersed with vivid outbursts. Like in *Rout*, the procession seems – at first at least – observed from a distance, an effect which offers the listener an added dimension of space. Both Percy Scholes and Robert Meikle have noted this movement’s palindromic form, with three themes presented in the approach to a significant climax – the moment at which the procession is at its closest – before the three themes are heard again, this time in reverse order.⁷⁷



Ex. 11 Bliss: *A Colour Symphony*, II, [17], first violin

In the scherzo movement, ‘Red’, Elgar is recalled in a lyrical reimagining of the opening theme at [17] (ex. 11). Indeed, much of the structural interest within each movement owes much to Bliss’s dexterity at melodic development and manipulation. His contrapuntal technique is also impressive, with melodic elements augmented and then inverted to produce harmonically-propulsive bass lines. It is in ‘Red’ that the mechanical energy of Bliss’s earlier works is manifested – perhaps in the industrial

⁷⁵ Eric Blom, quoted in Edwin Evans, ‘Perfect Bliss?’, *The Listener* 23 (25 January 1940), 193.

⁷⁶ Edwin Evans, ‘Perfect Bliss?’, *The Listener* 23 (25 January 1940), 193.

⁷⁷ Percy Scholes, *A few notes upon the work of Arthur Bliss and especially upon his Colour Symphony*, 12; Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 26.

‘furnaces’ – and here too he sought to emulate established formal designs by including a gentler, contrasting trio section.

Bliss’s growing inclination towards added sixths, sevenths and ninths in his developing post-Armistice harmonic style is evident in the opening bars of ‘Blue’, in which minor chords particularly are augmented and richly scored. This was the one movement that Bliss left entirely unaltered during a later revision, and is, therefore, the most prophetic section of the symphony. Bliss’s lines of thought are more clearly defined here than in the rest of the work: each solo instrument strives for freedom with its metrically-uneven melodies, yet each new line is tightly wrought above the organising structures of the propulsive, homophonic string accompaniment. These chords, especially when whispered, are never wholly secure, and the fluidity of Bliss’s inspiration is underlined by frequent woodwind arabesques above. Bliss later remembered that in this movement he was ‘thinking of a punt, or of some boat that is tied up to a wharf in a lake and all you hear is just the slapping of the waves against the boat and that gives you rhythm; and that is fairly static, and the boat is more or less static. But the first thing I demand in music is flow.’⁷⁸



Ex. 12 Bliss: *A Colour Symphony*, IV, opening viola theme

An emphasis on ‘flow’ continues in the finale, ‘Green’, which opens with a tonally-ambiguous soli theme in the violas (ex. 12): on closer inspection, it hints at a nine-note row, lending these first bars a strong suggestion of atonality. Following the thick, complex harmonies of the previous movement, this sudden starkness comes as a distinct aural surprise. Propulsion here is provided by secure contrapuntal management, alongside the reiterated rhythm of the opening motif: such is the importance of this feature that the linearity of Bliss’s counterpoint replaces harmony (or, briefly, tonality) as the creative ‘glue’.

The symphony came close to standing as the most profound experiment in timbre Bliss had yet attempted. In fact, although the orchestration is undoubtedly inventive and technically impressive, such surface features are rendered subservient to the

⁷⁸ Granada Television interview with Vernon Handley, 1972.

sheer quality of the actual musical material from which the work is constructed: the ballet rhythms of the scherzo, the silences which precede huge orchestral interjections throughout, and the apparent obliqueness of the initial fugue in the finale, which evolves diatonically into a tongue-in-cheek tribute to Elgarian late-romanticism. This is more than youthful trickery.

Throughout the first half of 1922, whilst working on *A Colour Symphony*, Bliss's primary workspace was a downstairs room at 13 Cheyne Walk, a house shared by Ralph and Adeline Vaughan Williams and Reginald and Jane Morris.⁷⁹ The house was close to the river, set back from the Chelsea Embankment, and only a short distance from the Bliss family home in Holland Park. Bliss described the 'wonderful atmosphere of quiet sustained work',⁸⁰ and recalled that Vaughan Williams was revising his *London Symphony* at that time. Despite this, there is remarkably little of Vaughan Williams in *A Colour Symphony*; but then, Bliss's closest friend at Cheyne Walk was always Morris, to whom Bliss was drawn as a scholar and theoretician as well as a musician.⁸¹ Besides, Bliss's early scores, as we have seen, demonstrate little inclination towards pastoralism.

Such proximity was nevertheless significant for a young man who had so admired Vaughan Williams as a schoolboy; performing in the *Sea Symphony* at Cambridge, and meeting him again intermittently when studying at the Royal College of Music prior to the Great War. The opportunity to forge a more meaningful friendship with him after the Armistice was certainly a thrill:

It was a wonderful experience for me, at the outset of my own career, to come into almost daily contact with a man so sure of the kind of music he was determined to write. I am convinced that this music came anything but easily to him, and that like Beethoven there was a constant inward struggle to overcome technical awkwardness perhaps, and an unwearying pursuit towards the heights which he glimpsed; lowlands and easy paths did not mean much to him.⁸²

⁷⁹ Cheyne Walk has a long association with noteworthy residents, including Bram Stoker, George Eliot and David Lloyd George.

⁸⁰ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 74.

⁸¹ The term 'theoretician' is appropriate here, given a mutual love of chess shared by Morris and Bliss.

⁸² Arthur Bliss, in the foreword of the Vaughan Williams centenary committee book, 1972 (manuscript in the private collection of Malcolm Smith). Does this – only 'glimpsed' – mean that Bliss did not place Vaughan Williams in the first division of composers? It is revealing that Bliss found in Vaughan Williams a kindred spirit in compositional approach, if not in compositional inspiration: after all, Bliss was keen to eschew the lures of Tudor sources and folk music.

Crucial to any discussion of the creation of a national musical identity is Bliss's appreciation of and respect for the strides Vaughan Williams was then making towards stylistic emancipation from Germany, even if this appreciation was tempered by Bliss's personal rejection of explicitly English musical sources:

Vaughan Williams appeared on our musical horizon just when English music was, with difficulty, shaking off the long-dominating German tradition of composition, and no more national figure than he could be imagined, as native to this country as the poems of Wordsworth and the paintings of Constable. In this I feel lies his sure passport to the interest of posterity.⁸³

But Bliss, too, was failing to shake off that German dominance in his own symphony. What contribution did Vaughan Williams and Morris have, it may be asked, to this choice of a four-movement symphonic structure? Why not follow the more progressive examples of, for example, Sibelius – especially as the musical fabric of much of Bliss's early music, dominated by textures constructed from *ostinati*, seems to unconsciously owe a great deal to such an influence? Sibelius was a star of the interwar years in British concert halls, and his music also had the further attraction of not being German. It is certainly possible that any continuation of musical tradition was preferable to the potential disarray of full abandonment – particularly in a work intended for a Three Choirs festival.

Poetic distractions

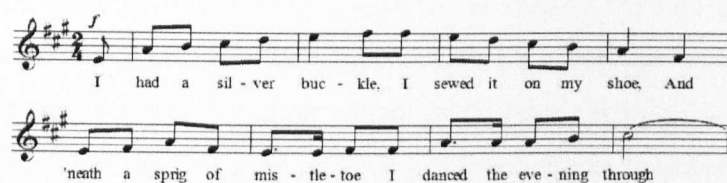
In the midst of Bliss's symphonic preparatory work, he saw his *Three Romantic Songs* performed for the first time by Anne Thursfield at Wigmore Hall on 18 January 1922. These Walter de la Mare settings were published the following year, in their original form for voice and piano; however, a manuscript exists of the third song, 'The Buckle', with string quartet accompaniment: this song may, therefore, have been composed in 1918, as Bliss was then corresponding with Herbert Howells regarding a de la Mare setting.⁸⁴ It was during 1918, we may recall, that Bliss's father remarried, giving Arthur a new stepbrother and stepsister, Patrick and Cynthia Mahony, and soon after a half-sister, Enid. It is to this new family that the three

⁸³ Arthur Bliss, in the foreword of the Vaughan Williams centenary committee book, 1972 (manuscript in the private collection of Malcolm Smith).

⁸⁴ See correspondence quoted in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells: a centenary celebration*, as well as related items in the Bliss Archive.

songs are dedicated: the texts are taken from de la Mare's 1902 volume *Songs of Childhood*, his first published work.

The first of the collection, 'The Hare', is an obvious counterpart to *Madam Noy* in terms of musical material, with its whole-tone harmonies and nocturnal evocations. 'Lovelocks' relies more heavily on pentatonic figurations, recalling the Debussy preludes of Bliss's childhood. In the final song, 'The Buckle', the diatonic melody is more like that of a nursery rhyme, with hints of folk balladry and an emphasis on the sixth degree of the scale (ex. 13). In each of these songs, the ghost of wartime fragility is never far away.



Ex. 13 Bliss: 'The Buckle' from *Three Romantic Songs*, diatonic melody

At this time, Bliss's familiarity with the cinema was confirmed by an article he submitted to the *Musical News and Herald*.⁸⁵ In it, Bliss outlined his dissatisfaction with the present quality of film music – which, it should be acknowledged, was still in its infancy. However, Bliss's interest had clearly already been piqued. Revealingly, the article appeared under the headline 'Those Damned Films!', and Bliss presented himself as a veritable connoisseur, claiming to have 'sat through hundreds and hundreds of films'. It contains an interesting exposition of cinema's narcotic effect, a subject which provides volumes of sociological discourse to this day. Music was now simply another tool in that armoury, Bliss observed:

To provide suitable music for this doping of the brain brought to us by the films is comparatively simple. There is much music that produces no thought and does not bear thinking of. But soon the directors become more ambitious. They conspire together to raise the music, which had hitherto served but to drown the twittering of the operator's lantern, to the artistic level of the picture it accompanied. They took the 'don't think' policy one step further. You were not only to be *told* what was happening and then *see* it happen, but, luxury of luxuries, you were to *hear* it happen.

Bliss later took up the challenge of composing for the cinema with, one feels, typically missionary zeal.

⁸⁵ Arthur Bliss, 'Those Damned Films!', *Musical News and Herald*, 18 February 1922, in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 31-2.

During the spring of 1922, Bliss produced three more song settings. This time the texts were those of W. H. Davies, woven into a cycle published later simply as *Three Songs*. 'Thunderstorms' describes a feeling well-known to Bliss – that of a creative malaise, the artist waiting impatiently for the muse to take him. This seems a particularly apt text selection, given that it was during the composition of his symphony that Bliss first noted this often-recurring predicament. He later admitted:

I have always found it easier to write 'dramatic' music than 'pure' music. I like the stimulus of words, or a theatrical setting, a colourful occasion or the collaboration of a great player. There is only a little of the spider about me, spinning his own web from his inner being. I am more of a magpie type. I need what Henry James termed a 'trouvaille' or a 'donnée'.⁸⁶

The second Davies song, 'This Night', takes as its subject the uncertainty of love, another pertinent theme in Bliss's life, given his Swiss escapade only a few months earlier. It contains a direct imitation of an owl's hoot, echoing a suggestion of birdsong at the end of the first song. Bliss's final choice was 'Leisure', the work of Davies's which has most endured and which contains those famous lines, 'What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare'.

In August, Bliss travelled to Salzburg for a series of chamber concerts at which *Rout* was performed. Hindemith took part on his viola, and it was on this occasion that Bliss met Schoenberg, Berg and Webern for the first time. By now *A Colour Symphony* was long complete, and its composer returned to England full of optimism. However, when the day of the first performance arrived on 7 September, Bliss found conditions at Gloucester Cathedral far from satisfactory:

It was a difficult work to play and a very intricate one to conduct. Rehearsals were inevitably very restricted, and with wrong notes in new parts to be found and corrected, there was virtually no time for the players to learn the work. A final blow fell at the actual performance, when it was discovered there was not room on the platform erected in the Cathedral for the chorus, who were also taking part in the programme, and my huge orchestra. So, just before I went on, a posse of my players seated on the sides were removed. I certainly saw the tuba ejected and one or two other players on whom I relied. It was not a happy occasion for anyone.⁸⁷

Despite this, press notices were positive. *The Times*, in particular, viewed the work as the watershed Bliss had hoped it would be:

⁸⁶ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 71. This self-analysis is seminal to Bliss's modus operandi.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 73. Anyone who has attended even a modern Three Choirs Festival can easily imagine the difficulties described by Bliss.

Some time ago it seemed an open question whether Bliss, with all his talents and facility, would develop as a serious composer, or be content to ... do little things for the astonishment of those who feed on astonishment ... This Symphony leaves no doubt about it ... One feels that a razor-edge mind is at work, a young mind because it despises weakness and sentiment ... it is worth while to add that the orchestration all came out with extraordinary clearness.⁸⁸

Still, though, this was not enough to satisfy Bliss. Nor was it enough to please Elgar, who was unimpressed by the work he had sought to commission.⁸⁹ An ‘estrangement’ grew between Bliss and Elgar, a sad end to a friendship which had been forged between a young soldier and his musical paragon. Perhaps it was the final movement, ‘Green’, which most offended Elgar, with its tonally-ambiguous fugue cloaked in Elgarian opulence. Elgar offered an explanation several years later, as the rift finally began to close:

Frankly, I was greatly disappointed with the way you progressed from years ago. There was so much ‘press’ of a type I dislike and newspaper nonsense. I can easily believe you were responsible for little or none of this but it rankled a great deal because I had great hopes for you: I had affection. It will seem vulgar to you if I add that commercially you have (I believe or was led to believe) no concern with the success of your works—an unfortunate side of art which we penniless people have always with us, and try to ignore. I hoped you were going to give us something very great in quite modern music, the progress of which is very dear to me; and then you seemed to become a mere ‘paragraphist’. I am probably wrong and I trust I was.⁹⁰

The “‘press’ of a type’ to which Elgar refers may have been the Scholes monograph that challenged Elgar’s musical abstraction (see above), or to a general critical rejection of his Edwardian, late-romantic style. These may well have been the causes of Elgar’s lost affection for one of his young protégés. Of course, even by 1928 (when the letter above was written) Elgar had few works by Bliss at his disposal with which to make an informed reassessment, and his use of the word ‘paragraphist’ is a revealing nod towards the derivative nature of many sections in *A Colour Symphony*. Finally, Elgar’s class-based attack – his description of himself as ‘penniless’ – asks pertinent questions of Bliss’s own financial security in the early 1920s: it seems likely that his activities were largely bankrolled by his wealthy father – there is certainly no evidence to the contrary.

⁸⁸ *The Times*, 8 September 1922, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 74.

⁸⁹ Elgar also expressed a lack of enthusiasm for Goossens’s work, *Silence* for chorus and orchestra, but was more impressed by Howells’s *Sine nomine* (see Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: a creative life*, 761).

⁹⁰ Edward Elgar, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 8 November 1928, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 94.

Of the Gloucester premiere, one cannot help but picture the urbane Bliss conducting his symphony on the brink of tears, confounded by unappreciative provincialism. This work had marked the culmination of more than three years of growing fame and equally rapid artistic development: it is understandable that the blow of so apparently shoddy a performance was crushing for Bliss. This disappointment may have been brought into even sharper focus by Bliss's having met Webern – 'a man who knew with absolute clarity what path he was on'⁹¹ – only a month before. Bliss's path now seemed far less certain. The creative exhaustion that followed soon led to a dramatic change of direction.

A month after Gloucester, on 16 October, Bliss conducted *A Colour Symphony* in Bournemouth.⁹² Dan Godfrey had realised its potential technical difficulties, and had rehearsed the municipal orchestra thoroughly before Bliss's arrival. One local critic found the work too much, however, considering it 'extremely complex, especially in the rhythmic details – it is also a very evident attempt at cleverness, which is a besetting sin of so many young composers.'⁹³ Contrary to most other reports, Bliss was branded 'a poor conductor ... no kind of help could have been formed by the orchestra from such extraordinary left-handed cues.'

A social and technological development of significant import to Bliss also occurred in the autumn of 1922. After the first successful forays into the world of wireless telephony, the British Broadcasting Corporation was inaugurated, with an approximate initial audience of around 50,000 people. The BBC would revolutionise the provision and organisation of musical and other artistic activity in Britain, providing enhanced access to a greater number of people. The first responses, however, were not universally positive.

There were fears that the public appetite for live music would be significantly diminished, and that related organisations and providers might cease to exist as a

⁹¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 73.

⁹² He had appeared in Bournemouth earlier that year, conducting *Rout* and the *Two Studies* on 22 March.

⁹³ *Bournemouth Daily Echo*, 18 October 1922. Although the critic must have been more perplexed by the earlier performance of *Rout*, it appears that no review was published. *A Colour Symphony* was later performed in Bournemouth under Richard Austin in October 1936, to a much more sympathetic audience, a critic writing 'I suppose it is hardly likely that we shall hear the work again in the near future, but I, for one, would like the opportunity.' This reassessment is possibly reflective of Bliss's enhanced reputations and his subsequent revisions to the work.

result. From the start, the BBC held an economic advantage through its license subscriptions – the precursor of the modern license fee; however, the effect of broadcasting on live music was nothing compared with the later replacement of cinema orchestras with recorded soundtracks, a transition which became widespread in or around 1928. By then the broadcast media was fast becoming the real forum for the masses, the cultural meeting place for a population still largely disconnected from the high artistic revolutionaries, in whose number we may count Arthur Bliss.

Pathway to America

How may we assess this crucial period in Bliss's career in terms of the formation of his artistic identity, particularly in the context of Britain's recovery from the most traumatic four years in its history? During these years, he turned away from the narrowness of self-conscious national identity, and drew instead upon his own experiences and observations for inspiration and artistic material. This was not easy, however, for the experiences of the recent past were often painful to revisit, and the more distant past of his Edwardian childhood now seemed more like L. P. Hartley's 'foreign country'.

An inclination towards abstraction was impossible for Bliss to oppose, and was met with sympathy and understanding by other culturally-inclined men returning from war. In these post-Armistice years, feelings of alienation, brittleness and dehumanisation permeated the artistic community to which Bliss felt the strongest attachment. His very Englishness, and the typically conservative receptions he had grown used to receiving from an older generation of commentators, hastened an unexpected flight to America: in London his creativity was stifled – he now claimed to be 'running away, before England, which is the most critical country in the world, finds me out'.⁹⁴

In *A Colour Symphony*, Bliss celebrated both shape and colour: his inclinations as a classicist found him revelling in the emphasis on 'design' within the visual arts at that time, and this offered him considerable music freedom. Central to Art Deco

⁹⁴ See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 43.

were the abstract concepts of design and formal structure in the creation of an aesthetic which removed the need to marry expression to personal experience. In the identity of this art movement, design was everything: the personality of the artist – or, in this case, composer – was suppressed, or even removed altogether. This appealed to Bliss at a time when his personal experiences were still too raw to be subjected to candid musical reflection.

Now, Bliss had joined his contemporaries in the visual arts in a prolonged period of experimentation. This was the key function of much of his early music, and his reverence for subversive continental practices was the source of much resulting press criticism. Works such as *Rout* and *Conversations* were experiments in which he sought specific solutions: neither provided a perfect solution to a given problem, but Bliss understood this and moved forward. Musical progress, like that in the visual arts, is not a relentless pursuit towards a predetermined ideal. Bliss did not court the mantle of *enfant terrible* which was bestowed upon him by the press, and was surprised by the critical response to his simple ambition to discard the romantic aesthetic.

In each of the works Bliss composed after the Great War, he tackled specific issues of technique and style, and then bravely presented them for public inspection. In *Rhapsody*, we find the orderly linear writing which was later explored and improved in *Conversations*, a tour de force in the interaction of independent lines and rhythms. Different shapes and colours were juxtaposed in *Mélée Fantasque*, and this study was continued on a more extended scale in *A Colour Symphony*. Timbral dexterity was learned through the composition of *Rout* and the *Two Studies*, and an understanding of excess and restraint was added with the incidental music for *The Tempest*.

In many of these works, Bliss abandoned the use of key signatures: his frequently changing tonal centres and occasionally discordant harmonies often made key signatures inappropriate. Bliss's melodic language, however, presents more of a conundrum. Most of the melodies in, say, *Rout* are diatonic – some are positively romantic. The melodies of *Conversations* are a little more chromatic, but are still based predominantly on major and minor scales. The bare fourth movement – the 'Soliloquy' for cor anglais – is almost Bach-like in its implications of consonant

harmony. Yet in the final work of this short period, *A Colour Symphony*, Bliss rose to his most adventurous yet, launching the final-movement fugue with clear serialist undertones.

In these works we find atypical time signatures, and the emergence of a tendency towards balletic rhythms, likely the consequence of Bliss's exposure to the Ballets Russes, or even the result of a musical discourse with his British contemporaries.⁹⁵ In April 1920, Stravinsky's *Ragtime* for eleven instruments (1918) had received its first London performance, as did the suite from *A Soldier's Tale* three months later. The very title of *Ragtime* had proved attractive to Bliss with his American heritage and Parisian experiences, while *A Soldier's Tale* combined the ragtime and modern dance rhythms which had come to characterise Stravinsky's musical language, and which pervaded the cultural renaissance that surfaced in the wake of the Great War.

This mode of learning, experimentation and stylistic assimilation is clear in Bliss's contemporaneous writings and public lectures, in which he strove to justify his approaches and aspirations. As a result of such progressive procedures, Bliss's early interwar works achieved originality in a way that his pre-Armistice chamber music and songs had not. Now he had developed his use of colour beyond that of nineteenth-century romanticism: there is evidence for this in his very choice of musical forces, his increased obsession with texture and timbre, and the greater virtuosic demands he began to make on performers.

Stephen Banfield has explicitly stated a connection between Bliss's music and 'the abstract tendency of cubist art',⁹⁶ aligning his musical practices with his friendships with artists such as Claude Lovat Fraser and Edward Wadsworth. It was this interest in colour which was ultimately manifested in Bliss's first extended orchestral work, *A Colour Symphony*. Bliss's new, essentially imitative soundscapes were more Parisian than English, even if they did not match the modernity of Stravinsky.

Bliss's British contemporaries, from Bax to Walton, all belong to what Christopher Palmer has described as 'the *Petrushka* generation': a group of composers who found 'the Franco-Russian style of orchestration a seductively spicy and glittering

⁹⁵ Holst's music for the ballet *The Perfect Fool* (contemporaneous with *Rout* and *Conversations*) is striking for its use of seven-beat figures, creating deliberate and agile distortions of triple metres.

⁹⁶ Stephen Banfield, op. cit., 369.

alternative to the Anglo-German tradition which Elgar had been inculcating.⁹⁷ The carnival in *Rout* is clearly indebted to *Petrushka*'s Shrovetide fair, as are many of Bliss's textural innovations, while *A Colour Symphony* presents a curious mélange of elements of Elgar and Stravinsky, in terms of both tonal language and orchestration.

Despite its 'miserable first performance',⁹⁸ *A Colour Symphony* had marked, according to the press reports, 'a new stage in [Bliss's] career ... Some time ago it seemed an open question whether Bliss, with all his talents and facility, would develop as a serious composer ... This Symphony leaves no doubt about it.'⁹⁹ Finally, Bliss had found a rapturous audience. And yet at this, the very moment of his critical recognition, Bliss felt so stifled by England that he began to consider temporary emigration.

What was the real root of so crucial a decision? During the preceding three years, Bliss had been careful not to land heavy blows on the ever-blossoming pastoral school: he regularly came into contact with Vaughan Williams through Reginald Morris, and was certainly aware of the influence exerted by the South Kensington elite, the likes of Hugh Allen among them, who were firm subscribers to the folksong and Tudor revivals. As we have seen, Bliss's music looked in a markedly different direction.

It is conceivable, therefore, that Bliss's departure was hastened by the success of works such as Vaughan Williams's *A Pastoral Symphony*, completed in 1922 and received rapturously in London. This must have seemed to Bliss a triumph for pastoralism, both in the scope and in the very name of the new work. As a schoolboy and student, Bliss had admired the assimilation of English and French voices in Vaughan Williams's music, but now he may well have agreed with Constant Lambert's later assessment that the symphony captured 'a particular type of grey, reflective, English-landscape mood [that] has outweighed the exigencies of symphonic form'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Christopher Palmer, sleeve note for Lyrita SRCD225.

⁹⁸ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 73.

⁹⁹ *The Times*, 8 September 1922, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! a study of music in decline*, 107. Of course, the 'pastoral' in the symphony in claims to refer to the war-torn fields of France, rather than to the English landscape.

However, Vaughan Williams managed an achievement at this time which largely eluded Bliss: he reached out to a broad public. In making his name as a moderate British avant-gardist, Bliss's stylistic alignment – at least in the cosmetic public eye, thanks to the writings of the *Daily Mail* and other critics – was with the European modernists, with Schoenberg, Bartók and Stravinsky. This may have won him a loyal following in some quarters, but not a lasting public affection. A reader of *The Times* would have been used to the commentaries of H. C. Colles, a signed-up member of the pastoral enthusiasts. Consider, for example, this extraordinary review of *A Pastoral Symphony*, surely a blow to Bliss's aesthetic in its sheer ecstasy, not least through its references to natural colour:

One has climbed the hill, and can look away to a horizon which seems infinitely distant as the eye is led to it through infinite gradations of blue ... To me this symphony speaks like that wide Down country in which, because there is no incident, every blade of grass and tuft of moss is an incident ... [Its melodies] are of the stuff of plainsong and folk-song, the blades of grass and tufts of moss, the primitive growth of musical nature.¹⁰¹

Press notices, then, naturally favoured Vaughan Williams, who had distanced himself from the experiments of atonality, and who had become distrustful of the 'superficial flippancy' of the younger generation.¹⁰²

Almost immediately after the Armistice, there emerged a tendency in older societal groups to insist that life prior to the war had been somehow rosier than was truly the case. Bliss was old enough to hear this, yet young enough to know better. Yet the impact of the social freedoms of the early 1920s have since been somewhat exaggerated, for arbitrary groups such as the 'Bright Young Things' only ever represented small coteries in society. Frivolity was a natural response to the horrors of war, although the elimination of repressive mores need not have meant the concomitant abandonment of self-restraint: because of this, some unhappiness ensued, as Bliss found as he nursed a broken heart and his dented pride in a Swiss hotel room.

Since the Armistice, this had been a brief age of pastoral introspection on one hand, and literary modernism on the other.¹⁰³ In many ways, it was the names of

¹⁰¹ Reproduced in H. C. Colles, *Essays and lectures*, 92-94.

¹⁰² See Michael Kennedy, *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 186-192.

¹⁰³ Bliss shared some of the ambitions of the New Bloomsbury group – the desire for a modern frankness, the need for artistic revolution – but his war experiences and hardened personality had left

Edwardian England – Shaw, Forster and Wells – that continued to find the broadest public favour. Of all the so-called modernists, it was perhaps T. S. Eliot who best captured the desolation and doubt of this period. Bliss had sought progress, but had not yet found his destination. In these years, he had remained distanced from most of the predominant trends. He had latched on to groups of like-minded artists, but he had remained essentially isolated from the broader cultural sphere. If he was to achieve lasting success, he would need to find a way to integrate. Unable to concede to the whims of others, emigration and a fresh start seemed a natural choice. On 21 April 1923, he boarded the *SS Aquitania* and set sail for New York.

him impatient with personal indulgence and the persistent connection between new art and old aristocracy.

PART TWO

1923—1945

“...in the second he has obtained his audience
and is trying to develop himself to the fullest extent
compatible with remaining in touch with it...”

America and return

1923—1930

In due course, Bliss spent two years in America, during which time he met Trudy Hoffmann: she became his wife in 1925. The newlyweds returned to London where they made their home in a studio flat in Redcliffe Square and later in a larger house in Hampstead. During these years Bliss's sense of cultural integration grew, and he developed several influential friendships, including with the writer J. B. Priestley. Towards the end of the decade, still haunted by memories of his military service, he set to work on a large choral-orchestral work on the subject of war.

Bliss's decision to leave England for America was hastened by a rare opportunity. His father, having remarried in 1918, wished to show his new family his homeland, and plans were made to move there permanently. Bliss himself had never before been to America, and now, in his early thirties and living in what he had found to be an increasingly parochial London, he was struck by a sudden desire to spread his wings. With the financial security of paternal love, Bliss could now indulge in his own modern Grand Tour, leaving behind Europe and all its associated problems and frustrations.

One senses that Bliss was 'going towards' more than he was 'running from'. Shortly before leaving, he was interviewed for a *Musical Mirror* article in which he expressed his desire to hunt down new experiences:

Modern Music is as young as the film industry, and there should be a great future for the alliance of the two. A man I certainly intend to open negotiations with at Los Angeles is Charles Chaplin. He would make an excellent subject for musical treatment.¹

Bliss's ambitions proved prophetic: although he never met Chaplin nor composed directly for Hollywood, within the fifteen years that followed he would become a dominant figure in British cinematic music, providing one of the first important British film scores in his music for *Things to Come*.

For now, though, the footing seemed less certain. Bliss had been stung by criticism in the four years that had passed since the war, but he had usually ridden through it with customary confidence: indeed, his sudden bout of apparent insecurity was out of character for a man who had just received his most favourable reviews for his first major orchestral work, no matter his own opinion of the quality of its first performance.

The Bliss family arrived in America on 27 April 1923. New York at that time was a major artistic centre, due in no small part to its position as America's trading capital together with the philanthropy which inevitably coexisted. East-coast Americans were determined to challenge the European old world in their cultural expansion, yet this was a young culture that Bliss, with his desperately conventional Edwardian childhood, could not even have imagined. His new experiences would go beyond even his forays into the avant-garde scenes of Paris: this was new art on a truly massive scale.

The family spent some time touring New England together, meeting distant relatives and visiting Brown University in Rhode Island where Francis Bliss had studied in the late 1860s. The change of scene quickly proved an inspiration to Arthur, who almost immediately began work on some new song settings: his first attempt at composition in America, 'Three Jolly Gentlemen', drew on texts by Walter de la

¹ Arthur Bliss, in 'From "Colour Symphony" to Charlie Chaplin' (interview), *Musical Mirror*, April 1923, 104.

Mare. It was published in New York alongside his earlier settings of the three W. H. Davies poems.

A cycle on a more ambitious scale, *The Ballads of the Four Seasons*, was composed during the early summer during a visit to Lake Mohonk in Ulster County, New York. As a group, the songs are remarkable for their simplicity, particularly in the sparseness of their piano accompaniment. Only a year earlier, Bliss had been putting the finishing touches to a symphony: designs on such a scale had faded with some rapidity, with bare fourths and fifths now encouraging the singer to declaim with a primal directness. These settings are led by their words throughout, with no attempt by Bliss to wield them into pre-conceived musical ideas.

In 1922, the scholar Shigeyoshi Obata had published translations of the work of Li Po, an eighth-century Chinese poet, whose words would remain with Bliss for the rest of his life.² Four of Li Po's verses are set in the *Ballads*, while a further five appear later in *The Women of Yueh*: there are yet more in the slowest section of the ambitious *Morning Heroes* of 1930. These texts, rich with emotion, allowed Bliss to explore themes related to war, principally the pain of enforced separation,³ expressed here through the changing of the seasons.

In these *Ballad* settings, Bliss resisted an inclination towards imitation of Chinese modes, opting instead for standard Western tonal relationships: for example, the first song of the cycle, 'Spring', is cast in a warm A flat major. The cycle then follows the time-tested sequential Vivaldian model, ending bitterly with a harsh winter's shriek of displacement, a series of marching low Ds clashing subtly with a fading E flat major triad above to accompany a piercing display of vocal torment. In between, the optimistic 'Summer' section sees the protagonist voyaging towards the object of their desires, fittingly, across a lake. 'Autumn' is the most militaristic and mechanical of the songs, with textual descriptions of an enemy on the battlefield and dissonant unrest in the piano accompaniment.

² Modern scholars believe that Li Po was of Turkish descent: several sources chart his reckless, alcohol-fuelled lifestyle, which led to his death by drowning after falling from a boat in an attempt to touch the moon's reflection. It is this tendency towards wild romanticism that has earned him the sobriquet of 'the Chinese Byron' (see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The romantic generation of modern Chinese writers*, 75).

³ This theme resurfaced in the Li Po setting in *Morning Heroes*.

After leaving New York with his family in August, Bliss travelled on to Vancouver by train and then toured through the Rocky Mountains to San Francisco. It was in San Francisco that Bliss met Albert Elkus, and began a lifelong friendship that would prove profitable many years later. The Blisses continued to California, where the family made good an earlier arrangement to settle in Montecito, a suburb to the south of Santa Barbara. It would be a serendipitous choice.

Despite its city status, and its densely populated urban centre, Santa Barbara and the surrounding county was, and remains, an essentially rural provincial outpost of Los Angeles, with the surrounding countryside providing rich agricultural land for the production of oranges, lemons and olives. The great prosperity of the region owed much to industry and entrepreneurship, although it was not only local wealth that contributed to Santa Barbara's desirability. Climate was also an important factor: a south-facing plain lined to the north by the Santa Ynez Mountains ensures a microclimate of low winds and high temperatures. For these reasons, the area attracted affluent migrants from all over America, including winter visitors from the more northerly New York and Boston.

Now, as he had done in London, Bliss threw himself into cultural life with some vigour, contributing articles to the local press and teaching music classes. However, the essential provincialism of the place could not fully sustain him, and he made arrangements to return to New York for the winter.

Winter travel

In October 1923, Bliss visited Boston and Philadelphia to hear orchestras under Monteux and Stokowski: these were inspirational experiences which provided the initial stimulus for a later work, the *Introduction and Allegro*. While accompanying Frank Bridge to the Berkshire Music Festival in Massachusetts, he met for the first time Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: she later became a reliable patron for Bliss, as she did for many other composers of chamber music.

Bliss reached New York on 11 November, where his second Li Po cycle, *The Women of Yueh* was performed for the first time. The work was started around the

same time as *The Ballads of the Four Seasons*, and had probably been completed in Santa Barbara during the autumn. The instrumentation – of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, string quartet, double bass, glockenspiel, triangle and side drum, with soprano soloist – signalled a return to Bliss's sound experiments of post-Armistice London, and now reveals a composer with realistic ambitions of the potential scale of performance of his music. He would have to start again, and build his name from relative obscurity.

In *The Women of Yueh*, as in the *Ballads*, Chinese pastiche is avoided throughout. The music is otherwise highly descriptive, as are the Li Po texts, which attempt to capture the personality of each female subject. These are carefully drawn portraits with a timeless, transnational dimension: so familiar seems the subject of each study, that elements of each would have been recognisable to Bliss at once, as they are still to present minds. This was surely the attraction: indeed, we might even posit that the composer now had behind him yet another failed love affair.

With the first performance negotiated, Bliss set about revelling in the culture of New York: he did this in the company of his brother, Howard, who arrived from England in December. To Bliss's presumed disappointment, though, in searching for suitable inspiration, the New York art music trend in the early 1920s tended towards the German tradition. Many prominent practitioners and educators had spent some time studying in Germany, replicating an experience familiar to Bliss from the England of his formative years. However, composers such as George Chadwick – who had a long association with the New England Conservatory in Boston – assimilated a broad range of styles into his music, despite a later tendency to ape the lush harmonies and textures of Strauss.

The thrills of New York were plenty, but by Christmas Bliss was exhausted and had conceded that he 'could never do serious work' surrounded by such distractions. It is revealing, too, that in reflecting upon this intense period more than forty years later, he chose to focus on the women that he encountered, and specifically on his apparent incompatibility with them. These were 'rich girls', with 'seemingly inexhaustible wealth' and who 'appeared free of responsibilities'. For Bliss, they were

‘intoxicating’, but they also ‘quickly enfeeble[d], and indeed stifle[d] artistic ambition’.⁴

Arthur and Howard travelled back to Santa Barbara in January 1924, and here the two brothers enjoyed a period of rest. Excitement reappeared the following month, however, when the notable Canadian soprano Éva Gauthier arrived in Santa Barbara, and Bliss accompanied her in a recital at the Montecito Country Club.⁵ On 21 March, a production of *King Solomon* began its run at the city’s Potter Theatre, for which Bliss had supplied some incidental music: though unable to sustain his driving ambition of post-Armistice London, he was certainly still keen to prove himself an adequate musician, and to forge for himself the makings of a new career in America.

Love fulfilled

The summer of 1924 was to be a momentous season for Arthur Bliss. For six months or more he had been a man of relative leisure, engaged only in giving occasional chamber recitals to the Community Arts Association with Howard and the violinist Roderick White, and preparing a local chorus for a performance of *Elijah*. Otherwise, he was free to drive down the coast road as often as he pleased, to take in a number of orchestral concerts at the Hollywood Bowl.

He soon rediscovered his love of acting, and began rehearsals for a semi-professional production of Connelly and Kaufman’s *Beggar on Horseback*: these were to be the inaugural performances at Santa Barbara’s new Lobero Theatre. The play, a parody of the expressionist parables which had achieved popularity in the wake of the Great War, warns against the dangers of bartering one’s artistic talents for commercial gain. A similarly idealistic streak still surely ran through Bliss. He took the part of Neil McRae, a sensitive classical composer who aspires to greatness but who ekes out a living by writing simple jazz standards. Bliss won the part thanks to his undoubted dramatic ability – honed in the country estates of England – as well as his ability to play the piano.

⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 77.

⁵ For a flavour of the contemporaneous critical reaction to Gauthier’s promotion of jazz and neoclassicism, see ‘Musical Notes from Abroad’, *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 872-75.

Playing opposite him in the part of the 'poor girl', the composer's true love, was twenty-year-old Trudy Hoffmann, a Radcliffe College student home in Carpinteria for the summer. Their dramatic roles proved prophetic. Bliss later recalled the ease he immediately felt with Trudy:

At our first meeting her charm was immediate and winning, and I began to look forward eagerly to rehearsing our scenes together. I had been in love many times in my life, and had been made unhappy and disturbed by each experience. The emotional crises always came when I had to make the final decision as to whether marriage would bring fulfilment to life, or an eventual frustration ... I knew that I had at last met the girl who not only allowed me to be truly myself, but who could make me a more worthwhile man and better artist.⁶

Trudy, twelve years Bliss's junior, had been born in Massachusetts where her father, Ralph, had taught German and Latin at a private boys' school. From there the family moved to Kansas, where her adventurous parents found peace away from the domineering intellectualism of New England and where Trudy spent much of her childhood. The lure of a better teaching post then brought the Hoffmanns to Santa Barbara, where Ralph, a skilled naturalist and botanist, retired to curate the region's natural history museum.

It was during 1924 that Bliss produced his only setting of the words of Thomas Hardy, although it was not published until 1926.⁷ The romantic might propose that this setting of 'The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House' was stimulated by a significant personal event, given the pervading atmosphere of warmth contained in Hardy's two short stanzas: one might read some significance into the concurrence of Bliss's meeting Trudy and his decision to set the lines of Hardy.⁸ Here is a delicate portrayal of a fleeting moment from rural England, demonstrating the continuation of a clear tendency for Bliss towards the English poetic tradition, and specifically poets of rural England: at the same time, Bliss began work on a setting of Housman's 'When I was One and Twenty', published later by Ricordi in New York.

These two songs share elements of musical style. 'The Fallow Deer' was originally conceived to have string quartet accompaniment, and the resulting piano part would fit that idiom well. Its jaunty bitonality is suggestive of the earlier *Three Romantic*

⁶ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 82-4.

⁷ The autograph manuscript, now in the Bliss Archive, is on Carl Fischer paper, a New York company.

⁸ The romantic here is unashamedly the present author, whose own parents were united in part by a mutual love of Hardy.

Songs; the simplicity of accompaniment in 'When I was One and Twenty' looks back further still, as far even as the conventional modulations of Bliss's undergraduate string quartet. But these two songs are vastly different in human feeling, with the Housman text rueing a love lost and a heart broken, only to be supplanted by the warm optimism of the Hardy. Could it be that the two songs were composed one before and one after Bliss's meeting his future wife?

If there are any doubts as to the connection between the Hardy song and the courtship of Trudy, there is surely none surrounding Bliss's setting of Tennyson's 'At the Window'. The verses abound with floral tributes to a beloved, and are underpinned by a busy piano accompaniment which facilitates a transition from shades of minor to unambiguous major. By September, Arthur and Trudy were engaged, and Trudy returned to Radcliffe until December to continue with her studies. By Christmas, she had decided to return permanently to Santa Barbara to prepare for a wedding the following summer.

Bliss's new commitment to his life in California is evident in a letter he wrote to Ulrich Nisbet in October 1924: 'I have a quaint appointment here as Director of Music [at the Community Arts Association] which may keep me here for several years'.⁹ His thoughts were turning to a long-term future in America, a sure indication of a growing contentment with his new life, but also of his somewhat diminished ambitions: he was now producing little new music of any note, and the music that was performed had not yet received the critical praise he might have hoped for.

This lack of artistic determination is perhaps unsurprising after the turmoil of the Great War, still surely fresh in Bliss's mind: personal happiness was, for the moment, more important than professional ambition. Andrew Burn has assessed that, in Trudy, Bliss 'found the ideal and sympathetic partner who would create for him a secure domestic happiness upon which his art could flourish. In Bliss's development as an artist, marriage was the final component.'¹⁰ For now, his interest in cultural progress found an outlet in the articles he wrote for the *Santa Barbara Morning Press*, for which he became the music critic in November 1924.

⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Ulrich Nisbet, 21 October 1924, facsimile in Bliss Archive.

¹⁰ Andrew Burn, 'From Rebel to Romantic: the music of Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 132 (1991), 384.

During the last weeks of 1924, Bliss travelled to Massachusetts to visit Trudy at Radcliffe, attending concerts with her in Boston and during a week's stay in New York. In the New Year he took her to the Hollywood Bowl, and went on a camping expedition across the Mojave Desert with the Hoffmanns. They married at the Santa Barbara Old Mission on 1 June, and honeymooned for a week in Carmel, California. After, the newlyweds travelled to San Francisco and onwards by train to New York. From there on 13 June 1925, they sailed aboard the *SS Orbita* for a new life in England. The decision had been swift and momentous.

Return to London

Three months after returning to his homeland, Bliss reflected formally on his two years away when he submitted an article to *The Sackbut*. America, it was plain, had left the Old World behind in its apparently unquenchable desire for art music. One wonders whether Bliss had already begun to question his bold decision to return to England with his new wife:

There is one distinctive feature of American audiences. They have not yet had time to acquire deep prejudices, judging rather by a simple criterion as to whether a work interests or moves them, irrespective of whether it is what their fathers and grandfathers would have called 'music'. If it be new and unfamiliar music, the audience, as well as the composer, will have the undoubted advantage of knowing that the presentation will take place under the best possible conditions.¹¹

This is an approach Bliss brought to his own music later in his career, resolutely pursuing his own artistic interests, and producing works in forms and styles that he and he alone wished to.

If Bliss had hoped to return to an England free from the grip of the pastoralists, he would have been disappointed. Vaughan Williams – to whom, it must be noted, it seems Bliss held no personal antipathy – was now every part the 'national' composer, overseeing the publications of both *Songs of Praise* and the *Oxford Book of Carols*.¹² When the third edition of the *Grove Dictionary* appeared in 1929, edited

¹¹ Arthur Bliss, 'Music in America: an impression', *The Sackbut*, September 1925, 30-1, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 50-2.

¹² Through this book of carols – which included the tune 'Greensleeves' – the Tudor revival 'and its overtones of a rural utopia' were disseminated to a receptive audience (see Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English musical renaissance, 1840-1940: constructing a national music*, 99).

by H. C. Colles, it held Vaughan Williams aloft as the very leader of the current generation of 'young' composers, a musical father figure for those that had returned battle-scarred from the trenches.¹³ This was a eulogy with no bounds.

Trudy was keen to aid her husband's reintegration into his local cultural activity. Her contribution was significant, as John Sudgen has reflected: 'The process of re-establishing themselves in London's artistic circles had begun; but, more importantly, the invaluable part played by Trudy Bliss in gracing and furthering the career of her husband was also under way.'¹⁴ Bliss's own admiration for his wife's personal fortitude was clear:

Trudy had never seen England, and I know that those first years there must have tried her courage a good deal. Instead of the beauty of California there was the grim aspect of Redcliffe Square, in which we found a studio-flat: instead of the comfort of her family and the companionship of college friends she had to face the unknown groups with whom I had been brought up. Whatever nostalgia she must have frequently felt she bravely minimised, and our life was varied and happy.¹⁵

Trudy allowed Arthur to draw a double bar line across the most troubled period of his life. She enabled him to consider life, art and creativity free from the existential constraints of introspection. She too sought musical integration by taking lessons in singing and music theory at the Royal College of Music, while Bliss himself taught at the College for a time.

One significant British development during Bliss's two-year absence concerned the steady growth of the BBC. By 1926 it had acquired more than two million license holders, and had established itself as an important institution in the nation's cultural activity. Further, this had positive effects within the world of music which were not necessarily acknowledged at the time: for example, the Promenade Concerts had begun to experience significant commercial pressures, but by passing responsibility for the concert series to the BBC a national institution was secured.

Arguments concerning the musical role of the BBC raged for the rest of the decade: this was no surprise, given the polar positions of concert promoters on one hand and a state-subsidised, not-for-profit public service on the other. The acquisition of the Proms was a canny move, for it then allowed the Corporation to promote itself, with

¹³ H. C. Colles (ed.), *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* v, 463.

¹⁴ John Sudgen, *Bliss*, 45.

¹⁵ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 84.

some justification, as the world's most ambitious concert organisation. With Percy Pitt at the helm as a musical adviser, the BBC also became an important vehicle for introducing modern works – by Bartók, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, for example – to the widest audience then imaginable: this was more worthy of note, then, than a quick run-through of *Rout* in an upstairs room in Piccadilly.

Contrary to concerns which had been expressed during the first years of the BBC, the broadcasting of live music served to promote and strengthen the public appetite for concert attendance. As a partner to the summer Promenades, the BBC organised its own winter series at Queen's Hall, which was welcomed by London society. A *Musical Times* editorial in February 1928 reported:

At each concert I have found myself surrounded by refreshingly unsophisticated folk. Evidently they had heard orchestras at home, and had decided to go and see one – for they took in almost as much pleasure through the eye as through the ear. At first one thought these hearers were Promenaders who had stolen back to their old haunt, but clearly they were quite new hands.¹⁶

As Bliss himself later discovered during the 1930s, fears that broadcast music would create a nation of passive consumers rather than active music-makers were largely unfounded.

Under John Reith the Corporation became divorced from both the state and the market: it now attempted to set the national cultural agenda, and to define its own role in performing this function. Reith's strategy, though, owed more to Victorian morality than to the aesthetics of modernity. For now, this was an undemocratic vision.¹⁷ And yet, its social tone notwithstanding, the BBC proved an effective vehicle for cultural dissemination. Perhaps most importantly, live music was now not restricted to the rich, and 'the canon' became an accessible commodity. A new, critical audience encompassing all social classes was formed: it is this, perhaps more than anything else, which improved the standard of musical performance in Britain. Thanks to his close engagement with the BBC, Bliss was now able to reach audiences previously unimagined.

¹⁶ 'Ad Libitum', *Musical Times* 69 (1928), 123. This is a source of some pride for the present writer, for it was around this time that his own grandfather, a poorly-educated east Londoner, began to attend concerts and develop his own understanding of music. This is a journey which has culminated in the preparation of the present study.

¹⁷ See D. L. LeMahieu, *A culture for democracy: mass culture and the cultivated mind in Britain between the wars*, 141-154.

New intellectual opportunities and an increased potential for the dissemination of ideas now began to threaten the ruling elite. The pastoralists had retreated to the rural idyll, while the high modernists climbed to aesthetic ivory towers. Bliss's interest in broadcast technology, combined with a keen ability to detect popular instincts, enabled him to find a middle ground. Throughout the 1920s, aided by his settled domestic situation, he began to integrate with the mainstream of England's cultural society. As the years went by, he worked his way into positions from which he was able to set a cultural agenda, seeking moderation between high culture and low commercialism.

A return to creative urges

In the autumn of 1925 the Blissés undertook a tour of the West Country – ‘before starting on intensive work, I wanted to show Trudy a little of England’¹⁸ – which included a memorable afternoon as guests at the Dorset home of Thomas Hardy. At the end of the year Bliss visited Zürich to sit on the selection jury for the 1926 International Society for Contemporary Music Festival, a sure indication that, despite his American sabbatical, his growing reputation had not been significantly affected.

Throughout this period of changing personal circumstances, Bliss's compositional output had been small. During his stay in America, he had produced no more than a handful of songs and short pieces for piano. However, his live experiences of the orchestras in Philadelphia and Boston had clearly been inspirational, for in 1926 he set to work on two orchestral compositions, dedicated to Stokowski and Monteux, the conductors he had seen at work in those cities.

In the spring of 1926 he began composing *Introduction and Allegro*, which he completed on 23 June. It was Bliss's intention to construct the entire work from a single theme: his principal motif allowed him to exercise his penchant for variation, development and musical evolution (ex. 14). First heard in the opening bars on harp, double bass and low woodwinds, the simple theme ascends and descends at the top of a D harmonic minor scale, before reaching upwards once again through the scale

¹⁸ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 85.

to a sharpened mediant, thus allowing an exploration of the relationships between minor and major. Here, Bliss allowed himself to depart from the experiments of the early 1920s. In the *Introduction*, a series of ninths recall the romanticism of the nineteenth century, with scoring that even in the most Elgarian passages of *A Colour Symphony* Bliss would surely have once scorned.



Ex. 14 Bliss: *Introduction and Allegro*, main theme

Elgar then sits alongside the syncopated rhythms of Stravinsky towards the end of the *Allegro*, yet for the most part, the work seems far from derivative, or at least far less derivative than his pre-American efforts. Now, disparate influences seem to have been assimilated into a confident, individual voice, which speaks through tightly-wrought formal design as much as the musical language contained therein. The impressive evolving counterpoint of the *Allegro* is surely a case in point.

On 18 July 1926, Arthur and Trudy began their personal explorations of the joy of parenthood with the birth of their first daughter, Barbara. Two months later, on 8 September, the *Introduction and Allegro* was performed for the first time at Queen's Hall. By then, Bliss had also finished work on a companion piece, *Hymn to Apollo*, which was premiered by Pierre Monteux and the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam on 26 November.

Monteux had been the first to champion *A Colour Symphony* in America, in concerts in New York and Boston: the dedication of *Hymn to Apollo* acknowledges this, and renders the work yet another indirect product of Bliss's American sabbatical. The work's roots may, however, extend further back still. The Bliss family, complete with the family's new addition, had recently stayed at Swanage, where 'thirty or so years [before] my brother and I used to spend part of our holidays'.¹⁹ Robert Meikle has suggested that the *Hymn*, completed exactly ten years after the death of Kennard Bliss at the Somme, recalls memories of his brother in this 'prayer to the god of healing'.²⁰

¹⁹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 90.

²⁰ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 16.

The first months of 1927 brought more important first performances: *Hymn to Apollo* was heard by a London audience for the first time at Queen's Hall on 27 January, and on 6 April a new cycle, *Four Songs*, was performed at Gotrian Hall. These songs expose more structurally-conservative ambitions, with their four-movement structure closely reminiscent of a classical sonata. The second song, 'Sea Love', employs a characteristically bleak text of Charlotte Mew, which is set by Bliss with complementary starkness for female voice and solo violin. The vocal line is calm and thoughtful, reflecting the subject's poignant contemplations at the water's edge, but it is the violin which captures the full emotional framework. Textural contrast is achieved through sporadically-deployed tremolandos, while frequent leaps in pitch and range ensure that the contrast between vocal and instrumental writing could not be greater. It was now clear that Bliss again wished to explore a full range of timbral possibility.

A chamber assignment

An opportunity soon presented itself. Bliss was now in receipt of sponsorship from Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the famous patroness whose acquaintance he had first made in America. She had asked Bliss to compose a work for her festival of chamber music to be held in Venice in September 1927: the request brought some other indirect excitement as he had not visited the city since childhood. The resulting work, an Oboe Quintet, was composed in the spring of 1927 and was completed by July, for Bliss then spent the rest of the summer visiting family in California with Trudy and Barbara.

Bliss's enthusiasm for the project was heightened on his learning that the new work would be performed by Leon Goossens and the Venetian String Quartet. With works for Stokowski and Monteux only recently behind him, Bliss was continuing to draw inspiration from virtuosic performers as he would do throughout his career, being particularly reliant upon soloists in the preparation of his three mature concertos: he

acknowledged that 'it is always a joy to write with a superlative artist in mind'.²¹ It is no surprise, then, to find in the Oboe Quintet a work of some technical difficulty.

The first movement begins in a state of marked harmonic instability: with no key signature, the two violins lead with tentative thirds (ex. 15). Viola and cello enter at the end of this first phrase with a pair of open fifths: these form a major triad with an added major seventh – a leading, rather than a cadential chord. The first violin's high D adds an augmented fifth, an interval that resurfaces at the very end of the work. These two opening violin phrases are themselves tonally ambiguous, with the second violin part displaying faintly serialistic implications. This is not surprising in itself, given that Bliss had briefly manipulated a nine-note row in the fugue of *A Colour Symphony*, with the effect of implying the use of dodecaphony. Such is the tonal ambiguity in these opening gestures that Bliss may well have had similar intentions here.

The image shows a musical score for the first four bars of the first movement of the Oboe Quintet by Arthur Bliss. The score is for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The tempo is marked 'Assai sostenuto'. The key signature is no sharps or flats. The time signature is 4/4. The first two staves (Violin I and II) play a melodic line with tentativeness, while the Viola and Cello enter at the end of the first phrase with a pair of open fifths. The score is marked with a piano 'p' dynamic.

Ex. 15 Bliss: Oboe Quintet, I, bb. 1-4

As the hesitant introductory section continues, a number of tonal centres are almost established: the harmonies in bars 18 and 19 hint at C major, with a semi-chromatic bass line leading to a colourful second-inversion chord with added sixths at the first entry of the oboe at bar 20. The approach to this cadence sees the texture and range expanding, and the harmonies are striving and romantic: this is typified by the yearning suspension and resolution of the first violin's falling A to G above the oboe's entry. These aspiring quasi-romantic harmonies are used again in the approach to a further climax soon after.

There is little doubt that the first movement ends in the key of B. But is this B major or B minor? We hear the primary theme – with its contradictory thirds – on the viola,

²¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 91.

and this is then handed to the first violin; both are accompanied by a triad of B minor in the remaining string parts (ex. 16). The final statement, however, is left to unaccompanied oboe, which too uses both major and minor thirds. Here, in a fleeting example of major-minor equivocation, Bliss has simply inverted one of the key characteristics of jazz: the ‘blue’ note here is not the D natural, but the D sharp.

Ex. 16 Bliss: Oboe Quintet, I, bb. 181-184

The oboe is unquestionably the solo instrument throughout the work, rather than one of five equal voices. Indeed, there are structural elements of the Classical concerto to be found here: the first and third movements both open with passages for tutti strings, and there are many other sections in which the oboe does not participate. Innovative and traditional textural procedures are found cheek by jowl in the second movement. From bar 46, for example, Bliss creates a harp-like effect with string pizzicatos to accompany a probing melody: falling major sevenths pass seamlessly between the two violin parts, with this exchange augmented by viola and cello ostinato-like figures beneath (ex. 17).

The most striking feature of the final movement is its very last chord. It is a second-inversion chord of F minor with an added D flat, the heavily-emphasised dominant in the bass creating a particularly unusual and unnatural cadence. This added sixth produces a biting discord which is, of course, never resolved. The final chord is preceded by a lengthy cadenza-like coda for oboe; this passage is frequently interrupted by equally cacophonous interpolations from the string quartet, some of which also contain marked intervals of a minor sixth. It is a salient fact that the primary feature of the very first full chord of the work is, of course, a jarring augmented fifth.

The organisation of the final movement relies entirely upon its thematic structure: indeed, there is no harmonic unification at all. In the absence of a clear tonal scheme, melody is elevated to the position of determining structural element. The finale is also of significance within the broader Bliss canon, because it contains the only quotation of a folk theme, the Irish ‘Connelly’s Jig’. Perhaps Bliss understood that a well-placed folksong would reflect positively the pastoral associations of the oboe. It is also possible that the quotation represents a disgruntled – and non-English – acknowledgement of the then-powerful pastoral movement: amusing, then, that Elizabeth Lutyens would dismissively categorise any leanings to the pastoral as ‘folky-wolky modal melodies on the cor anglais’.²²

The image shows a musical score for an Oboe Quintet, measures 46-49. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. The Oboe part (top staff) has a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a slur over a phrase. The Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello parts provide a rhythmic accompaniment with a repeating eighth-note pattern, marked 'pizz.' and 'p'.

Ex. 17 Bliss: Oboe Quintet, II, bb. 46-49

The overall impression of Bliss’s new quintet was one that placed him closer to Lutyens, then a pupil of Harold Darke at the Royal College, than to his more established contemporaries. Those composers who had escaped the horrors of war by virtue of their very youth, Walton among them, had continued the experimental spirit of the early 1920s, and persisted with more internationally-directed approaches. Most importantly, their instinct was to move far away from perceived Edwardian failures, which were felt to be embodied still in part by the new establishment of Vaughan Williams and Allen.

The tide of modernity could not be held back: by the end of the decade, pastoralism began to slip from its pedestal. This was recognised by Robin Hull: ‘It appears that the more extravagant phases of the folk-song revival in England are now at an end ...

²² Elizabeth Lutyens, quoted in Meirion Harries and Susie Harries, *A pilgrim soul: the life and work of Elizabeth Lutyens*, 53. It was Lutyens, of course, who coined the phrase ‘cow-pat music’, though this epithet has since been much misquoted.

It has been exalted to a position it was never intended to occupy, and it may be only a matter of time before the present exponents recover their sense of proportion'. Bliss, always proportionate, even clinical, was never one to pander to the trends immediately around him. Yet he had already returned to antiquity with his *Hymn to Apollo*, and his next work, explicitly entitled *Pastoral*, seemed to suggest a new discomfort with an increasingly mechanical age. As pastoralism loosened its grip, was the quotation of 'Connelly's Jig' a sign that Bliss's steadfast opposition was starting to thaw? Was a catharsis near? As British music began to embrace progress at last, was Bliss now content to ride in the slipstream of others?

As Bliss was completing his Oboe Quintet, H. E. Wrotham felt confident enough to suggest that its composer had long been something of an outsider to the musical establishment, even if this may have been a result of his abrasive personality:

[Bliss's] Rugbian training armed him with a self-confidence which his contemporaries, so 'tis whispered, found irritating; whilst these admitted his cleverness they refused to believe that here was another Saul come to help in delivering English music from the foreign bondage that had only been riveted tighter by Sir Edward Elgar.²³

Now he no longer had ambitions to be that 'Saul': having been an isolated figure before taking solace in America, he was now willing to improve his skills of diplomacy, if not perform a wholesale conversion to pastoralism. His newly-maturing style did not deviate significantly from the Elgarian lineage that he still considered important despite its German associations, as the dedication of another new work soon confirmed.

Looking back in 1966, Frank Howes placed Bliss and Walton in the Elgar camp, away from the so-called pastoralists:

These composers, whom I have classified as belonging to the nationalist succession, Butterworth, Moeran, Warlock, Hadley, Rubbra, and Finzi, would admit the designation, since they have escaped the German bondage of the two previous generations: they have drunk at English springs in the shape of madrigals and folk-song; they have been strengthened by the Bach revival, have been sensitive to English poetry and kept clear of foreign influences (some might say to their loss). They are unlike Elgar, Bliss, Walton, and Rawsthorne, whose Englishness is of some other sort that one would not label pastoral.²⁴

²³ H. E. Wrotham, 'Arthur Bliss', *The Sackbut* 7 (1927), 252.

²⁴ Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 262.

Howes was willing to admit a definite Englishness in his second group, but not an indigenous, pastoral Englishness. Nor did he imply explicitly that the derivation of Bliss, Walton and Rawsthorne is German: rather, the suggestion is of an inclination towards the progressive. For Howes it was the pastoralists who belonged to the 'nationalist succession' – yet must the two really be intertwined so unyieldingly?

European adventures

On 11 September 1927, Bliss was in Venice to hear the first performance of the Oboe Quintet: the programme was soon repeated in Vienna, where Alban Berg praised the work warmly. The quintet undoubtedly marks the emergence of an assured artistic voice. Conventional harmony, while not entirely rejected, is rather adapted to create the impression of profound tonal instability. Gone are the romantic melodies sometimes prevalent even in works such as *Rout* or *Conversations*: these are replaced by themes which hover between diatonicism and chromaticism, with accompanimental harmonies which are highly dissonant. Serene passages give way to others of extraordinary textural violence. Darkness was still stirring in Bliss's creative personality.

Bliss continued to teach at the Royal Academy of Music throughout 1928, pausing in the spring to take a family holiday in Sicily. On returning to London, the family moved from their flat in Redcliffe Square to East Heath Lodge, a larger property in Hampstead which provided Arthur with a separate study. Now the Blissés had surely arrived: a spacious residence, consumer goods, foreign holidays – this was the desirable lifestyle portrayed in the burgeoning popular media. The Sicilian vacation had an extended legacy, too, for it was this visit that inspired his next work, *Pastoral: lie strewn the white flocks*, commissioned by Harold Brooke. Bliss recalled:

It was at the site ... of the classical fountain of Arethusa, a copy of the *Idylls* of Theocritus in my pocket, that I found the theme for my choral work. The southern light, the goat herds, the sound of a pipe, all evoked the image of some classical, pastoral scene. I began to collect a short anthology of poems which should depict a Sicilian day from dawn to evening.²⁵

²⁵ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 93.

The title and the theme of the work represent a move towards the rural: the words of Theocritus would be used again later in Bliss's career.²⁶ His predilection for the classics may be observed in his choice of texts for *Pastoral*, and he also drew upon the words of a friend, the poet Robert Nichols.²⁷

The source of the Nichols texts – a 1917 volume entitled *Ardours and Endurances* – is striking for its use of classical allusions in response to mechanical warfare. Nichols has the demigod Pan resting to a choir of water nymphs – set by Bliss for female chorus – gently soothing a group of sorrowful sons, and offering them 'dreams lovelier than sleep'. The juxtaposition of war with gentle rest is clear, and seemed particularly attractive to Bliss, still haunted by the nightmares of his war service. He soon began work on a project designed to provide him with catharsis, in which he again returned to Nichols's war-inspired volume.

This, then, was not an explicitly Arcadian pastoral. Indeed, some of the literary sources in this 'anthology-cantata' were from beyond English shores. With this skilful anthologising, Bliss was preparing – perhaps even consciously – for the work which would crown the decade, *Morning Heroes*, another multi-source work which required considerable textual dexterity in assimilating various themes and historical styles.

In the *Pastoral*, Bliss opened with Ben Jonson, and moved through John Fletcher, Poliziano and Theocritus before concluding with the Nichols verses. In his settings, Bliss called upon a string orchestra, with solo flute and timpani, and chorus with mezzo-soprano soloist. The setting of Fletcher's 'Hymn to Pan' finds that chorus in full voice with homophonic declamations, the primary rhythmic interest being confined to the string band. Generally, though, the mood is far calmer, as is befitting of the instrumental forces deployed, and the chorus is frequently heard unaccompanied.

This 'pastoral', its very rurality stated in its title, was surely something of a semantic risk for Bliss, perhaps more so given that he chose Elgar as its dedicatee. Later

²⁶ The subtitle, *Lie strewn the white flocks*, comes from 'Empedocles on Etna', a poem by Matthew Arnold which was considered for use but ultimately not used.

²⁷ Thanks to Bliss's academic interest in history and literature, he saw merit in Nichols's classical models.

scholars – Jerrold Northrop Moore and Michael Kennedy among them – have cloaked Elgar’s rurality in an unambiguously positive light: during the 1920s, though, this was not necessarily the case. Elgar’s very association with the countryside, with the landscape, now made him seem historically distant, bound to the defunct idealism of English identity. Elgar was not a ‘pastoralist’ in the ‘modern’ sense, and – the briefest of oboe quotation aside – neither was Bliss. Rather, this association with rural England only served to reinforce Elgar’s seemingly outmoded musical character, one that was built on now-irrelevant themes of chivalry, pageantry and anachronistic imperialism.

Commercially, though, the naming of Bliss’s *Pastoral* showed some nous, in that it is one of several interwar works to contain the word ‘pastoral’ in its title.²⁸ Yet, as we have seen, this is not an explicitly English pastoral, in neither its music nor its Sicilian inspiration. However, the *Pastoral* implies a preference for the country over the city, and sits within a cultural canon of romantic affection for rural contexts: here, nature offers a beguiling alternative to the modernity of the city. For Bliss’s generation, this modernity had been manifested in the mechanical warfare of the trenches, and some of the greatest literary figures either to emerge from or perish in that conflict frequently resorted to rural allusions to mitigate the horrors of infantry life. Bliss himself recalled the stark contrasts between battle and the natural world:

I found in France, as so many others did, that the appreciation of a moment’s beauty had been greatly intensified by the sordid contrast around: one’s senses were so much more sharply on the alert for sights and sounds that went unnoticed in peacetime because taken so for granted. But a butterfly alighting on a trench parapet, a thrush’s songs at ‘stand to’, a sudden rainbow, became infinitely precious phenomena, and indeed the sheer joy of being alive was the more relished for there being the continual possibility of sudden death.²⁹

This is a visceral pastoralism which did not require a response in folksong. It is unsentimental, a simple contrast to the mechanical realities of daily life. It is almost anti-pastoral, with natural beauty sitting beside the grim truth, as Thomas Hardy explored through Tess, the progressive heroine who launched this survey. Bliss’s appreciation of the natural world is free from national boundaries: his experience is not Arcadian, but of the world.

²⁸ See Eric Saylor, “‘It’s Not Lambkins Frisking At All’: English Pastoral Music and the Great War”, *Musical Quarterly* 91 (2008), 40.

²⁹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 36. For a broader perspective on rural allusions during the Great War, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and modern memory*, 230-69.

A rift healed

Bliss finished work on his *Pastoral* on 5 April 1929, and it was performed for the first time on 8 May. This was the work, then, which through a carefully-judged dedication lifted the estrangement between Bliss and Elgar, a rift which had begun after the first performance of *A Colour Symphony* in 1922. Elgar was delighted by such an honour. Indeed, on hearing the broadcast of the first performance, Elgar wrote to Bliss with great enthusiasm:

Under conditions far from good I listened to the performance of the *Pastoral* you so kindly dedicated to me: the transmission or reception (I know nothing of the workings of the BBC with aerial sprites) was not good. But I could judge that your work is on a large and fine scale, and I like it exceedingly.³⁰

The *Pastoral* marked a change of direction for Bliss: he would not attempt a purely instrumental work for another three years.

It was around this time that he met J. B. Priestley, a future collaborator: like Bliss he was a Cambridge graduate and a veteran of the Great War. Priestley had also recently moved to Hampstead with his family, taking a house at 27 Well Walk. A friendship blossomed, formed through tennis and billiards, as well as the appreciation and discussion of music and literature.³¹ They were of a similar age, and both had young families. Fame was on the horizon for Priestley, who in 1929 saw the publication of his breakthrough novel *The Good Companions*. The theme of this weighty volume – the adventures of a group of travelling players – anticipates the basic scenario of a later Bliss-Priestley operatic collaboration, *The Olympians*. Priestley had also by then completed *Angel Pavement*, a sepia-tinted, sub-Dickensian portrayal of contemporary London life.

Substantive cultural integration was approaching for both men, and yet both seemed destined ultimately to remain on the margins of the English cultural establishment.³² Priestley at least achieved huge popular success, but a temperament of tetchiness shared by Priestley and Bliss has been furthered as a potential reason for a lack of prolonged critical acclaim. A more compelling case for this, however, is that they both worked across genres – and critical suspicion is often directed at such all-

³⁰ Edward Elgar, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 9 May 1929, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 95.

³¹ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 100.

³² The title of one of Priestley's volumes of memoirs, *Margin Released*, is telling.

encompassing creative personalities. Indeed, Bliss soon began work on a choral-orchestral composition, *Morning Heroes*, which defied classification.

For now, though, another anthology beckoned. In *Pastoral*, Bliss had commanded his 'short anthology' to be declaimed by a mezzo-soprano. His next work also employed a solo voice, this time a baritone. The accompanying forces were again small, and Bliss drew once more upon texts by more than one poet. Similarly, the outdoors provided inspiration for this work, which also confirmed a gradual increase in output from the more fallow days of the middle of the decade.

The direct source of inspiration was a painting, as Bliss recalled: 'The idea of the *Serenade* came to me one day in 1929, as I sat in a gallery looking at a picture (was it a Fragonard?) in which a pleasure-loving group frolicked in one of those romantic gardens'.³³ Jean-Honoré Fragonard is best remembered for his rococo paintings of intimate romance, many of which are set in luxuriant outdoor locations in keeping with the opulence of the fading Ancien Régime. *The Swing* is one of the best examples of his work, in which a young coquette entices a suitor concealed in thick woodland undergrowth. This scenario appealed to Bliss:

I thought – why not revive the tradition of the vocal serenata, in which the lover himself sings his songs of courtship? In these four movements, therefore, I first introduce the serenader himself as a somewhat swashbuckling and cocksure fellow, and then let him sing a setting of Spenser's sonnet 'Fair is my Love'. In the third movement his lady is depicted, and in the fourth, a second song is addressed to her, and she is praised in the words of Sir J. Wooton's *Tune on my pipe the praises of love*.³⁴

Fittingly, the work is dedicated to Trudy. The text draws upon classical English love verses, dating from comfortably before the time of Fragonard: the Spenser sonnet is from *Amoretti* of 1595,³⁵ while Wooton's pipe tune is from *England's Helicon* of 1600. This is Modern English verse, and modern courtship in its ribald youth.

This glimpse of Tudor England is set in a thoroughly twentieth-century manner, with Latin rhythms suggestive even of Bliss's younger contemporaries. The choice of text places Bliss into a tradition of Warlock, Moeran and even Vaughan Williams with an acknowledged interest in the Elizabethan, even if the resulting music is closer to that

³³ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 95-6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁵ Vaughan Williams also set passages of Spenser's *Epithalamion*, for five baritones.

of Walton or Lambert. Bliss was no Tudor revivalist, but the leanings of a classical scholar never entirely left him. The *Serenade* was first performed at Queen's Hall on 18 March 1930, the solo part sung by Roy Henderson with Malcolm Sargent conducting. Two weeks later came news from California, where Francis Bliss had died after a short illness.

His father's death proved a spur. Since the end of the Great War, Bliss had been plagued by

frequent nightmares; they all took the same form. I was still there in the trenches with a few men; we knew the armistice had been signed, but we had been forgotten; so had a section of the Germans opposite. It was as though we were both doomed to fight on till extinction. I used to wake with horror.³⁶

He had been commissioned by the committee of the Norfolk and Norwich Festival to produce a work for their 1930 season and, in his new studio at Hampstead, he set to work on his 'choral symphony' *Morning Heroes*. This was the most extensive concert work that Bliss ever composed, setting yet another anthology – of poets as historically diverse as Homer, Li Po and Wilfred Owen – in an hour-long requiem for orator, chorus and large orchestra. He hoped that the process of composing *Morning Heroes* would serve as a catharsis for his nightmares of war: indeed, he later claimed that 'if the externalising of an obsession can be thought of as a cure, then in my case I have proved its efficacy.'³⁷

In anticipation of the premiere at Norwich, an article appeared in the October 1930 number of the *Musical Times* on a 'New Symphony' by Arthur Bliss.³⁸ The author bemoaned the lack of serious art music which dealt retrospectively with the Great War, but went on to laud Bliss's new work for attempting to remedy this oversight. Bliss was also praised for refusing to use his music as a vehicle for attacking the social conditions widely seen as responsible for the war, that is, the repressive naivety of Edwardian England.

Bliss's dedication of *Morning Heroes* to Kennard, the brother killed on the Somme in 1916, leaves no doubt as to the inspiration for the work: the loss of Kennard, alongside the nightmares described so vividly in *As I Remember*. Indeed, Andrew

³⁶ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸ H. G., "'Morning Heroes': A New Symphony by Arthur Bliss", *Musical Times* 71 (1930), 881-86.

Burn has described *Morning Heroes* as Bliss's 'requiem for his brother'.³⁹ Some formal questions, however, remain unanswered. Two potentially conflicting descriptions of the work have been presented above: a symphony by the 1930 *Musical Times* article, and a requiem by Andrew Burn. Other analyses, in liner notes and elsewhere, have labelled the work an oratorio, with its emphasis on the choral.

The claim of *Morning Heroes* as oratorio is one that is tempting to dismiss instantly, given Bliss's wholesale rejection of the genre in his infamous diatribe to the Society of Women Musicians of 1921, alongside its decidedly Teutonic origins. Besides, the work can in no way be considered a formulaic oratorio: it lacks arias and passages of recitative, placing it outside the conventional mould. However, its incorporation of an instrumental overture and large set-piece choruses align it more easily to the oratorios of Bliss's English forbears.

We must also consider Bliss's treatment of the Homer text within the first section of *Morning Heroes*, specifically his use of an orator. This lengthy oration might well be considered a recitative-of-sorts, drawing upon that musical style which is designed to reflect the contours of human speech. An alternative treatment of this opening section could have had serious implications, for had Bliss set the whole passage for chorus or even solo voices this first movement would likely be considerably longer: instead, the orator delivers an enhanced narrative thrust. Bliss had a history of vocal experimentation, which even in the early 1920s had placed him closer to Walton than to his immediate contemporaries.

We may assume that the author of the 1930 *Musical Times* article intended to place *Morning Heroes* alongside the choral symphonies of Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Mahler. He may have had a case, given Bliss's skilful synthesis of words and music. There is no hierarchy here: for example, one of the work's most important musical themes – the chorus's 'tearful parting' at 42 – returns in the final section at 126 in the orchestra only. Rather than simply sharing motivic material, the orchestra and chorus offer different perspectives on it.

³⁹ Andrew Burn, "'Now, Trumpeter for Thy Close": Bliss's Requiem for His Brother', *Musical Times* 126 (1985), 666-68.

Morning Heroes is unavoidably elegiac, but rather than resorting to Mozart, Verdi or Fauré for comparative models we might begin with the non-liturgical anthology of texts in Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*. Better still, though, is a collection of British choral works that form their own subgenre: the 'war requiem'. The most prominent example is, clearly, Britten's *War Requiem*, composed more than thirty years after *Morning Heroes* and in response to a different world war. A convincing argument may be posited for the placing of *Morning Heroes* in this subgenre alongside, potentially, Elgar's *The Spirit of England*.⁴⁰ All three works share a carefully-woven anti-war sentiment, and Bliss and Britten both set the words of Wilfred Owen, now the most highly-regarded of the Great War poets. Finally, we may also add works by Delius (the *Requiem*), Finzi (*Requiem da camera*) and Vaughan Williams (*Dona nobis pacem*).

Indeed, Bliss's was by no means the first conscious attempt at a post-Armistice war requiem by an Englishman. In 1922, John Foulds had composed *The World Requiem*, which was programmed by the British Legion for an Armistice Day performance at the Albert Hall in 1923. According to Lewis Foreman, its reception was comparable to that of Britten's *War Requiem* many years later.⁴¹ It was a sensational work, full of the crude pentatonicism and oriental modes for which Foulds is now remembered. Despite a positive initial reception *The World Requiem* was seldom repeated, and national musical remembrance became, predictably, the preserve of Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Since then, Foulds has been treated with relative contempt by the centrist strands of music criticism.

It seems most realistic, to summarise, that *Morning Heroes* is a subconscious combination of requiem, symphony and oratorio, led both by the text and by Bliss's own musical material.⁴² It is a synthesis, a hotchpotch of existing genres, which contributed to a semi-distinct subgenre within English music. The issue of Bliss's dominant generative impulse remains unresolved: in passing he described the work as a 'symphony', but here such a classification seems devoid of useful formal or

⁴⁰ This argument has been rehearsed convincingly in Rachel Cowgill, 'Elgar's War Requiem', in Byron Adams (ed.), *Elgar and his world*, 317-62.

⁴¹ See Lewis Foreman (ed.), *From Parry to Britten: British music in letters, 1900-1945*, 299.

⁴² In reaching this conclusion, the author also considered Honegger's 'oratorio' *Le roi David*, with its seemingly text-led structure and utilisation of many musical styles.

musical meaning. Simply, the recurring motifs of *Morning Heroes* bring unity to an ultimately coherent whole.

This was the first work in which Bliss set the words of Walt Whitman, though by no means the first time Whitman had been set by a British composer – his texts were greatly in vogue during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴³ In the wake of the Great War, younger composers were attracted to Whitman's lack of Victorian prudery, as well as his uninhibited and radical insistence on progress, encompassing too the important feature of racial tolerance. Having held cult status for British social democrats since at least the turn of the century, Whitman must have seemed the perfect vehicle of expression for the half-American Bliss, offering finely-crafted poetic definitions of the nineteenth-century American experience.

Despite the violent, urban setting of Bliss's Whitman selection, 'The City Arming', the poet is defined by his alignment with the natural world: the transient nature of Delius's *Sea Drift*, for example, is thanks in no small part to the metrical freedom of Whitman's texts. For Bliss, a veteran now accustomed to the whims of the common man, Whitman's fascination with the 'divine average' must have seemed particularly appealing.⁴⁴ In Bliss's setting, the massed voices seem to orate as one: the loose rhythms of Whitman's text are held firm amid this homophonic and curiously unmelodic choral writing. Like Bliss, Whitman had stood and watched mass graves, and the text and music together convey the true grimness of war.

In a two-part final movement, Bliss responded directly to the Battle of the Somme. For this, he selected two pastoral perspectives from two stylistically contrasting war poets, Wilfred Owen and Robert Nichols. Owen's 'Spring Offensive' depicts the classic scene of rural Arcadia, with its fields, flowers and brambles. This evocation speaks of the survivors' guilt – 'Why speak they not of comrades that went under?' – and of an inability to express the true grief of the loss of young comrades. Bliss returned in Nichols to the same source as his text for the *Pastoral*: now, though, such classical allusions proved the perfect foil for the bleak directness of Owen. Like in

⁴³ One of the first British works to set Whitman was Vaughan Williams's *Toward the Unknown Region* of 1907. Even Stanford, the Victorian conservative *par excellence*, set Whitman in his *Elegiac Ode* of 1884.

⁴⁴ British culture and Whitman's social democracy collide in Stefan Hawlin, 'Ivor Gurney's Creative Reading of Walt Whitman: Thinking of Paumanok', *English Literature in Transition* 49 (2006), 31-48.

the Homer passage that opened the work, the dead are glorified and welcomed onto the Elysian Fields – but Bliss’s dissonant musical language confirms that this is not the Arcadian utopia proposed by his truly ‘pastoral’ contemporaries.

In *Morning Heroes* Bliss was composing on a symphonic scale – this is easily his largest concert work – and was reacting against conventional post-romantic and pastoral trends. Responses to the apparent death of Romanticism had taken many forms after the Great War, including the surrealism of the Dadaists, the more clinical approach propounded by the Second Viennese School, and also Bliss’s own ‘experiments in sound’. Clearly, though, much of Bliss’s specific artistic activity during the post-Armistice years was woven into the pervading European anti-romantic sentiment. For him, it was impossible to return to the relative complacency of the *fin de siècle*. It is clear that Bliss had not yet been lured by the explicitly pastoral.

Diplomatically, Britain’s response to the war had left it weakened: moderation of a strong Franco-Russian desire for retribution had demonstrated that the imperial mantle of ‘great world power’ would now be passed to America and Russia. Indeed, the USA was the ultimate victor of the Great War. By the late 1920s Bliss, with his American heritage and personal experience of that country, was drawn more personally to America than to continental Europe. This transition seems to reflect his mode of interwar musical development.

Now on the cusp of creative maturity, Bliss seemed affected less by the wanton destruction of war, but instead by its human tragedies. An early potential for violent musical revolution had given way to a slow sobering of intellectual thought. Bliss’s latest compositions had created a natural pathway which had culminated with *Morning Heroes*: the text settings of both *Pastoral* and *Serenade* seem, in retrospect, to be something of a ‘dry run’. The textual sources for each work are eclectic, yet they are united by common themes, and by the inherent comfort of non-musical pastoral allusions. *Morning Heroes* brought to an end a period of intense musical self-examination. After the journeys ‘through the lovely summer landscape of

Norfolk'⁴⁵ which accompanied rehearsals for the first performance of the new work on 22 October 1930, Bliss attempted little composition for nearly a year.

⁴⁵ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 97.

Rebel tamed

1930—1934

With the cathartic Morning Heroes behind him, Bliss spent several months away from composition entirely, before embarking upon two new chamber works. During the four years that followed he returned briefly to America, and was a frequent visitor to festivals of contemporary music in continental Europe. He wrote widely, and developed a deep interest in the effects of broadcasting upon conditions for musical activity. By 1934, he had begun to plan a summer residence in the Somerset countryside.

For a time, following the completion of *Morning Heroes*, Bliss looked deep within himself. His father had died during the previous spring, and shortly before the Christmas of 1930 he attended the funeral of Philip Heseltine at Godalming cemetery, alongside his friends Bernard van Dieren, Constant Lambert and Anthony Bernard. Bliss had fostered a close friendship with van Dieren, describing him as

the most enigmatic personality I have ever met. In paying a tribute to his memory after his death I wrote that he partook of the nature of a Leonardo da Vinci, so multifarious were his inventive interests. He not only played a musical instrument, but he could make one, he not only wrote books

such as his monograph on Epstein, but he was a beautiful binder of books; he was a linguist, a chemist, and a composer of many songs and much chamber music.¹

This Dutchman, a Catholic, had come to England before the Great War, where his career had been furthered by Heseltine and Cecil Gray. With his atonality and complex counterpoint, van Dieren created a music that was non-pastoral, un-English. His 'otherness' had allowed him a personal context in which to achieve this. After the Great War, Bliss had not enjoyed such freedom.

By the early 1930s, however, Bliss was by no means the isolated figure of ten years earlier. His friend Adrian Boult had been appointed Director of Music at the BBC in May 1930, and was already making strides to secure the position of art music in the Corporation's output. He also became the founding conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and worked hard to demonstrate to orchestras and their musicians across the country that BBC broadcasts brought opportunities rather than threats. This, in turn, ensured that the BBC was soon a focal point for the activities of many of England's most important composers, Bliss himself included.

For some, though, Boult was too close to the central faction of the Royal College establishment, despite his tireless promotion of contemporary currents in art music. It is, of course, for his relentless endorsement of British music that he is now remembered, as well as for his frequent displacement of his own musical preferences in order to nurture a modern contemporaneous performing canon. Boult must surely, then, have seemed a suitably moderate candidate for the role. This did not, however, prevent open hostility from Sir Thomas Beecham – who ensured Boult's professional exclusion from Covent Garden – and a milder antipathy from Frank Bridge alongside his young disciple, Benjamin Britten.²

With Boult now filling the jobs of two men, he found himself stretched and occasionally overworked. He later married Ann Wilson in July 1933, and took on her four children from her previous marriage.³ More than ever, something had to give,

¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 97.

² For more on the fractious relationship between Boult and Beecham, see Michael Kennedy, *Adrian Boult*, 154, in which Kennedy quotes Boult: 'Somehow I used to find him absolutely repulsive both as a man and as a musician, and his treatment of people I knew ... so absolutely beastly that his complete neglect of me didn't seem to matter a bit.'

³ Ann Wilson had divorced Steuart Wilson, and so the marriage was later not without controversy. It has been suggested that when Wilson became Director of Music at the BBC in 1948, he engineered

and for Bliss this presented some welcome opportunities. Bliss's close alignment with Boult placed him close to the centre of musical activity in Britain, and ensured that his pronounced isolation of the 1920s was left in the past. The new decade brought with it a fresh spirit of cultural integration for Bliss, and this would coincide with the composition of some of his best music.

Family grief, and a new creative beginning

The death of Bliss's father was followed in 1931 by a further loss for the family, when Trudy's father was killed after falling from a rock face while on a botanical expedition: now faced with her own bereavement, she travelled alone to Santa Barbara in order to support her grieving family. In her absence, Bliss oversaw the first London performance of *Morning Heroes* at Queen's Hall in March 1931, before making his own visit to America later in the year.

At least part of 1931 was taken up by some major revisions of *A Colour Symphony*, the work which had prompted Bliss's flight from England almost a decade earlier. Perhaps that project had been present in Bliss's mind as he worked on *Morning Heroes*, for there are similarities between the two works, the most obvious of these being the processional openings. Languid triplet rhythms also abound in both works, as do what Robert Meikle describes as 'long-breathed 9/8 melodies'.⁴ The revised version was performed on 27 April 1932 at Queen's Hall, and was conducted by Adrian Boult, the work's dedicatee.

With work on *A Colour Symphony* completed, it was a short song that generated more fundamental creative urges. This time the poet was James Joyce, and the occasion was a collaborative project. Thirteen composers contributed as many settings to *The Joyce Book*, in which each composer set one of Joyce's 'Pomes Penyeach': the complete volume was designed as a tribute to this paragon of Irish literature. The project had been initiated by Bliss alongside Herbert Hughes three years earlier when the two had discovered a mutual admiration for Joyce whilst

Boult's 'retirement' as conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra (see Michael Kennedy, *Adrian Boult*, 131-2).

⁴ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 29.

attending a festival of contemporary music in Paris. Other contributors included Howells, Ireland and Bax.

The Joyce volume is underpinned by modernistic snapshots of yearning and desolation, and Bliss's song, 'Simples', is no exception. Bliss uses triplet figures as a means of propulsion, with slow, measured dotted rhythms in the vocal line matched by a broadly chordal piano accompaniment. The harmonies are richly scored, and Joyce appreciated this warmth and simplicity, telling Bliss so in a letter: 'I like your song better than any other in the book. It's rich and ample and melodious, delightfully balanced in its movements. You have done my little song great honour.'⁵ The cycle was first performed at the London College of Nursing on 16 March 1932, a month after the birth of Bliss's second daughter, Karen.

Both of these projects – the symphonic revision and the Joyce song – were small in scale compared with Bliss's return to new, abstract music. After the public expression of grief in *Morning Heroes*, the birth of a child, and a long period of reflection, he began work on a Clarinet Quintet. The initial inspiration for the work was provided by another virtuoso performer, the clarinettist Frederick Thurston. But the clarinet had also been the instrument of Kennard, the lost brother killed during the Great War. The Quintet is, therefore, another manifestation of Bliss's loss, but a more private requiem than *Morning Heroes* had been.

The composition of the Clarinet Quintet marked Bliss's return to absolute music, having been concerned entirely with the programmatic since his Oboe Quintet of some four years earlier. Comparisons between the two works abounded immediately: the dedicatee of the Clarinet Quintet, Bernard van Dieren, wrote in a letter to Bliss of his feeling 'very pleased and honoured by the promised dedication. If the clarinet quintet is going to be at all like the oboe quintet it will be anything but a trifling tribute.'⁶ But in many ways, the two quintets could not be more different – indeed it seemed that, for now, Bliss's compositional catharsis had succeeded.

⁵ James Joyce, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 3 March 1933, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 101. Bliss later posited, with some justification, that Joyce may have sent out twelve other similar letters at that time.

⁶ Bernard van Dieren, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 30 September 1932, Bliss Archive.

The clarinet, as Kennard's instrument, held important emotional associations for Bliss. But it also offered huge musical potential for any composer, as he described in a lecture he gave to the Royal Institution in 1934:

[The clarinet] has a curiously varied manner of expression, being capable of sounding almost like three different instruments. In its high register it is brilliant and piercing, with an almost pinched trumpet sound; in its middle octave it is beautifully pure and expressive, with a clear even tone; in its lowest register it is reedy in sound, with a dark, mournful and rather hollow quality. It is an immensely agile instrument, capable of extreme speed and dexterity, both legato and staccato. It has great dynamic range, extending from a powerful forte to the softest piano.⁷

Like the quintets of Mozart and Brahms, Bliss's work requires an A clarinet, an instrument which provides a darker timbre than the smaller members of that family.

After the three-movement Oboe Quintet, Bliss opted instead for a more traditional four-movement form. The conventional opening *Allegro* is replaced by a moderato movement; a scherzo-like *Allegro* is then followed by an expressive slow movement. The work ends with a rhythmically vital *Allegro energico*. In fact, this metastructure is broadly similar to that of *A Colour Symphony*, the work Bliss had been revising whilst the quintet was conceived: passive—active—passive—active.



Ex. 18 Bliss: Clarinet Quintet, I, bb. 1-12

At the beginning of the Oboe Quintet, Bliss had introduced each instrument in turn, a process which had culminated in a lush tutti at the oboe's first entry. Now he opened his Clarinet Quintet by again staggering the entries of each instrument, but here the clarinet, rather than one of the strings, launches the work (ex. 18). Gone is the quasi-tonality of the Oboe Quintet: rather, this solo *cantilena* sets a mood of romantic lyricism.

⁷ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 103-4.

After a harmonically deceptive anacrusis – a flattened supertonic – an unambiguous tonal centre emerges: this opening phrase is in E major. Then, in bars 6 and 7, Bliss introduces a falling sequence. This hallmark of late-romanticism had been almost completely absent in his music for more than ten years. In the next sub-phrase, Bliss repeatedly returns to the tonic note, creating a pedal-of-sorts, while the notes in between form a descending chromatic scale.

In these opening bars, Bliss had presented a theme ripe for contrapuntal manipulation. Indeed, the entry of the viola in bar 11 obeys at least one of the strict rules of fugal writing: it is an almost exact restatement of the clarinet's subject, but in the dominant of the opening phrase. While the viola plays that theme, the clarinet begins to explore the two keys of E and B.

The cello enters at bar 24 by repeating the opening subject – in the original key, E – with one slight modification: the anacrusic note is now a genuine supertonic, rather than a flattened one. By the time the cello reaches the sequential section of its theme, both violins have made their entries. The sequencing is thus made even more explicit by a sequential counter-subject in thirds in the two violin parts (bars 29 and 30, ex. 19).

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The score is for measures 29 through 32. The key signature is E major (one sharp). The time signature is 3/4. The Violin I and Violin II parts feature a counter-subject in thirds, with triplets and slurs. The Viola part has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The Cello part has a more rhythmic, arpeggiated texture with slurs. The overall texture is contrapuntal.

Ex. 19 Bliss: Clarinet Quintet, I, bb. 29-32, sequencing

Within the first 32 bars, then, three important constituents emerge: a diatonic primary subject, sequencing, and carefully disguised chromaticism. These elements appear again and again throughout the movement, so that we may regard the opening bars as a manifesto for the music ahead. In the first two minutes of music alone, the listener is exposed to many of the compositional techniques Bliss had also employed in the earlier Oboe Quintet. These include the extensive use of a primary subject, the staggered entries of that subject on various instruments (which betray baroque, as

well as romantic, influences), an ostinato-based accompanimental texture, and a dramatic textural widening towards a cadential climax (at bar 59).

But there are also less familiar elements in Bliss's new style. The use of sequencing is now extensive, whereas in the Oboe Quintet it is absent. The most astonishing – and most clearly audible – difference between the two works, however, is in their harmonic language. The Oboe Quintet had begun with a near-atonal discourse between the two violins which, with its deployment in thirds, lent the music a foreground dimension of harmonic ambiguity. The strategy in the Clarinet Quintet differs significantly: despite the unaccompanied opening melody, triadic motifs ensure that a key is established within the first two bars. When a second voice enters, it does so in a key directly related to that first key. This primary theme is later manipulated to instigate traditional modulatory goals and to produce harmonies founded upon conventional triads.

Bliss described the second movement – *Allegro molto* – as

one of spirit and vivacity. It bounds along on a staccato rhythm, throwing out on its course very distinct and easily apprehended tunes. The shape of this second movement is built on the simplest of all patterns, the symmetrical. Its energetic opening section is balanced by an equally vital closing section; in between comes a middle contrasting joint well secured in, and at the end a coda or tail piece which grows naturally from what precedes it. To me the merit of this movement lies in its joinery. It is like a table of large size in which the carpentry is almost, if not quite, invisible.⁸

Indeed, the movement has many more merits than its subtle stitching, the chief of which being its simplicity and lack of self-consciousness, in keeping with the rest of the work. Bliss's analysis demonstrates a confidence in a three-section structure, and as we probe deeper we discover that the 'middle contrasting joint' contains many of the elements from which the two sections either side of it are constructed: it is this unity which, to continue Bliss's analogy, so well secures the joint in place.

In his address to the Royal Institution, Bliss persisted with his use of analogy when he likened the Clarinet Quintet to a 'conversation of five different persons, each of whom is equally important, and each of whom should only open his mouth when what he is going to say is directly to the point.' It seems that Bliss had now acquired the art of musical economy that was to serve him well for the remainder of his

⁸ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 103-4.

career. We also find him revelling in the musical discourse which had so enthralled him in *Conversations* more than ten years earlier. He continued to focus on conversational elements in his analysis of the fourth movement, *Allegro energico*:

The last movement is gay and light-hearted. It is a conversation of *esprit*, in which the table talk of these five personalities is tossed about like a ball on the top of a fountain spray. Except for one moment of gravity near the end, the subject matter is devoid of any brooding seriousness.⁹

Throughout the movement, much of this light-heartedness is generated by alternating 6/8 and 3/4 metres, exemplified in the opening theme. There are some similarities between this melody and the theme which opens the entire work: they are both in E major, and again the presence of a flattened supertonic brings some tonal uncertainty. In another example of trans-work unity, a survey of the final chord of each of the four movements reveals a cohesive tonal scheme. They end on root position chords of E major, A major, B major and E major respectively – or tonic—subdominant—dominant—tonic.

Bliss's Clarinet Quintet is a more expressive, more late-romantic work than its counterpart for oboe. Whether this is because it was composed in the aftermath of the cathartic *Morning Heroes*, or because it is a more private expression of his loss, or perhaps for neither of these reasons, is open to debate. The most conclusive evidence of Bliss's compositional retrospection, though, is provided by a final summary of the Clarinet Quintet's four movements: a sonata-form first movement; a ternary second movement, whose defining rhythmic feature is the triplet – that is, a predominant feeling of three; an *Adagietto* constructed from long, diatonic melodies; and an energetic, discursive rondo, with a recurring opening subject creating an ABACA structure. One could almost be describing a work composed a hundred years earlier.

Bliss goes to the BBC

A week before the Christmas of 1932, Bliss invited a few friends to his home to hear Frederick Thurston and the Kutcher Quartet play through his new work for the first

⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 103-4.

time. Earlier in the year, in May, the newly-built Broadcasting House had officially opened its doors, and in doing so had given London yet further confirmation as the nation's artistic, intellectual and cultural capital. With this new building, the Corporation had, for now at least, committed to centralisation. Previously, its activities had been conducted on a more regional basis, allowing access to more studio space than London alone had been able to offer.¹⁰

During these early years of the BBC, Bliss's music received frequent broadcast performances – after all, the years of the corporation's quickest development in the interwar period happened to coincide with Bliss's most productive years. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that he was respectful of the BBC's achievements and, seeking to maintain his own future broadcast opportunities, was keen to commit such praise to print in the BBC's weekly magazine *The Listener*. An article of November 1932 found Bliss in typically straightforward mood, and is worth quoting at length:

The BBC has grown in ten years to be the greatest music-making machine, by a very long chalk, that has ever existed; so immense indeed has it become that only a comparison with some great industrial concern producing its thousands of tons of steel or gallons of oil can give any idea of its varied and tentacular existence. [...]

In face of real difficulties it must be admitted that the music branch has done its work admirably and courageously. Courageously, I certainly think, for it cannot, however much it may wish, act entirely autocratically. It administers in a public service supported by a ninth of the population, listened to and criticised by nearly a fourth; consequently, in theory at any rate, it has to give that fourth just about what it wants, or get out.

Now in practice it works slightly differently, insomuch as the BBC rightly makes use of its official aloofness as a corporation to withstand the attacks of isolated shareholders. If a citizen here and there attacks, for example, the policy of giving Bach cantatas, he is in the position of a man fighting shadows; there is no substance concrete enough to hit – it is like poking a pond with your umbrella. Even if a daily newspaper levels its spearhead against the same annoyance, the target is only quietly removed, to appear later a little further on. This is just as it should be. The BBC must be governed by a beneficent oligarchy, otherwise it would lose all personality. It has obviously decided rightly and with subtlety to bridge any gulf between the public and itself by enticing the said public to creep up to its own level of taste, hoping that sooner or later complete harmony will result. It calls the tune in fact and is paid for it as well – a most happy state of affairs. [...]

The listener is not only provided with a foundation of experience which would without the radio most likely take him years of study and travel; he is also initiated into the musical language of his own day – and that is important, for even lesser works of talent of our own period often speak or should speak with more force and intimacy to us than masterpieces of other generations. The music branch [meaning the BBC's Music Department] is definitely conservative – it, perhaps, has to be – for is not

¹⁰ In fact, even after the building of Broadcasting House, many broadcasts were still transmitted from hotels and restaurants in London and elsewhere throughout the 1930s, which has left a legacy of excellence in BBC outside broadcasting.

England itself the most conservative of nations, and proud to hold up 'Safety First' as the passport for life? In spite, however, of this national stale blanket characteristic, the number of controversial works that are slipped in is considerable, and this is where the music branch has the advantage over other sections. It need not cut, prune, bowdlerise, prettify or tame a symphonic work, until it means just nothing, and then offer it with assurance to a crowded audience of middle-aged Peter Pans. It is a question of take it or leave it in musical matters, and it is vastly to the credit of the musical programme committee that it does say in so many cases, 'Just take it!'¹¹

Here Bliss exhibited his political acumen, particularly in describing the kind of oligarchy which was then coming to prominence in continental Europe. It seems that he understood perfectly the BBC's capacity for public education, and its power to lead public trends in artistic appreciation.

It was this clarity in Bliss's thinking – as well as his compositional talent and his friendship with Boult – that led to his first formal involvement with the BBC in 1933, when he became a 'musical adviser'. Where he had written previously of poking a pond with an umbrella, his personal contacts ensured that he had no such trouble in finding viable channels for communication. Bliss had fought the battles of 'new music' in the early 1920s, and everyone at the BBC knew that he still bore the scars proudly. The role of adviser suited Bliss well, as it allowed him to continue with his compositional career at a time when he was beginning to expand his output, yet it did not require the level of full-time office work which at that time was testing Adrian Boult's stamina. It was soon proposed that Bliss become Boult's Assistant Director of Music.

Senior staff at the BBC were generally supportive of the proposal, and in the early summer of 1933 Bliss wrote to Boult with his own formal suggestions for the arrangement.¹² He described a part-time role, that of a 'Musical Programme Adviser', which would relieve Boult of the direct responsibility of organising the extensive performance programme overseen by the BBC at that time. Bliss proved himself capable of driving a hard bargain, demanding an office at Broadcasting House, a seat on the Music Advisory Committee, and an annual remittance of no less than £750. Boult supported that sum, arguing that Bliss was 'the only person in the

¹¹ Arthur Bliss, 'What Broadcasting has done for Music', *The Listener*, 16 November 1932, 704-5, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 62-5.

¹² Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Adrian Boult, 13 June 1933, reproduced Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 232.

country with whom I could confidently share this responsibility.’¹³ Bliss was ultimately appointed to a new Musical Advisory Panel, and in this capacity was able to make decisions and speak with a freedom that was impossible for Boult in his senior post as Director of Music.

Evidence given by Boult to the Ullswater Committee later demonstrated the closeness in attitudes shared by Boult and Bliss.¹⁴ By the middle of the decade, Boult had begun to attract suspicion, not just from the usual suspects, Becham and Bridge, but now too from figures of the BBC establishment. These included some of those who sat on the Music Advisory Committee, such as John Reith, Hugh Allen, John McEwen and Landon Ronald – men who had blocked Bliss’s membership of their committee. Far from being regarded as the great champion of British music, it was felt that Boult was too inclined towards the modernists of the continent.

If this claim was ever explicitly made, it was firmly rebuffed by Boult in his Ullswater evidence, in which he clarified that it was his responsibility to ‘guide musical opinion’ and to ‘give the public the great classics together with such novelties as we consider of prime importance’. He highlighted the value of ‘the disinterested advice of the senior members of the music profession’, but lamented that he ‘seldom [received] that advice from the Music Advisory Committee’, listing Allen, McEwen and Ronald by name.¹⁵

It was around this time that Hugh Allen’s tolerance of Bliss began to evaporate, and a climate of mutual suspicion remained between them ever after – a situation that later proved difficult for Bliss when Allen took the chair of the Music Advisory Committee in 1936. By then, though, Bliss was far more in tune with the musical predilections of the common man than Allen could ever have hoped to have been: Bliss’s healthy regard for jazz, and his forthcoming involvement in writing music for film, ensured that he was the very model of the modern British composer.

¹³ Adrian Boult, in an internal memo, BBC Written Archives Centre, also quoted in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *op. cit.*, 233. It should be noted, however, that Bliss’s suggested post would not have relieved Boult from the daily paperwork of programming: only a full-time employee could have hoped to have achieved that.

¹⁴ The Ullswater Committee was established in 1935 in order to plan a strategy for the future of the BBC in the light of the expiration of the Corporation’s first ten-year Charter at the end of 1936.

¹⁵ See Michael Kennedy, *Adrian Boult*, 175-6.

While negotiations for Bliss's BBC contract continued in 1933, he had also been working on another abstract composition, a Viola Sonata. Like the Clarinet Quintet, with its obvious connection to Frederick Thurston, the Viola Sonata drew inspiration from another virtuoso performer, Lionel Tertis. Indeed, Bliss acknowledged that Tertis's influence at times went beyond mere inspiration:

I think my Viola Sonata should have Tertis' name coupled with mine as joint composers, for many times in the course of its composition I would be called to the telephone by Tertis with his viola at the other end. I would hear his voice 'On page 17, line 3, do you like *this*'—I would then hear the tones of the viola—'or *this*?' He would then repeat the passage. 'But, Lionel, I don't hear much difference.' 'But you *must*,' he would answer; 'the first time I took two down bows, etc. etc.' ... I had a master class in viola playing quite free, and I am grateful.¹⁶

The first performance was given in private on 9 May by Tertis and the pianist Solomon; the same pairing later gave a BBC broadcast performance on 3 November. A few years later, Solomon offered similar technical input during the composition of Bliss's Piano Concerto.

The original scale of the sonata was more like that of a concerto, and Bliss reduced the work's length substantially before the first broadcast. This proved unsatisfactory for the composer, who by now was placing an increased emphasis on the formal design of his music. A frequent reviser of earlier works, Bliss intended to revisit the sonata on an orchestral scale. He never found the time: 'if today I had the energy and the patience I would translate the piano accompaniment into an orchestral tissue, taking care that the mellow ... tone of the solo instrument was not obscured by too thick a surround.'¹⁷

It was the viola's richness of tone, similar to that of the clarinet, which had attracted Bliss to the viola. In one of his Royal Institute lectures, he addressed the issue directly:

The viola is the most romantic of instruments; it is a veritable Byron of the orchestra. The dark, sombre quality – now harsh, now warm – of its lowest string, the passionate rhetoric of its highest string, and its whole rather restless and tragic personality, make it an ideal vehicle for romantic and oratorical expression.¹⁸

¹⁶ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁸ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 284.

Bliss certainly made use of the instrument's contrasting tones, and yet the fascination here, surely for both listener and composer, is not in the exploration of timbre, but in the tautness of structure. Bliss's careful handling of thematic development seems to acknowledge classical designs, but rather than presenting the usual contrasting subjects of those models, developed and interwoven, almost all of the material in the first movement emanates from a single subject heard at the beginning of the work. It is a theme that recalls the opening subject of the Clarinet Quintet, with its falling macrolines and wide-spaced intervals.

Subjectival contrast, if any, is brought by rhythmic modification rather than the introduction of fresh material. This confirms the absence of conventional 'sonata form', and also that Bliss's formal classicism was not derived from traditional models. Indeed, for Hubert Foss, who reviewed the new work for the *Musical Times*, 'there is no imitation of the especial manner of that German school which hitherto has developed that principle to its highest extensions. A new manner has been found which more neatly expresses for musical uses the thoughts of the composer.'¹⁹ Melodic beauty is largely reserved for the slow central movement; in the next, the movement which is most inspired by Tertis's virtuosity, a coda blends the primary theme of the first movement with the fiery rhythms of the finale.

Rural retreat

The large house in Hampstead was continuing to provide fine working conditions for a composer of ever-increasing note, even with the arrival of Karen in February 1932. However, Arthur and Trudy now sought a country retreat for use during the summer months, a place where he would be able to work without the distractions of London society. Having failed to find anything suitable, the Blissesses decided to have a house built to their own specifications, and bought a plot of land close to the Somerset village of Pen Selwood. A house was designed by their friend, the architect Peter Harland, and work soon began on Pen Pits.

¹⁹ Hubert Foss, 'Classicism and Arthur Bliss: His New Viola Sonata', *Musical Times* 75 (1934), 214.

In 1930s Britain, as had been the predominant musical style of the interwar years, even the design of houses looked backwards. In suburban Metroland, European modernism was eschewed for the shades of history and stability evoked by the mock-Tudor. Not for Bliss. With his input, Harland designed a remarkable art deco home, furthering a stylistic passion first explored in *A Colour Symphony*. The property is now a Grade II* listed building, a designation which it acquired largely due to its peculiar design. The open plan first storey has characteristics of an ocean liner, with a massive wall-length window from the lounge providing impressive views southwards across Salisbury Plain.²⁰ This is a paean to Functionalism, to the sleek lines and speed-inspired aerodynamics of the age.

The very ambition to withdraw to the countryside demonstrated in Bliss a domestic desire he shared with his fellow Britons – that is, a need for privacy. While the new middle classes scurried home to their semi-detached castles behind privet hedges and net curtains, believing that the past was somehow a kinder sort of country, Bliss too was hiding his family away in their own rural retreat. In this age of dark ideas, smaller dreams brought a sustaining light.

It is a strange coincidence that the first foundations of Pen Pits were laid at almost the moment of Elgar's death in February 1934, that towering figure in Bliss's early musical education and a figure associated inextricably with English landscapes. Indeed, Bliss wrote later of his new bucolic sanctuary with an enthusiasm which recalls the occasional prolixity of Elgar:

[Harland] provided me with a separate music-room in the woods some fifty yards or so distant. Here I could be absolutely alone; it was a magical little retreat. From my windows I saw nothing but trees, and the only sounds were those made by the wind passing through them. Pheasants would make their rough nests within a few yards, and quite likely a fox, unconscious of my presence, would lollop by; badgers had their setts within view.²¹

In acquiring a second home, Bliss had unwittingly scored a direct hit against suburbia. In taking part-time residence, Bliss's domestic arrangements became binary – a home in the city, and another in the country. He had avoided the sprawl of the housing boom altogether.

²⁰ See F. R. S. Yorke, *The modern house in England*, 70-1.

²¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 103.

However, the development of the suburbs had broader cultural ramifications. This access to cheap housing democratised Britain as never before, and this was a process not rejected by Bliss: he understood that strands of intellectual opposition were profoundly anti-democratic, even if he only ever drove through the new estates to get to and from Pen Pits. The housing democracy was reflected in popular culture: the press now carried stories on matinee idols and sport stars, not on the aristocracy. As Bliss's friend J. B. Priestley observed in his contemporaneous *English Journey*, 'the young people of this new England do not play chorus in an opera in which their social superiors are the principals' – rather, this new England was 'as near to a classless society as we have got yet'.²²

Modernism, with which Bliss had flirted during the 1920s, was an unavoidably international movement. Bliss's quest to escape parochial London had taken him to France, and even on to America. But now he sought, and so purchased, his own piece of England. His increasing involvement with the BBC, and his own soon-to-be-attempted survey of the nation's musical activity, saw him begin to pitch his tent more firmly on English soil: this would later be demonstrated practically in his sense of national duty during the Second World War.

Some of these themes found voice in the lecture series Bliss delivered to the Royal Institution in March 1934. Certainly, Bliss spoke movingly of the ambassadorial role art could play in the projection of a nation's values:

I do not believe that it is the purely English quality of our music which prevents the spread of interest in it abroad. Much more likely is the unwillingness of governments and officials to depart from the rule not to use English art for propaganda purposes. They do not realise that in English music and in English poetry they have two of the finest ambassadors in the country, and that with one of our great orchestras touring with English music, and one of our picked companies touring with English drama, they can spread an understanding of English thought and character that no conference, even if it sat continuously for years, can do. One day perhaps a government will use the names of Byrd, Purcell, Elgar, Delius, Vaughan Williams as ambassadors, coupled with our dramatists from Shakespeare to Shaw, to form effective ties of friendship with foreign countries, after more outworn methods fail.²³

Here, for what may have been the first time, Bliss publicly acknowledged a lengthy tradition of 'national' art, a cultural canon in which each stakeholder could take pride. This demonstrated a new willingness to integrate, not only in moving closer to

²² J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, 402-3.

²³ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 15 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 97. Roscow notes that with such a war cry Bliss anticipated the formation of the British Council the following year.

the centre of the prevailing cultural establishment, but also in recognising the progressive principles of alternative, once-rejected trends that were still not present in his own work.

He quoted twin creative urges first identified by W. H. Auden – ‘the desire for creation and the desire for company.’²⁴ Here, then, is the final proof of the integrative impulse: no longer content to sit on the sidelines, Bliss was keen to enter into an artistic conversation with both his music and his public pronouncements. He also attempted to define the English cultural character, an act which summoned a kind of introspection previously absent in his various writings. He warned of a national musical tendency to seek inspiration rather than actually to generate it – a reflection, perhaps, of its geographical location:

Between the extremes of north and south [although politically, by now Bliss might just as well have chosen East and West] lies England, and indeed it seems in every way situated in a middle position, a clearly-defined no man’s land facing on either side opposing forces. As in the political world, we tend violently neither to the right nor to the left, but extract what is needful to us from opposing principles, welding them together, so do English composers adopt a novel kind of equipoise.²⁵

He continued, resorting to an almost irresistible gibe at German rigour, with an implicit criticism of an ‘island-nation’ tendency towards narcissism:

They [the English] have not the academic thoroughness of the German to pursue a train of thought to its logical and often tedious conclusion, nor have they the volatile spirit of the Latin which makes their best music run on so swift and vivacious a course. They are not dramatic like the Italians, nor dancers like the Spanish.²⁶

With these indictments, it is little wonder that Bliss had looked abroad for his musical models in the wake of the Great War. ‘England has always been the last to go to an extreme in any direction’, he added, and not as a compliment. His proposed solution came in the marriage of music with poetry, ‘the art in which we as a nation are supreme’ – yet Bliss’s music, the occasional romanticism of the Clarinet Quintet notwithstanding, is more dramatic than lyrical.

Elsewhere, it is clear that time had helped to lighten the full load of Bliss’s anti-Teutonic chauvinism. In the course of the three lectures, he lavished praise on the

²⁴ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 98. The source of the Auden quotation is unknown.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

organising principles to be found within the songs of Schubert, the symphonies of Beethoven, and even *Tristan* – all acknowledged masterpieces, of course, but which represented a swathe of a distinctly Prussian canon that had once met Bliss's youthful ire. At the end of his final lecture, he proposed his own artistic creed:

I believe that the foundation of all music is emotion, and that without the capacity for deep and subtle emotion a composer only employs half the resources of his medium. I believe that this emotion should be called into being by the sudden awareness of actual beauty seen, or by the vision of beauty vividly apprehended. I believe that the emotion resulting from apprehended beauty should be solidified and fixed by presenting it in a form absolutely fitting to it, and to it alone. If I were to truly define my musical goal, it would be to try for an emotion truly and clearly felt, and caught for ever in a formal perfection.²⁷

Finally, it seemed that Bliss had made a musical commitment to natural beauty, and had rejected the ultra-abstract objectivity of his youth. In this way, Bliss believed he could best reach out to the audience he had established for himself.

By now, other once-aspiring modernists also seemed happy to conform to once-scorned ideals, to genres popularly exalted by Donald Tovey and others. The rebel Bax had produced five symphonies, and Walton was well on the way to completing a symphony of his own, complete with fugal finale to match that of the recently revised *A Colour Symphony*. This could only encourage others to do the same. The Sibelius symphonies were hailed by Constant Lambert as important models,²⁸ and even Bridge attempted a symphony at the end of his life.

Bliss's lectures had an added significance, for they coincided with a broader debate concerning the future direction of a national music, within the context of this most turbulent and unstable decades, the 1930s. In the same month as the lectures were delivered, March 1934, Bruce Pattinson added to a stream of praise directed towards the folksong enthusiasts for their work in making indigenous music central to the nation's musical experience.²⁹ Later in the year, a set of lectures by Vaughan Williams were published under the title 'National Music'.

²⁷ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 100.

²⁸ See Lambert, *Music Ho! a study of music in decline*, 231-39. Bliss too used passages of Sibelius – particularly from *Tapiola* – in his lectures to demonstrate a national conveyance through line, rhythm and colour.

²⁹ Bruce Pattinson, 'Music and the Community', *Scrutiny* 2 (1934), 404.

The lectures, naturally, promoted the notion that the best music is derived from indigenous sources – and they also contain what may be perceived as a subtle condemnation of a younger Bliss who, for one thing, is not listed in Vaughan Williams's list of worthies:

We have in England today a certain number of composers who have achieved fame. In the older generation, Elgar and Parry, among those of middle age Holst and Bax, and of the quite young Walton and Lambert. All these served their apprenticeship at home. There are several others who thought that their own country was not good enough for them and went off in the early stages to become little Germans or little Frenchmen. Their names I will not give to you because they are unknown even to their fellow-countrymen.³⁰

Bliss's Parisian apprenticeship was hardly significant in terms of the time that he spent there, but it is certainly the case that his early development from 1919 to 1923 was heavily influenced by continental trends. In the passage above, however, Vaughan Williams neglects to mention his own lessons in Paris with Ravel. This he dismissed as an acquisition of 'a little French polish', when in fact Ravel did much to open the gates to his technical assuredness and, therefore, to much of his mature style. He also took advice from the aging Bruch.

While Bliss is excluded, Constant Lambert seems a surprising inclusion. *Music Ho!* contains many rejections of a national music, founded on his correct belief that music ethnocentric in nature would fail to have a suitable appeal beyond English shores. This was supported by John Foulds in his book *Music Today*, also published in 1934. He noted that 'English music in the main has been of little or no effect abroad because – as E. J. Dent says somewhere or other – "it has been the wrong kind of English music because it was composed for purely English audiences".'³¹ Elsewhere, Rutland Boughton's *The Reality of Music* offered an entertaining Marxian analysis of the exploitative nature of the pastoral composers, ripping folksong from the hands of the proletariat and spinning it into a light bourgeois entertainment.³² Certainly, the parochialism of folksong had been enough to dissuade the internationalist Bliss from exploring its limited possibilities. Soon, though, a global conflict would breathe new vigour into the national music.

³⁰ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 11.

³¹ John Foulds, *Music today: its heritage from the past, and legacy to the future*, 224.

³² Rutland Boughton, *The reality of music*, 91-4.

Bliss's three lectures had been attended by H. G. Wells, and Bliss recounted the important sequence of events that followed:

Something that I said on this occasion must have caught Wells's attention, for he invited me to lunch, and there and then spoke of his projected film based on his recent book, *The Shape of Things to Come*, and asked me whether I would like to collaborate with him by writing the musical score.³³

Like much of Wells's work, the themes of *The Shape of Things to Come* are 'modern' – sensational, even – but not 'Modernist' in the same frame as, say, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. His interest in time travel lent itself to prose with strong, traditional narratives, dealing with the political and historical obsessions of the day. Ruth Levitas is not the only scholar to suggest, not uncritically, that Wells was a man of his time, for his time.³⁴

However, Wells was already a towering, though controversial, figure in contemporary English literature. *The Shape of Things to Come* had been published in 1933, and could trace a direct lineage back to Wells's 'breakthrough' fantasy novel *The World Set Free* of 1913. His rising profile was aided by the austerity of the Depression, and a concurrent culture of rising unemployment and political upheaval. By 1933 Europe seemed as unstable as at any point since the signing of the Armistice, with Hitler seizing power in Germany and Stalin exercising total control of the Russian lands.

The Shape of Things to Come was Wells's futuristic response to this bleak world situation, yet it takes a more nuanced and projected approach than that of, say, the bitonal *The War of the Worlds*. For one thing, Wells's predictions of a global war proved strikingly accurate, with his world engulfed in conflict by Christmas 1940, only sixteen months after in reality Britain entered the war against Germany. The novel takes the form of a 'dreamstate' memoir – presumably Wells's attempt at a Joycean modernism – written by the fictional Dr Philip Raven, a League of Nations official who had supposedly died in 1930.³⁵

³³ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 104. It is worth noting that this is one of the defining events in the Bliss biography, whereas most accounts of Wells's life omit Bliss altogether, and pay scant regard to the film adaptation of *The Shape of Things to Come*.

³⁴ Ruth Levitas, 'Back to the future: Wells, sociology, utopia and method', *The Sociological Review* 58 (2010), 530-47.

³⁵ Because of this, the novel is both able to project and predict forwards, while also supposedly looking back and reflecting upon imagined events. Patrick Parrinder has suggested that Philip Raven

The narrative is made more believable by the inclusion, early on, of real events that had occurred prior to the novel's publication in 1933. Wells's projections are then built upon these facts, lending the work a degree of authenticity. As with many other dystopian works of fiction, Wells submits predictions with the confidence of certainty and specificity, including, for example, a global plague in the years 1955 and 1956, and two restorative world conferences in 1965 and 1978. The novel proved instantly popular with a readership aware of the uncertain political climate and still paranoid in the wake of the Great War: sales figures were helped, no doubt, by the author's request that copies should be sold as cheaply as possible.

The Royal Institution lectures had been Bliss's most public and most extended exploration of his musical ideals to date, and that they were witnessed by a figure such as H. G. Wells was certainly fortunate. His association with Wells allied him directly with one of the most progressive, pro-modern thinkers in Britain during the 1930s. As the spring of 1934 bloomed after a hard winter, and the building of the rural retreat in Somerset began, Bliss found himself thrust towards the centre of artistic life in England. It is no coincidence that the five years which followed were to be the most richly creative of his life, for these were the years that found him at his least isolated. He was at last integrated into a strong, stimulating yet mainstream intellectual community. Finally, in his mid forties, he was where he had long hoped to be.

is a depiction of Wells himself (see Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the future: H. G. Wells, science fiction, and prophecy*, 3-17).

Golden years

1934—1939

Bliss's new acquaintance with H. G. Wells gave him an opportunity to express himself through a medium new to him, and the important film score which resulted was followed by one his greatest abstract works, Music for Strings. At that time, a journalistic assignment also allowed Bliss to witness musical activity in parts of the country he had not yet explored. His growing stature saw him in demand as a jurist at international competitions, and led ultimately to the composition of his first ballet score and his first mature concerto.

Work continued on the new house at Pen Selwood throughout the spring of 1934. For most of his adult life Bliss had lived in urban environments, and the whole family was excited by the prospect of spending extended periods in the countryside. The house was habitable by the summer, for on 16 August Bliss wrote to Boult from Pen Pits with some ideas for the BBC that went beyond the scope of his work with the Musical Advisory Panel, which at that time was limited to the minutiae of programme planning and the selection of new works for broadcast performance.¹ It

¹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Adrian Boult, 16 August 1934, BBC Written Archives Centre, quoted in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 236.

seems likely that the letter articulated many of Boult's own thoughts: he passed Bliss's correspondence up the chain of management with some haste.

In his BBC correspondence, Bliss was careful to praise the staff of the music department, but he also stated his opposition to elements of BBC policy he perceived to be disadvantageous to the progression of musical activity. He had a number of suggestions to remedy this. For example, it concerned him that the number and frequency of BBC Symphony Orchestra concerts within each season were to be reduced. Bliss rejected management claims of oversaturation in London concert programming, and proposed that a previous minimum of 18 concerts per season should be reinstated immediately: twenty-four, he added, was an even more desirable number. This, he claimed, would benefit the standard of orchestral playing, as ensemble cohesion would not be achieved with infrequent performances.

Having made his name in the early 1920s with a number of experimental chamber pieces, Bliss was keen that the BBC should promote such works – and therefore the music of young, aspiring composers – with its own chamber series. The case was argued forcefully, with a pervading wish for artistic quality to be placed above financial concerns and, therefore, by implication, bland populism. Indeed, Bliss's final plea was this:

The general policy of the programmes in all important concerts must be:– to steer clear of any box office toadying and to aim entirely at great artistic effect. This should be announced publicly, and to induce good houses a fine publicist must be used to collect a permanent BBC Symphony Concert audience. This may sound contradictory in writing, but it is the only safeguard for the future, and it is the future that we must command.

Bliss's views were not received well, particularly by Roger Eckersley, the Director of Entertainment, who earlier had been a supporter of Bliss's appointment. He labelled it 'a highly mischievous letter, written apparently without any kind of knowledge of the problems of broadcasting as a whole'.² This would not be the last time that the wily Bliss feigned a certain lack of knowledge in order to drive home a point with greater force.

² Roger Eckersley, quoted in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 237.

Those damned films, revisited

Bliss had first written of films and their musical accompaniments in an article, 'Those Damned Films!', in the *Musical News and Herald* of 1922. Those films had been silent, but he had still felt able to project a future for the closer incorporation of music:

There are only two alternatives before the future musical director of the films. Either, if you are of a conservative disposition, choose music that is not expressly written for the picture, but which is neither too good to overweight the film, nor too bad to hurt your dignity as a musician ... or ... get some composer to collaborate with the producer and write those special cinema noises ... What a proud day it will be for some of us to be featured as the sound-producing experts on a real live million-dollar movie!³

Bliss had long harboured an ambition to compose for the cinema, but it would have to be strictly on his terms if he was to be the producer of those 'special cinema noises'. However, Bliss had demonstrated impressive foresight for the contribution that composers might make to the development of cinematic sound.

Bliss's opportunity arose because of his chance meeting with H. G. Wells, whose novel *The Shape of Things to Come* was to be dramatised for the cinema by London Film Productions. If Bliss was at all familiar with Wells's novel, he might have felt on less certain ground when confronted with the adapted screenplay. For the author himself,

the book upon which this story rests is essentially an imaginative discussion of social and political possibilities, and a film is no place for an argument. The conclusions of that book therefore are taken for granted in the film, and a new story has been invented to display them.⁴

For one thing, the protagonists in Wells's novel had been described with an almost scientific precision, with almost no characterisation to speak of.

Bliss jumped at the opportunity to provide the score for the film adaptation. He was captivated by this tale of potential social progress, with its associated tribulations: like Wells, he was not too proud to embrace the modern and popular technology of the cinema as a means for the expression of those interests. By contrast, some of his intellectual contemporaries were suspicious of this vehicle of mass culture, and of its

³ Arthur Bliss, 'Those Damned Films!', *Musical News and Herald*, 18 February 1922, 220, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 31-2.

⁴ H. G. Wells, *Two film stories*, 9.

narcotic effect. W. H. Auden had expressed caution in lines composed in 1932: 'By cops directed to the fug / Of talkie-houses for a drug, / Or down canals to find a hug / Until you die.' A moderate and even a social democrat Bliss may have been, but no aspiring sociological Marxist.

Responsibility for the film's production was taken by Alexander Korda, the founder of London Films. Wells and Korda had first met through a mutual acquaintance, and the two soon became close friends. In many ways, though, it was this initial confidence which proved one of the project's central difficulties. Wells soon became integrated into every aspect of production, as Korda's nephew recorded in his writings on his uncle's career: 'He agreed to let Wells write the script. He agreed that the movie should be a collaboration ... He even let Wells do most of the talking at story conferences.'⁵

It had been Wells's initial intention to build the film around the music Bliss would provide:

The music is a part of the constructive scheme of the film, and the composer ... was practically a collaborator in its production. In this as in many other respects, this film, so far at least as its intention goes, is boldly experimental. Sound sequences and picture sequences were made to be closely interwoven. This Bliss music is not intended to be tacked on; it is part of the design.⁶

This represented a new approach in film music. Then, as now, the music was usually subservient to the images, being added after the visuals had been edited satisfactorily. Wells's suggested *modus operandi* hinted at an ambition of artistic integration on an almost Wagnerian scale.

Despite much effort, however, the eventual practical reality was rather different. As the relationship between Wells and Korda soured, inevitable concessions were made. Wells admitted later:

It cannot be pretended that in actual production it was possible to blend the picture and music so closely as Bliss and I had hoped at the beginning. The incorporation of original music in film production is still in many respects an unsolved problem.⁷

The Wells script and the Bliss score underwent extensive alteration, much of which was necessitated by the collision of Wells's idealism and Korda's pragmatism: this

⁵ Michael Korda, *Charmed lives: a family romance*, 122.

⁶ H. G. Wells, *Two film stories*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

was not helped by the novelist's total inexperience in preparing a film script. As Wells conceded, 'It is only now [at the moment of the film's release] that I realise how little I knew about the cinema when I wrote the scenario. Many of the sequences which slipped quite easily from my pen were extremely difficult to screen, and some were quite impossible.'⁸

Ultimately, then, the film was not built around the music: rather, Bliss's score was dissected and slotted around the action at opportune moments. The lengthiest section of film for which music was required came towards the end of the film, during a 'building of a new world' sequence set in the first half of the twenty-first century, climaxing with the completion of Everytown in 2036 – the fullest manifestation of the Wellsian image.⁹ In this section of the film, Wells made his case for the technological benefits available to human society.

This music, as might be expected, is led by driving rhythms and metallic percussion, with concluding fanfares signifying a sense of arrival and success. It was in this section, and in this section alone, that Wells's initial ideal was realised: a large section of Bliss's original score was used, and the film cut to fit it. In fact, Bliss had raised the subject of 'mechanical music' in one of his Royal Institution lectures, and it may have been these insights that initially caught Wells's ear:

[There are] those who do not rhapsodise over the machine, but get a sense of perfection from its fine lines and formal designs, which they feel are analogous to what they are wanting to express ... [By contrast, there are] those, missing a sense of romanticism, fall into an inhuman, cold manner of composing. Human warmth is damped down, and a chilly impersonal manner takes its place. Their music tends to sound very much the same, just a series of cogs revolving, pistons working, wheels turning. Composers have become aesthetic engineers, but so far the compositions they have designed are on the whole monotonous.¹⁰

We can imagine, then, that Wells might have hoped for Bliss to provide a musical response to scenes of construction – one containing 'human warmth' – rather than an aural imitation. This is certainly what Wells got, yet it did not prevent him from

⁸ H. G. Wells, quoted by J. Danvers Williams in *Film Weekly*, 29 February 1936, 8, reproduced in Karol Kulik, *Alexander Korda: the man who could work miracles*, 147.

⁹ It was in this section of the film that Wells seemed to take particular interest. Bliss also confirms that throughout the film's lengthy evolution, this section of music remained almost entirely unaltered. See Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 105 and 'Sir Arthur Bliss', interview with Peter Griffiths, *Film Dope* 5 (1974), 2-5.

¹⁰ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 15 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 89. Here, Bliss appears to reject his earlier aesthetic of, say, 'In the Tube at Oxford Circus', the fifth of his *Conversations*.

demonstrating his capacity for obtuseness. Having played Wells an excerpt from the 'rebuilding' music on the piano, Bliss was met with this puzzling reply: 'I am sure that all that is very fine music, but I'm afraid you have missed the whole point. You see, the machines of the future will be *noiseless!*'¹¹

Korda had advised against a pre-determined musical score from the start. Bliss recalled that 'a great deal of the music was written and pre-recorded before the film really got under way' and that 'many later modifications had, of course, to be made'.¹² This was a source of frustration for Bliss who, as contemporaneous works demonstrate, was then nearing the height of his creative powers. It is little wonder, then, that he was keen to rework his score into a concert suite.

Much of Bliss's music was recorded on 3 March 1935 at the Decca Studios at Thames Street, London.¹³ This was some months, according to Wells, before the film began to take acceptable shape. Bliss had prepared his music in good faith, still hoping that Wells would be true to his word and that the film would be shot to his score. At that time, though, a final script had still not yet been produced: the recordings from the Thames Street sessions were ultimately discarded, rendered useless by the countless script revisions yet to be made. The music which appears on the film's soundtrack was recorded later under the baton of Muir Mathieson.¹⁴

Despite these frequent problems, Bliss claimed to have gained much from the experience:

I am sure the discipline involved [in composing for films] is good for a composer's technique. It certainly teaches him the value of the blue pencil, of having to delete whole bars, sew up the passage neatly to an exact timing, and express his thoughts in an aphoristic form. It is salutary to see how often compression improves the music. Not always, of course: there are certain works whose nature demands leisure and space, but quite a number (and one can tell this from an audience's sudden relaxation) outstay their welcome; ending absolutely punctually is one of the marks of the great masters.¹⁵

By March 1935, then, all of the original music for *Things to Come* was at least composed and scored, even though extensive use of the blue pencil was still

¹¹ H. G. Wells, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 105.

¹² Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 105.

¹³ The London Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Bliss.

¹⁴ Aural comparisons of the Bliss and Mathieson recordings show a reduction in the breadth of musical material: there are also some conspicuous alterations to percussive instrumentation, usually with mechanical 'effects' added rather than eliminated.

¹⁵ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 106.

required. If Bliss had truly learned the art of economy in composing his first film score, then his next work would allow him to explore more expansive soundscapes. Now he turned to a piece of ‘pure’ music, as he did several times in his career after producing a large, programmatic composition. As if to make this contrast more explicit, he gave his new work the title *Music for Strings*. Could any title be more demonstrably abstract?

Music for Strings

This is an important work in the Bliss canon, for it involved no extra-musical stimulation, or collaboration with a virtuoso performer or group of performers. Could it be, then, that this work gives us one of the clearest glimpses of Bliss’s true creative personality? As we know, he usually required some kind of external influence;¹⁶ now, though, he was tired of providing music for ‘other people’s ideas’, and so ‘as an antidote I started to compose a substantial piece of “pure” music.’¹⁷ The work was never revised, another rarity in Bliss’s output: indeed, he ‘wrote these movements fairly quickly, and enjoyed the labour’.¹⁸



Ex. 20 Bliss: *Music for Strings*, I, bb. 1-3, opening subject

In the last movement of the Clarinet Quintet, Bliss had produced an organic tour de force from the opening statement. The energetic opening of *Music for Strings* serves precisely the same purpose, and provides much of the thematic material in an extended sonata-form first movement. This opening gesture may be divided into three motifs corresponding to its three bars, and it is from these motifs that Bliss constructed much of the movement (ex. 20). The second subject, when it arrives at bar 47, represents a significant departure from the material hitherto presented (ex. 21). It is assembled from a series of three-beat sub-phrases, each containing three richly-scored down-bow chords. Yet there is a relationship between this new subject

¹⁶ See the ‘spider’ and the ‘magpie’, Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 71.

¹⁷ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 107-8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

and the opening music: in the third bar of the movement, the thematically-important lower string parts have the same dotted crotchet, quaver, crotchet rhythm.



Ex. 21 Bliss: *Music for Strings*, I, bb. 47-50, tutti strings, second subject

Some observations of metre and tonality also prove useful. The time signatures in this opening movement change frequently, yet there are no instances of irregular, quaver-based metres: that is, bars of 5/8 or 7/8. In fact, there are only two bars even of 5/4 in the whole movement. This constancy, and the eventual dominance of 3/4 time, produces an extremely regular, driving pulse. Frequent interplay between semiquaver and triplet-semiquaver figures creates yet more rhythmic energy and urgency.

There are also very few directions for fluctuating tempi in the orchestral parts, although in the conductor's score Bliss adopted an almost Elgarian mode of tempo communication. Where Elgar had used letters (*L*, *R* etc) to indicate small adjustments in tempo, Bliss opted for symbols: a square for 'steady' (as at bar 47) and a circle for 'quicken' (bar 55). He wrote at the head of the score that '[these signs] are used to indicate *slight* changes of tempo where the use of ordinary time words would suggest more than the intended effect.'

While the first movement is cast thematically in sonata form, this is heavily disguised by Bliss's fluid tonality. Frank Howes observed of the work that '[Bliss] may not begin and end in one and the same key or "in" a key at all, but there is just enough key to keep the texture free from tangle.'¹⁹ Indeed, there are no key signatures in this movement: the first key signature in *Music for Strings* does not appear until the fifty-third bar of the final movement. Perhaps Bliss had returned to his early rejection of conventional tonalities: was the imposition of key signatures in the Clarinet Quintet suggestive of only a temporary aberration?

¹⁹ Frank Howes, 'Bliss's *Music for Strings*', *Musical Times* 77 (1936), 305.

In fact, this is not the case. The work opens with a forceful second inversion chord of D major: the case for D as a tonal centre is immediately strengthened by an aspiring melodic leap from A to F sharp in the violin parts. A somewhat chromatic excursion then leads to a chord of G minor, the subdominant of the opening chord, at bar 5. In the next bar, however, the chord of greatest importance is A major and, three bars later, this is still the case. In this opening section, Bliss continues to make extensive use of A, including a cadence at bar 17 and a quasi-modal descent at the very end of the section at bar 46. A is indeed confirmed as the first movement's tonal centre, and the presentation of the second subject in E flat introduces a tritone relationship frequently heard in Bliss's music.

'Going for a walk with a line' is how Bliss, rather whimsically, often described his use of the opening theme of *Music for Strings*.²⁰ Perhaps his light-hearted description of so rigorous a work stemmed its enjoyable compositional process. In a television interview with Vernon Handley in 1974, Bliss admitted to finding first movements – which, of course, traditionally contain the most concentrated musical arguments – the most difficult to compose.²¹ Even in his Cello Concerto, which was begun at the age of seventy-eight, he was unhappy with the sheer number of different 'moods' contained within the first movement.

It is hard to conceive of Bliss experiencing such frustrations with the first movement of *Music for Strings*, in which two contrasting and defined moods are provided by the two primary subjects. Robert Meikle observes that the movement had 'in a sense generated itself, with constant reliance on the opening figure', and that the process of self-generation, of organic growth, is 'the hallmark of Bliss's [mature] musical architecture'.²² This fresh approach to musical structure may account for both the underlying energy of the present work, and the speed at which Bliss composed it.

Frank Howes called the second movement a 'kind of rondo', although he was also perceptive enough to acknowledge the potential inaccuracy of this label: 'it is a kind of rondo, of alternating themes, only the rondo theme is not a comfortable steadfast

²⁰ See Arthur Bliss, 'In the Quick Forge and Working-House of Thought', reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 209-11.

²¹ Television interview with Vernon Handley, 1974; see also Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature* 52.

²² Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 20.

tune'. He also offered an apology for his analytical presumptuousness, referring again to 'the germ of the rondo tune (may Mr Bliss forgive me for calling it such a thing!).'²³ In the finale of *A Colour Symphony* Bliss had elevated the function of counterpoint and a concomitant rhythmic idea, in order to compensate for the lack of structural importance he had placed upon harmony or tonal progression. The same may be said of the final movement of *Music for Strings*: it is constructed almost entirely from the two main ideas presented in its introduction.

In fact, all three movements of *Music for Strings* are constructed from a comparatively small number of fundamental themes and motifs. But 'formal antithesis and recapitulation' is avoided,²⁴ the work proving instead to be a vehicle for the composer's talent for musical development, variation and metamorphosis. It is not surprising, then, that later in his career Bliss produced works with titles such as *Meditations on a Theme of John Blow* and *Metamorphic Variations*. Indeed, if the process of musical growth can be regarded as a stream with many tributaries, then we must view Bliss's *Music for Strings* as a great river of musical invention which widens as it rolls towards the sea.

Music for Strings received its first performance on the morning of 11 August 1935, in a concert given by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra during the Salzburg Festival. Adrian Boult conducted a programme consisting entirely of British music, and the audience included Toscanini, Weingartner and Bruno Walter. Bliss remembered proudly that during rehearsals for the work, Arnold Rosé, the orchestra's leader, had been heard to mutter 'Schwer, schwer – aber gut!'²⁵

On 5 November, *Music for Strings* was heard in London for the first time, with Boult again at the helm. It was repeated on 27 November at Queen's Hall, and this time drew the attention of the national press. The next morning, a bold assessment appeared in *The Times*:

As Brahms once said of a similar attribution, any fool can see the derivation from Elgar. The true value of this work is the profitable use Bliss makes of his loan. He does not bury it in a napkin but trades contrapuntally with it. And his counterpoint brings him in a return of genuine musical interest and to his audience considerable gratification. His handling of the material is wholly his own and he

²³ Frank Howes, 'Bliss's *Music for Strings*', *Musical Times* 77 (1936), 307.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁵ Arnold Rosé, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 108.

comes near to persuading one of what one knows to be untrue – that a composer can say something of moment in words that are not his own. In music a man has to make his own vocabulary as well as his own style. In so far as the vocabulary of ‘Music for Strings’ is derivative it falls short of being a strong work. In so far as it reflects the thought of a vigorous mind it is a successful work.²⁶

This is the review that marked the beginning of Bliss’s close critical association with Elgar, which has persisted to this day.

While the medium of *Music for Strings* may invite comparison with Elgar’s *Introduction and Allegro*, the critic might not have been so quick to suggest a link between Elgar and *Music for Strings* had he been writing, say, five years later, after the appearance of, for example, Britten’s *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937), Howells’s *Concerto for Strings* (1938) or Tippett’s *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* (1939). It is revealing that rather fewer comparisons were made in the press between these works and their British antecedents, Elgar or otherwise. As the first important string work composed by a member of the post-Armistice generation, it seems likely that *Music for Strings* bore the brunt of such associations.²⁷

Certainly, the second subject of the first movement is reminiscent of Elgar, but most of the music presented here represents a significant departure from the Elgar idiom. The comparisons with Elgar’s *Introduction and Allegro* have become tired, as John Warrack has rightly observed:

[*Music for Strings*] is ... one of the few English works of the century to earn a place beside the *Introduction and Allegro* as a masterpiece of string music. Both Bliss and Elgar have discovered an essential part of the nature of string ensemble in their music, but when the works seem comparable it is really less through similarity of idiom than because of their matching mastery of the medium. Bliss’s acute ear for sound, adventurous to the point of eccentricity in his earliest music, is here turned upon a time-hallowed ensemble.²⁸

This is an exuberant, modern work which simply operates within a definable genre. There are moments in the second movement which, as Robert Meikle has suggested, are more likely to remind a listener of Schoenberg or Gershwin.²⁹ *Music for Strings* is a successful work precisely because it is not overtly derivative of the English works which precede it.

²⁶ *The Times*, 28 November 1935, 12.

²⁷ Such derivative criticism was abundant in musical journalism in the 1930s.

²⁸ Promenade Concert programme, 2 August 1971, copy in the Bliss Archive.

²⁹ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 19.

English journey

Before travelling to Salzburg for the first performance of *Music for Strings* in August 1935, Bliss's growing stature had been recognised with his appointment to the Music Advisory Committee of the new British Council. This esteem was confirmed by an enticing proposition from the BBC: he was commissioned by the Corporation to undertake a musical survey of Britain for its own periodical, *The Listener*. This required him to produce a series of articles detailing the effects of broadcasting, good or ill, on musical activity in the provinces.

During the previous year, Bliss's friend J. B. Priestley had published his *English Journey*, one of several polemics on post-Depression society. Gregory Roscow has noted a number of similarities between the journeys of Priestley and Bliss: both began in the southwest before moving north and returning along the east coast.³⁰ Also, the accounts of both journeys appeared originally in twelve parts. Unlike Priestley, though, Bliss crossed the Welsh border to Cardiff, and also ventured as far north as Glasgow.

In the autumn of 1933, Priestley had found an England in economic recovery, and therefore an England at play. A gentle colonisation by American culture was palpable. This was an England

of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafés, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons.³¹

This vision of modernity had been witnessed by Bliss during his visits to America. To him, this was a familiar future. Like his art deco country residence, function was now a thing for visual admiration, not just for living and working. The technologies of culture and leisure had replaced those of industry in this new society of suburbia and consumerism, and Bliss was inescapably at its heart.

And so, during the autumn of 1935, Bliss embarked upon a 2,500-mile journey, taking in a good number of Britain's towns and cities. He held fond memories of childhood holidays in the counties of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire.

³⁰ See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 105 and the accompanying map on 106.

³¹ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, 401.

His conventional, middle-class education had taken him to Rugby and on to Cambridge, but the young Bliss had seen little of Warwickshire outside his school, and it was his university that dominated cultural activity in the city of Cambridge. He now had an opportunity to visit some of the great seats of provincial England, and to see how music was supported in their locales.

At that time, Bliss's knowledge and experience of music in the provinces was somewhat limited. For all his interest in the countryside and the natural world, he had been based in the capital for the majority of his career as a composer. Although he had recently acquired the small estate in Somerset, he had made no attempt to integrate himself into the amateur musical life of that county. This short project, then, would educate Bliss every bit as much as the readers of his articles, and even contributed directly to a new work: having been confronted by the vitality of the amateur brass band movement, he composed the test piece – the *Kenilworth* suite – for the Crystal Palace Brass Band Championships in 1936.³²

Ultimately, though, the extent to which Bliss was drawn towards urban centres – rather than rural outposts – is striking. In the course of his research he ventured to, for example, Bath, Bristol, Huddersfield, Burnley, Newcastle and Norwich. Of course, it was these centres that provided foci for provincial music – witness the English music festival; Bliss's articles, too, were intended for urban and suburban audiences, eager to read of people like themselves. The articles reflect Bliss's outlook as a man of essentially urban inclinations: in them, he wrote of city orchestras rather than parish choirs.

Across the twelve articles, Bliss declared that musical activity in the provinces was in a healthy condition, and that the BBC was playing an important role in this:

It is indeed the quantity of music everywhere that has most astonished me. There seems hardly a village which is not touched by some musical organisation. In a general way broadcasting has been the most potent cause of this growth. It has awakened the sense of music in vast sections of the population. There is naturally a percentage of this new audience who are lazily content to take the

³² The inspiration for the *Kenilworth* suite took Bliss back to the Warwickshire of his schooldays, and conjured the romantic association with Sir Walter Scott: Scott's novel *Kenilworth* set ambition against love, selfishness against selflessness (see John Sutherland, *The life of Walter Scott: a critical biography*, 240-255).

ready-made article as handed to them, but there are other listeners who wish to get in closer touch with music by learning to take part themselves.³³

A national tendency towards intellectual sloth was an aggravation for Bliss throughout his life, and continued to engage him in his work with the BBC during the Second World War. In these discourses, Bliss was never shy in promoting his belief that any person, regardless of education or background, could prosper, through application, in an intellectually-driven culture. Bliss had held these convictions since his service during the Great War: never after had he underestimated the capabilities of ‘the common man’.

Bliss’s social democratic outlook may be glimpsed in most of the articles, but particularly in his descriptions of the valleys of south Wales, which confirm his commitment to equality of cultural opportunity. He noted happily that unemployed miners could each pay one shilling and sixpence to hire music ‘for the privilege of playing in the Brahms *Requiem* or the Bach *B Minor Mass* ... the masterpiece which will sustain him through the winter’.³⁴ Of course, art could not truly sustain, but this activity underlined to Bliss the degree to which public consumption of and interaction with great works was a routine behaviour for the working class.

Of course, Bliss was almost certain to laud the effects of broadcasting as unequivocally positive: he was writing for a BBC publication, and being paid by the Corporation to do so. His articles were driven by musical anecdote and lacked, for example, either the fascinating social insight or the palpable wit of Priestley. However, the tour was central to Bliss’s improved understanding of the musical vista outside of London. This was an important personal experience for him, and it enhanced his reputation within the BBC and beyond: here was a man sympathetic to music across the entire nation.

³³ Arthur Bliss, ‘A musical pilgrimage of Britain 12: Conclusion’, *The Listener* 14 (18 December 1935), 1133, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 152.

³⁴ Arthur Bliss, ‘A musical pilgrimage of Britain 2: Cardiff and the Three Valleys’, *The Listener* 14 (9 October 1935), 633–4, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 114.

Final edit

At some time during Bliss's musical tour of Britain he was proposed as the next Director of Music at the BBC: this would allow Adrian Boult to take full-time command of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. After all, the establishment of Bliss's Musical Advisory Panel had done very little to unburden Boult of his administrative workload. Indeed, in mid-September 1935, the news of Bliss's potential appointment even made the national press. Ultimately, though, a new post of Deputy Director of Music was created and given to R. S. Thatcher who, like Bliss, had served with honour during the Great War.

The full-time Directorship would have capped a busy autumn for Bliss who, during those months, also oversaw some important first performances. On 12 September he conducted his suite of music from *Things to Come* at Queen's Hall: at this time, though, the title of the forthcoming film was still unconfirmed, and so the music was performed as *Suite from Film Music, 1935*. It still bore that name when Malcolm Sargent reprised it with the London Philharmonic Orchestra the following January. On 5 November came the first London performance of *Music for Strings*.

Beyond pure commercial potential, the very working of the film music into a concert suite confirmed Bliss's fading interface with the lures of modernism. The film music had a function – to deliver a story, to heighten a narrative. But in this new, abstract context the music did not lose its aesthetic appeal or its intrinsic quality, and now stands successfully as a work for the concert hall. By December 1935, the film of *Things to Come* was at last receiving its final edit: at this time, recordings of four sections of music ('Ballet for Children', 'Pestilence', 'Attack' and 'The World in Ruins') were released commercially. Here, then, was an early example of an integrated publicity campaign.³⁵

The strategy did not have the desired effect. The recordings aroused some interest, but much of it was negative, abounding with now-familiar Elgar comparisons. (The 'March', it is true, has a distinctly Elgarian swagger.) The critic of the *Musical Times* was first in line: 'Only in the turbulent parts and in "Desolation" is it good in the

³⁵ These have since been released on CD under the Dutton label.

way Bliss is usually good; in the other parts it is fair in the way that Elgar used to be very good.’³⁶ *Gramophone* was even less kind:

The theme of the ‘March’ is not a good one, and I do not think the composer has been happily moved here. Doubtless something with a ‘popular’ appeal was needed, and this is scarcely Bliss’s line. There may, of course, be some intention in the dance-theme shaping of the first tune, with its flattened third, that has become so tiresome a cliché; but judged as a musical theme, it is cheap ... There is here [in the ‘Epilogue’] something of the optimistic warmth of the Elgarian temperament, which I see as a good hope in Bliss’s future.³⁷

As Chislett acknowledged, this was music composed to accompany a specific visual scenario: it is not representative of Bliss’s musical personality in the same way as, say, *Music for Strings*. In the case of *Things to Come*, the given scenario was not even Bliss’s own. The very requirement was for a march imbued with populist triumphalism, and this is what Bliss willingly provided. Consequently, Bliss’s march is not brightly optimistic – rather, it is a dark, dread march, with undertones of the Fascism emerging across the Channel.

On 21 February 1936, *Things to Come* was screened for the first time at Leicester Square. The film did not prove a financial success, but the first critical responses were more positive than those for Bliss’s music had been. An article in *The Times* provided a rare contemporary assessment of Bliss’s score within the final film production:

As we know from the concert performances, Mr Arthur Bliss has not failed to make good use of his opportunity, but another power has intervened to nullify his work. For the sound in this film is so grossly over-amplified that the music becomes mere noise. In the war scenes it is admittedly a terrifying noise, heightening to an almost unbearable degree the emotions aroused by the spectacle of horror and destruction ... We still have hopes, based upon the experience of less ambitious productions, that music may yet take its legitimate place in the cinema; it remains for the musicians to stake out a claim for their art as something more than one among many forms of sound effects.³⁸

Bliss’s own memories of his first major film experience was of ‘six months of adventure’, but Wells’s final verdict on the project was far more frank and rancorous. He was unsparing in his criticism of the key players:

For me it was a huge disillusionment. It was, I saw plainly, pretentious, clumsy and scamped. I had fumbled with it. My control of the production had been ineffective. Cameron Menzies was an

³⁶ G. C., ‘The Promenade Concerts’, *Musical Times* 76 (1935), 939. As we have seen, the ‘poor man’s Elgar’ is a label that dogged Bliss from the first appearance of *Music for Strings* onwards, and has continued beyond his death.

³⁷ W. A. Chislett, in *Gramophone*, April 1936, 463.

³⁸ *The Times*, 9 April 1936.

incompetent director; he loved to get away on location and waste money on irrelevancies; and Korda let this happen ... He [Menziès] either failed to produce, or he produced so badly that ultimately they had to cut out a good half of my dramatic scenes. Korda too disappointed me and above all I disappointed myself. I was taken by surprise by difficulties I should have foreseen. I did not take Korda's measure soon enough or secure an influence over him soon enough. I have called him congenial and he is – insinuatingly and untrustworthily congenial. I grew tired of writing stuff into the treatment that was afterwards mishandled or cut out again. In the end little more of *The Shape of Things to Come* was got over than a spectacular suggestion of a Cosmopolis ruled by men of science and affairs.³⁹

Wells's biographers and scholars of cinema find themselves in broad agreement. For Warren Wagar, the film is Wells's 'worst, most lopsided Utopia, conceived in haste to hammer home one simple message to a mass audience incapable of digesting more than one idea at a time'.⁴⁰ The mass audience, of course, were still more interested and more beguiled by such sentimental horrors as Gracie Fields's *Sing As We Go*.⁴¹ Donald Albrecht found little to celebrate in the film's design, rejecting it as 'little more than a cartoon of streamlining'.⁴² As for the music, the best phrases – the grand, Elgarian march, for example – were simply lost beneath dialogue or futuristic sound effects.

For Bliss, too, the film's shortcomings lay in its deviation from Wells's grand plan. '[Wells] knew that the mass medium of the film was the most powerful means of conveying his message, but it did not quite turn out like that', he judged later. 'The financial necessity of having to appeal to a vast audience meant a concession here and a concession there, a watering down in one place, a deletion in another, so that, instead of having the impact of a vital parable, it became just an exciting entertainment.'⁴³ Such is the ache of art that strives for popular appeal.

³⁹ H. G. Wells, *H. G. Wells in Love: postscript to an experiment in autobiography*, 211-212.

⁴⁰ W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells and the World State*, 238, also quoted in Matthew Riley, 'Music for the Machines of the Future: H. G. Wells, Arthur Bliss and Things to Come (1936)', in Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism 1895-1960*, 249-68.

⁴¹ This was undoubtedly the hit film of 1934, in which the Fields character, laid off from her job in a cotton mill, ventures around the north of England proclaiming that 'if we can't spin, we can still sing'. The screenplay was supplied by Gordon Wellesley and J. B. Priestley, yet relies upon shallow sentiment, hackneyed cliché and false optimism. It was stupendously popular. One can only hope that Priestley concentrated hard on his pay cheque.

⁴² Donald Albrecht, *Designing dreams: modern architecture in the movies*, 163, also quoted in Matthew Riley, 'Music for the Machines of the Future: H. G. Wells, Arthur Bliss and Things to Come (1936)', in Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism 1895-1960*, 249-68.

⁴³ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 105-6.

Bliss's new England

The press notices for *Music for Strings* had identified a strong Elgarian thread in Bliss's evolving style.⁴⁴ The criticism of the *Things to Come* score then focused on an almost cod-Elgarian march. With his journalistic descriptions of cultural life in Britain, Bliss lay claim to be something of a musical Priestley. He now even owned a seat in the Somerset countryside. But what was Bliss's real place in the national urban-rural discourse?

Historical scholarship undertaken since Bliss's death has attempted to reveal the cultural meanings of the English countryside, and has claimed that in identifying with the 'nation' one need not identify explicitly with the rural. However, for much of the twentieth century, a contrary trail of thought prevailed: indeed, popularly, it still does. This is important, for the two associative names stated above – Elgar, recently deceased, and Priestley, still very much living – were at that time bound tight to notions of England and its countryside.

In interwar England, though, rural imagery was also used to evoke class conflict or, even, tangible modernity.⁴⁵ In this period of unprecedented urbanisation, most pragmatists were reconciled to the urban nature of their society.⁴⁶ There is no clear evidence that Bliss found in Somerset his idealised image of nationhood: rather, here was simply a second home, a desirable location in which to compose. There were no false idols of social harmony in Bliss's mind.⁴⁷ This demonstrates why these years must be considered within an urban-rural interdependence or continuum, rather than the received binary model of popular commentary.

With the Priestley association, though, and through his connection to Wells, we have cause for presuming Bliss to be a social progressive. We have seen his theoretical emphasis on humanity, regardless of class or background. It was in a climate of social democracy that Bliss lived and worked during the late 1930s. He had long

⁴⁴ This was the inevitable end point of a process that had been evident from *A Colour Symphony* onwards.

⁴⁵ See Alex Potts, "'Constable Country' between the wars", in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism*, vol. 3: *National Fictions*, 175.

⁴⁶ Peter Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English culture and the limits to rural nostalgia, 1850-1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997), 155-75.

⁴⁷ For more, see John Lowerson, 'The battle for the countryside', in Frank Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, culture and social change: a new view of the thirties*.

since abandoned the social and political principles of the nineteenth century, and although his music had begun to demonstrate a kind of mature conservatism, his personality was not for turning. In his writings he was prescriptive, in his administration controlling. This was a man who championed equality, but required it to be matched with a rigorous discipline.

There were still deep divisions in the national music. Cecil Gray, for one, was unimpressed by the continued dominance of an apparent elite:

This spirit of smug, pharasaical gentlemanliness, complicated with social snobbery, permeates every aspect of English musical life at the present time, from top to bottom ... There is no hope for English music until this fatal confusion of artistic with false social and ethical values has been broken down.⁴⁸

The grudges against those who had explicitly sought European apprenticeships still held firm. The objectives of British high society, too, hardly proved conducive for the liberal fraternity: this was unfavourable to the societal ambitions of, for example, Wells and Priestley, themselves good friends. Authoritarianism had sprung up on the Continent and, in reality, conditions in Britain were little better. Modernism, with its progressive associations, was regarded as a threat: indeed, the politics of Stanley Baldwin seemed to encourage a regression to the values of Victoriana. The future, as explored by Wells and others, was a frightening, dystopian place.

While the urban-rural interrelationship was a complex one in the 1930s, Britain's political masters were inclined to deploy ruralism to conservative ends, often with limited success. Baldwin had begun this campaign as a response to the 'dangerous' high modernism of the 1920s: in 1924, for example, he had claimed that 'England is the country and the country is England'.⁴⁹ He used the horse-drawn plough as a symbol of virtuous rural life, a 'sight that has been seen in England since England was a land ... the one eternal sight of England'. This was hollow rhetoric. Baldwin was evoking the past, and neglecting the future: the horse-drawn plough was a dying technology, and he knew it.⁵⁰ In this resistance of progress, not to mention of simple agricultural history, the cry went out that rural England had remained unchanged for millennia.

⁴⁸ Cecil Gray, *Predicaments*, 291-2.

⁴⁹ Stanley Baldwin, 'England', in *On England and other addresses*, 1-9.

⁵⁰ This tendency towards the past would have near-disastrous consequences in the lead up to the Second World War, in which Baldwin failed to make necessary funds available for national armament.

For Bill Schwartz, the intention of such rhetoric was openly to ‘displace and neutralise the antagonism between the people and the state’.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Ross McKibbin has concluded that beneath such statements lay a desire to exclude the organised proletariat from a common conception of ‘the nation’.⁵² This proved irksome to Marxian social democrats: this was an age in which the collective English self-image had altered and turned away, as Alison Light has argued, from the ‘masculine public rhetorics’ of high imperialism, and rather towards a ‘more inward-looking, more domestic and more private’ idea of the nation.⁵³

If there was a cultural unease with industry and urbanism, and a subconscious connection with ‘the “timeless” life of the English countryside’, it served only to create solitude and disjointedness.⁵⁴ Amid the expanding suburbia, the English sought sanctuary from demonstrative and destructive nationalism in their gardens and at their kitchen sinks.⁵⁵ In many ways, Britain was further from true democracy than it had been before the Great War: now, wrote Priestley, ‘we wear the face of the inheritor, not the creator. We have amongst us thousands and thousands of Bertie Woosters who do not know that Jeeves is dead.’⁵⁶

There were international considerations and threats, too: indeed, any adequate understanding and appreciation of Bliss’s next work, *Checkmate*, demands some commentary upon the political context in which it was conceived. Much has been written on the rise of Moseley and the British Union of Fascists, the disgust for which is used by the modern media to evoke nostalgia for a pan-societal desire for political moderation.⁵⁷ Of more ultimate and international importance was the election of Hitler in 1933, and the apparently-disinterested response to this by the British governing elite. Even when Hitler’s troops invaded the Rhineland in 1936, the response at Westminster was muted.

⁵¹ Bill Schwartz, *Formations of nation and people*, 18.

⁵² Ross McKibbin, ‘Class and conventional wisdom: the Conservative Party and the “public” in inter-war Britain’, in *The ideologies of class: social relations in Britain 1880-1950*.

⁵³ Alison Light, *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars*, 8-9.

⁵⁴ Krishnan Kumar, *The making of English national identity*, 231-2.

⁵⁵ Alison Light, *op. cit.*, 211.

⁵⁶ J. B. Priestley, *Rain upon Godshill: a further chapter of autobiography*, 221.

⁵⁷ Witness recent large-budget television and film dramas such as *The King’s Speech*, *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*. In January 1934, Moseley had courted the Rothermere press so successfully that the headline ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts’ appeared on the front cover of the *Daily Express*. In the wake of the Battle of Cable Street, Moseley became a national figure of fun for the sniggering masses. This inherent suspicion of politicians ensured that Britain never fell prey to a totalitarian regime.

Less is made of the concurrent socialist activities in London, such as the sometimes-militant Green Shirt Movement for Social Credit, which sought a middle ground between capitalism and communism. By keeping the social credit of communities within those communities, it argued, a more leisured and moderate society might emerge.⁵⁸ There were also, however, left-wing extremists and communist sympathisers, and this polarisation is demonstrated no better than by the political pin-up girls of 1930s, Unity Mitford, the Nazi sympathiser who attempted suicide after the declaration of war in 1939, and her sister Jessica, the so-called 'red sheep' of the family. This combative relationship between Black and Red would become the central theme of Bliss's first ballet score.

To the chess board

By the autumn of 1936, Bliss was meeting with the BBC's three-man Musical Advisory Panel every Tuesday at Broadcasting House. Here they discussed and confirmed arrangements for the week's performances, paying particular attention to the Sunday evening concerts which were generally broadcast live.⁵⁹ Throughout 1936 and early 1937, Bliss planned and composed what became his first and best-known ballet score, *Checkmate*. He wrote:

I had often thought, in the years before the First World War, when I first saw the splendour of the Diaghilev ballets, how glorious it would be to have one's own music created anew in the dance; and now the chance had come to write a work to be given at a gala performance by the Sadler's Wells Ballet in their first season in Paris the following year.⁶⁰

So began a period in which Bliss became a musical ambassador for England, providing this score for the Sadler's Wells Paris season, and later the major British work for the New York World Fair in 1939.

His new subject matter spoke of Bliss's tendency to retrospection: *Checkmate* was the realisation of a twenty-year ambition to compose a ballet score, and also recalled the many hours Bliss had spent playing chess with R. O. Morris in the early 1920s. Bliss understood the dramatic register of this arena, and set to work on producing an

⁵⁸ For more, see J. L. Finlay, 'John Hargrave, the Green Shirts, and Social Credit', *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (1970), 53-71.

⁵⁹ Bliss remained on the Panel until the summer of 1939.

⁶⁰ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 113.

original scenario with the help of the director Bridges Adams and the choreographer Ninette de Valois. Red was set against Black, Love against Death: the central narrative concerned the Black Queen and a Red Knight, culminating in the inevitable matriarchal victory.

Dark clouds were beginning to form above European politics, and the prospect of war was looming large: certainly, Bliss's music captured these contemporaneous diplomatic machinations. A tangible sense of inevitability had a profound effect of Bliss, a veteran of 'the war to end all wars'. Clement Crisp has suggested that this new source of potential trauma accounts for the desolation and occasional violence in the score of *Checkmate*:

Writing at a time when the dramas of the chess game were terrifyingly echoed in the worsening European scene, *Checkmate* has a power and a passionate expression that are still gripping in the theatre. The mood, surely set by the music of the Prologue, is one of inexorable tragedy; the bold melodic writing and the precisely stated atmosphere created by the dark orchestral colouring have an eloquence that sustains and embellishes the danced theme.⁶¹

Crisp's analysis is fair: throughout, bassoons and clarinets are favoured over flutes and trumpets, and the sinewy string melodies seem to capture an ominous descent into the unknown – of the two players, Love and Death, there could be only one victor.

The Red of Love is surely not representative of Russia, but the Death-marching, goose-stepping Black pawns leave no doubt as to their derivation. Within a score comprising a number of set pieces, de Valois was able to combine a number of differing dance styles, including classical steps, Fascist salutes, and even elements of the English Morris tradition. Bliss, too, perhaps more so than in his music for *Things to Come*, demonstrated his gift for programmatic description: a faint chorale introduces the bishops, while Wellsian machines are recalled for the marching rooks. The elderly Red King, almost Lear-like, is given his own unstable pathetic leitmotif.

Bliss completed his score in May 1937, and the ballet received its first performance in Paris on 15 June. The cast included Robert Helpmann, Frederick Ashton and Margot Fonteyn, and the performance was conducted by Constant Lambert. With the premiere behind him Bliss's time became freer, and he was able to begin work on a

⁶¹ Clement Crisp, 'The ballets of Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 107 (1966), 674.

score for a cinematic documentary on the development of the aircraft: the slow production of *Things to Come* had obviously not left permanent scars.

The Conquest of the Air had been filmed during 1936, and now required editing and other post-production work as well as, naturally, a sweeping soundtrack: Bliss was an obvious candidate. Much of this editing work was put on hold until 1938, owing to something of a meltdown in the British film industry: indeed, much had changed since the extravagances of *Things to Come*. Investors were now far less willing to provide equity for increasingly uncertain returns: this brief hiatus was timely for Bliss, who as a consequence had been able to focus on *Checkmate* with few disturbances.

The film was assembled for preview in the spring of 1938, by which time Bliss had completed his score. He also worked the music into a concert suite, which was heard for the first time on 11 February 1938, with Muir Mathieson conducting the London Film Symphony Orchestra. After a Promenade repeat later that year, Constant Lambert wrote of the new work in the *Radio Times*:

Arthur Bliss, who has just written music for an important documentary entitled *Conquest of the Air*, has evidently been conscious of the difficulty imposed by the apparently easy subject. Those who expect an imposing array of percussion instruments and a series of orchestral stunts in the latest Franco-Prussian manner will be disappointed. Bliss's music is 'straight' music written for a 'straight' orchestra, and he has throughout paid more attention to the human element than to the mechanical element ... Generally speaking, this suite suggests that modern composers are at last taking machinery for granted, that they no longer are interested in mechanical realism but prefer to treat modern realism as a normal expression of the life that surrounds us.⁶²

Here, Lambert's authoritative critical voice provides confirmation of Bliss's lack of interest in mechanical trickery. He had come a long way since his underground conversation at Oxford Circus. On 8 April 1938, Bliss conducted his own suite from *Checkmate* at Queen's Hall, a performance which was reviewed in the *Manchester Guardian* by Walter Legge: 'This music is as hard, ruthless and busy as everyday business life, unsentimental as a high-powered locomotive. It sets the listener no problems, but it gives him no rest from insistent clamour. Perhaps Mr Bliss is the true modern musician, faithfully reflecting the spirit of his times.'⁶³ Here was

⁶² Constant Lambert, 'Music of the Machine Age', *Radio Times*, 6 September 1938.

⁶³ Walter Legge, quoted in Alan Sanders (ed.), *Walter Legge: words and music*, 67.

modern power encapsulated in musical purity. Such praise as this crowned a decade of extraordinary success.

Cultural ambassador

In May 1938, Bliss travelled to Brussels to serve as a jurist for the Ysaÿe International Competition for Pianists, alongside such luminaries as Rubinstein and Gieseking. By this time, Bliss had agreed to a commission for a piano concerto, and it seems remarkable that his undoubted enthusiasm for the genre survived after his duties in Brussels. Certainly, his notorious straightforwardness came to the fore during the early stages of the competition, as he remembered later:

Unfortunately on this occasion we had an old pupil of Liszt as Chairman, who was both vain and weak. His habit of exclaiming aloud 'zu schnell' or 'zu langsam' while nervous young players were competing annoyed me to such an extent that I threatened to withdraw, giving the press my cogent reasons, unless he kept quiet during the auditions. At the end of the contest he rashly volunteered to play the Schumann Concerto himself at a public concert, thereby giving us the feeblest exhibition of piano playing of the week.⁶⁴

In a letter home to Trudy, Bliss also revealed the less glamorous aspects of judging such competitions: 'I have heard twenty-two pianists play the same piece by Bach, the same piece by Scarlatti, and expect to hear them sixty-three times more. Never again!'⁶⁵

Bliss's friend Ernest Makower was to have a role in the successful delivery of the Piano Concerto: Makower had been appointed Chair of the British Council's Music Advisory Board upon the Council's foundation in 1935, and had been charged with the responsibility of commissioning British compositions for the New York World's Fair of 1939. He also managed to secure Bax's Seventh Symphony and Vaughan Williams's *Five Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'*.

The commission provided Bliss with a pressing impetus, given his strong personal connections with the United States. This was the first time he had composed a work with a specifically American audience in mind, and it was no accident that the concerto was dedicated 'To the people of the United States of America'. In addition,

⁶⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 118.

⁶⁵ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 18 May 1938, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 119.

Bliss was well served – in both enthusiasm and technique – by his own early promise as a pianist. His recollections of his own abilities are modest, but a career as performer rather than composer had once seemed a very real possibility. In composing a concerto for the instrument, he had an opportunity to realise ‘the combination of performer and creative artist’ that he had once so admired in Busoni.⁶⁶

In truth, the Ysaÿe International Competition had helped to fill Bliss’s mind with the virtuosity that found a release in the Piano Concerto. Despite his protestations about the drudgery of judging, he had still admitted to Trudy that ‘I am learning a lot by listening to these young players – the standard is high – and my Piano Concerto is going to benefit by the experience’.⁶⁷

After a televised performance of *Checkmate* on 8 May 1938,⁶⁸ Bliss settled down to work on the new concerto. His head was full with the abilities of the young competitors, and he turned again to the technical brilliance of an established soloist. Bliss now had at his side the pianist Solomon, one of the most gifted performers working in Britain at that time.⁶⁹ The two men had been formally introduced by Lionel Tertis in 1933, during Bliss’s work on his Viola Sonata.

Bliss regarded Solomon’s talent as an invitation to exercise every facet of a pianist’s technique, yet he remained determined to avoid any detraction from the romantic depth of the work. Indeed, the expressive quality within the music – in contrast to, for example, the objectivity of Bliss’s early career – was likely due to Bliss’s admiration for Solomon’s character as well as his executive talent: he later recalled that ‘Solomon has the temperament I admire – capable of great feeling, held steady

⁶⁶ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 27.

⁶⁷ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 18 May 1938, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 119.

⁶⁸ This was produced by the BBC at Alexandra Palace, and televised live at 9pm on 8 May 1938.

Documents in the holdings of the Alexandra Palace Television Society show that the performance was accompanied on the piano by Yvonne Arnaud, but that a later broadcast performance in February 1939 was accompanied by full orchestra conducted by Constant Lambert, as per the original staged production.

⁶⁹ Solomon was born Solomon Cutner in London’s East End in 1902, and was promoted as a child prodigy. He was renowned for his prolific touring schedule, and for his interpretations of Beethoven. Solomon was eleven years Bliss’s junior, but still Bliss had seen him perform at Queen’s Hall whilst an undergraduate at Cambridge. Solomon can have been little more than ten years old, and Bliss later claimed in a radio interview that this concert was a contributing factor to his abandoning his ambitions of becoming a concert pianist.

in check. I try to do the same by casting my work into as formal a pattern as I can.⁷⁰ Solomon, for his part, was careful to test the potential of a collaborative relationship: ‘before definitely accepting, [he] wanted to see what views I held about piano technique and whether he was sympathetic to the general atmosphere of the work.’⁷¹

Technical brilliance aside, by the late 1930s the piano concerto seemed a little out of fashion. It must have seemed inconceivable that Bliss, who had appeared so experimental twenty years earlier, should attempt to compose in so conventional a genre. This was the first of his three significant mature concertos, and it is revealing that his earlier attempts – either abandoned or destroyed – strayed from the conventional ‘single instrument with orchestral accompaniment’, employing either two pianos or the unusual combination of piano with tenor voice.

What is surprising about this work, then, is not only its very genre, but also the romantic sweep of the music contained within, which places it comfortably in the lineage of Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. Amongst Bliss’s British contemporaries, major works for piano and orchestra were scarce. Vaughan Williams’s effort of 1931 was poorly received and has not endured; John Ireland’s 1930 concerto seems a better benchmark. Constant Lambert’s single-movement *Rio Grande* is perhaps the outstanding British piano work of the interwar years, while Frank Bridge also consciously rejected the formal ‘piano concerto’ with his *Phantasm*. It fell to Bliss to crown his most successful decade with an acknowledged concerto of romantic scope and execution.

From the outset, the soloist is placed in opposition to the orchestra: Bliss demands attention from the opening orchestral fanfare and the first piano flourishes, but this introductory material is just that: it does not appear again, and is not used as a developmental ‘germ’. Rather, unusually for Bliss’s abstract works of the 1930s, three further themes are then exposed, and are consequently woven into a tight musical argument. This, at least, ensures that the work conforms to at least one of Bliss’s compositional habits for multi-movement works: the first is reserved for thematic discourse, and leads to a contrasting meditation, before a rondo finale sweeps the work to a close with rhythms of relentless propulsion.

⁷⁰ Arthur Bliss, in an undated typed note in the Bliss Archive.

⁷¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 120.

Bliss completed his concerto in April 1939, as the prospect of war had a nation enthralled. It was in an uncertain climate, then, that on 4 June the Bliss family set sail on the *SS Georgic* to attend the New York World's Fair: the trip coincided with the children's school holidays, and so it was decided that the whole family should be present. The Atlantic crossing was made together with Adrian Boult and Solomon, and the group was greeted on their arrival by the British Consul General. This was followed by some intense rehearsals with Barbirolli's New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra.

The concerto received its long-awaited first performance on 10 June, in a Saturday evening concert at Carnegie Hall. Bax's new symphony had been premiered the previous evening, and had not met a favourable critical reception. The Bliss work, on the other hand, was better received: it had, after all, been composed with American ears in mind. It was hailed by the *New York Times* as 'a modern pianist's vehicle', with reports that 'the audience rejoiced in the brilliant music and repeatedly called back to the stage the composer, conductor and pianist.'⁷² Solomon's extraordinary performance was captured in the concert hall, alongside the abundant energy of the New York orchestra under Boult's immaculate control.⁷³

Bliss recalled his disbelief at the thought of a second war in Europe: after the concert, he remained confident that he and his family would return to London after their summer vacation. It seemed that 'the majority of men I talked with felt it was only a question of summer lightning and that sanity, statesmanship, and a sympathy with the other fellow's problem would prevent the madness of 1914.'⁷⁴ Even with hindsight, Bliss did not profess to have known any better. In the Carnegie Hall audience had been Bliss's old friend Albert Elkus, who was now a Professor of Music at the University of California at Berkeley. This was opportune, for now Elkus offered Bliss the post of temporary visiting professor at Berkeley, a position which would serve Bliss and his family well.

Solomon soon returned to Britain, and there he gave the London premiere of the Piano Concerto at a Promenade Concert on 17 August, this time conducted by Henry

⁷² Olin Downes, *New York Times*, 11 June 1939.

⁷³ The recording has been issued as APR CD5627. Solomon and Boult collaborated again on a commercial HMV recording of the work in January 1943 with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

⁷⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 121.

Wood. That performance drew these remarks in *The Times*: 'The first impression created by this work is one of wholesome sanity and nervous energy. It is not afraid to speak directly from the heart.'⁷⁵ This alludes to the romantic nature of the work, but also, curiously, to the tense wisdom of the composer himself. Bryan Crimp has also claimed that, for a time, the concerto 'came to be regarded as a potent musical symbol of Anglo-American solidarity',⁷⁶ due in no small measure to the continuing frequency of performances by Solomon. In later years the work was also championed by Noel Mewton-Wood, who garnered critical acclaim for his own interpretations in the concert hall and on record.

Soon after the New York performance, Trudy and the girls visited relatives at Stockbridge; Bliss and Boult travelled to Chicago, where Boult conducted some of Bliss's music. The family were reunited for a break of several days at Moosehead Lake in Maine. By the end of August they had returned to Stockbridge, where they heard on 3 September the announcement that Britain had entered the war. After a civilian ship was sunk in the Atlantic, Bliss resigned himself to a more extended stay in America, and accepted the professorship at Berkeley.

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 18 August 1939.

⁷⁶ Bryan Crimp, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 117.

Second war

1939—1945

Finding himself stranded with his family in the United States, Bliss took the Visiting Professorship at Berkeley that Albert Elkus had offered him. Here he integrated himself into a vital cultural community of European ex-patriots, and began work on a song cycle and a string quartet. Later, he returned to England alone – here he served with the BBC, becoming Director of Music in 1942. By the end of the war Bliss found himself drawn increasingly towards the stage, producing two ballet scores and planning his first opera.

On 3 September 1939, the day that Britain entered the war, Franklin Roosevelt addressed his nation on the subject of American neutrality. The USA had passed a number of Neutrality Acts during the 1930s, which had been designed to prevent her from becoming embroiled once again in a European War. In his Presidential address, Roosevelt referred to his own belief in the advancement of peace, and added enigmatically: ‘This nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well. Even a neutral has a right to take

account of facts. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or close his conscience.’¹ His thoughts did not yet extend to military intervention.

Bliss’s personal response to the explicitly-stated neutrality of the USA, his ‘second’ country, in the first days of the Franco-British offensive is not known. Certainly, though, he began to correspond almost immediately with friends and colleagues in London, in order to determine how he might be of use in some active way. On 4 September he sent a telegram to Adrian Boult, offering his ‘national’ services to the BBC, and repeated his proposition in a letter to R. S. Thatcher on 8 September. A week later came Thatcher’s reply: ‘there really isn’t a job while the services of so many bright members of the staff are still unused. Your offer is immensely appreciated none the less.’²

A glimpse of Bliss’s mood is revealed in a letter recently discovered by Paul Jackson among the personal effects of the artist Maurice Farquharson. It provides a good account of Bliss’s state of mind during the first weeks of the war:

I write to you for advice in a state of extreme depression. On the eve of sailing back, war broke out, and I cancelled our passage and took time to consider what was best to do ... I have taken a small furnished house for the family just outside Boston [59 Hunt Road, Belmont], sent the children to school and live or rather non-live day by day in dreadful indecision. What should I do? What must I do? It is because I shall soon have to clarify this for my sanity’s sake that I write to you ... This is the problem.

1. I feel it stupid or perhaps even selfishly contrived to bring Trudy and the children back into a war country if they can stay here. Trudy’s American citizenship makes that easy.
2. If I stay here with them I become a sort of ex-patriot with all that means. Loss of touch with my contemporaries, frightful nostalgia, inability to look after what prospects I have, ignorance of restrictions which during war time may be affecting my/our future and the impossibility of getting settled here to work without some sort of official blessing.
3. If I return to England, I have a possibly long separation from my family which I hate to think of, and the possible difficulties financial and other that they may meet, – but if I return what useful work can I or should I do?

Whichever way I look at it, my next step seems to be inevitable. I can no longer decide here, and therefore long for a secure opinion from you who are in the actual spot.³

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a Presidential address to the nation, 3 September 1939.

² R. S. Thatcher, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 15 September 1939, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 25.

³ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Maurice Farquharson, 18 September 1939, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 181-2.

On 19 September Bliss wrote to Eugene Goossens from Belmont, and mentioned Albert Elkus's offer of a teaching position at Berkeley to begin the following January. In October he wrote to Goossens again, in a state of some sadness: 'I feel a veritable exile. I have to start my career again. I am very nostalgic for England.'⁴

At around the same time he also wrote to Bridges Adams, confirming that he had accepted Elkus's proposition. He reported: 'I spend most of my time ... preparing lectures on Tudor composers to be given next year at the University of California in San Francisco.'⁵ Indeed, the autumn of 1939 was spent either at the rented house in Belmont, or preparing for his forthcoming professorship by compiling lecture notes in the Harvard Library. In December the family visited Chicago, and spent Christmas there at the home of one of Trudy's aunts.

Berkeley

By the New Year the family had reached California: in January 1940 Bliss began his appointment at Berkeley, and they took up university lodgings on Warring Street. This situation, though not ideal given his temporary exile from England, was more suited to Bliss: he was now surrounded by friends and intellectual stimulations, with Ernest Bloch and Darius Milhaud both living in close proximity. He also had a large cohort of students to engage him, and he taught several courses on composition and music history, including a comprehensive introduction to English music.⁶

The summer of 1940 took the Blissés to Santa Barbara, where they stayed in a house belonging to Hoffmann relatives who had returned to their main East Coast residence. Here Arthur received letters from Howard describing German bombing raids on London: it was now the youngest brother imparting the grim news, having once served as a vessel for Arthur's accounts of life in the trenches.⁷ It was around

⁴ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Eugene Goossens, 7 October 1939, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 25.

⁵ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to W. Bridges Adams, 11 October 1939, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 25.

⁶ He remembered later that his students had taken immediately to Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony – a work so 'characteristic of [an] inward wrestling which his outward appearance so seemed to belie' (Arthur Bliss, in the foreword of the RVW centenary committee book, 1972, manuscript in Malcolm Smith private collection).

⁷ See Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 126-7.

this time that Bliss began work on a number of song settings: the resulting *Seven American Poems* were not performed until November 1941, and not published until December 1942.

In these songs, composed for female or male low voice, Bliss set five poems of Edna St Vincent Millay and two of Elinor Wylie. He set two more Millay poems in Santa Barbara, but these found no place in the published cycle: they were humorous in nature and unavoidably gender-specific to a female performer. Bliss's choice of poets seems unexpected: after all, he was not prone to setting female writers.

Both women had enjoyed literary prominence during the interwar years. Both, too, were firm proponents of the sonnet form and, despite their modern leanings, had been heavily influenced by the English classics. An active feminist, Millay had embarked on a number of lesbian affairs from an early age, drawing the remark from the ever-acerbic Dorothy Parker that 'Miss Millay did a great deal of harm with her double-burning candles.'⁸ The strikingly beautiful Wylie married three times before her death at the age of 43, with each new marriage instigated by an elopement – the first of these resulted in her abandoned husband taking his own life.

Bliss's lengthiest period in Santa Barbara before this wartime vacation had been fifteen years before, during his successful courtship of Trudy, and he reflected later upon this unhappy change of situation: 'it was eerily strange to be staying there once more under such different and sadder circumstances and my mood at that time is expressed in my settings of seven American poems, ... each one of which carries the burden of vanquished joy or beauty.'⁹ Indeed, Stephen Banfield has noted that the seven songs explore 'a wistful acceptance of loss and violent protest against it'.¹⁰

This was not the first time that Bliss's music had reflected violently some flaw in his personal circumstances. These personal aspects are also captured in Banfield's claim that Bliss was 'at last using song as a means of direct self-expression', and that the result is a 'wonderfully relaxed outpouring'.¹¹ Gone is any last hint of tonal ambiguity, replaced wholly by the warm romanticism of the Piano Concerto. Where

⁸ Dorothy Parker, quoted in Nina Miller, *Making love modern: the intimate public worlds of New York's literary women*, 122.

⁹ Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 126.

¹⁰ Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English song*, 368.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 366.

that he had been 'too disturbed to write any music'.¹³ This condition is understandable, for the family's London home had been cleared and its contents placed into storage by friends. Further, the country retreat at Pen Pits had been commandeered by the War Department and daubed in camouflage paint.

Bliss was forced to suffer these indignities from afar, and it is little wonder that he felt 'overcome with a sense of impotence and frustration'.¹⁴ Even his visits to Santa Barbara saw once-happy memories eroded by a sense of darkening gloom. The depth of feeling and pain in the American songs betrayed Bliss's continuing personal anxieties:

There was a sustained clash of loyalties, destroying any feeling of sustained happiness. What *should* be the future of my family and myself? There could be no question of *their* returning to England, but what action was right for me? My roots were deeply planted there, and whatever growth I had attained I owed to that country's traditions of thought and design of living. As I walked, morning after morning to my lecture room past posters bearing the words 'London Aflame' or 'The City Burning', ... my work at Berkeley seemed so relatively unimportant.¹⁵

Naturally, Bliss found it increasingly difficult to devote his attention to composition. His inspiration was rescued only by a timely commission for a chamber work, on which he began work in September 1940.

A chamber diversion

Bliss's next work retained a touch of the personal intensity of the American songs. Its patroness was a familiar friend, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who now added a String Quartet in B flat major to the Oboe Quintet she had already commissioned from Bliss in 1927. Following the student quartet of 1913 and another in the 1920s (now lost), this was also his most substantial essay in the genre, and the first that he acknowledged publicly.

Work was impressively quick: it began on 6 September 1940, and by the middle of January 1941 the Pro Arte Quartet was ready to perform the first three movements at the New York Public Library. Revisions were made, and a finale was added by

¹³ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 130.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

February: the full work received its first performance at Berkeley on 9 April 1941. This, then, was the perfect antidote to Bliss's distractions.

The rondo form of the first movement – in which the slow opening section is reintroduced transposed by a tritone at bar 122 – finds new themes flowing effortlessly throughout. Where his previous abstract works had employed a small number of themes which were then developed and manipulated through the course of a movement, Bliss now adopted a practice of presenting the listener with an abundance of contrasting melodies. The quartet therefore proves something of a stylistic outlier in the Bliss canon: after the war, in the final phase of his career, he would return once again to the intellectual rigour of thematic design and evolutionary development.

In the opening 71 bars of the first movement, then, Bliss presents several contrasting themes. First we hear a lengthy chordal passage – a quasi-chorale – which gives way to a more urgent violin figure at bar 23. A temporary time signature and a quickening of tempo at bar 30 bring a new theme, with all four instruments in a heavily-accented rhythmic unison. The *Allegro con brio* which dominates much of the movement is introduced at bar 42, with a motif whose rhythm will recur again and again: this sparkling violin melody eventually leads to a downward spiral of syncopation. Finally, a jaunty dotted triplet figure appears in bars 68 and 69. This brings the total number of themes or motifs encountered thus far to six, before we have even reached an entirely new *espressivo* melody at bar 112.

There are, of course, some shared characteristics among these themes. If we consider, for example, the second theme – the quietly assertive violin motif which dominates between bars 23 and 29 – such similarities are easily identifiable. The first two minim beats of each bar utilise a quaver-crotchet-quaver rhythm: this is precisely the form of propulsive syncopation found at bar 55. Beneath the first violin in bars 25 and 26, the second violin and cello ascend through an octave in a melodic echo of the opening two bars of the movement: the first violin ascends similarly in its anacrusis to bar 22.

Between the statement and restatements of the chorale theme other melodies seem to ebb and flow, tied together by Bliss's technical assuredness and his distribution of

shared traits. It is in these opening 22 bars that John Amis has suggested we may find ‘the essence of Bliss’s style’.¹⁶ This is most true of Bliss’s mature harmonic language. The opening chord, for example, is a G minor triad with an added seventh; the third chord is a first-inversion triad of B flat major with an added major seventh. Barely any chord in this section is left untouched by sevenths, fourths, superimpositions or false relations. The passage ends with a near-triad of the dominant, F. However, the bass note is raised by a semitone and a B flat is added to the top of the texture, this quasi-diminished-seventh functioning as a link to the section that follows.

The harmonies in this opening section are rich, dissonant and innovative, yet the melody of the first four bars is remarkably simple. It contains only four pitches: the notes of the triad of B flat major, and the supertonic of that key. Excluding a leap of a seventh between the first and second bars, the intervals within this melody are small and unexceptional. Bliss also creates an evenly-proportioned phrase structure: this opening gesture is eight bars long, and is constructed from four two-bar statements.

Some of the hallmarks of the younger Bliss are also present here: a diatonic melody spiced with colourful harmonies, propulsive syncopation, thematically-discursive part-writing with generous distribution among the instruments, and the use of the augmented fourth in the movement’s tonal structure. Like in so much of Bliss’s earlier music, the gimmickry of complex metres is rejected for the steadier pulses of 3/2 and 4/4. The tried-and-tested method of tempo symbols is also employed: a square for ‘steady’, a circle for ‘quicken’. The sheer number of aurally-distinct themes in this short movement, however, represents a genuine departure from some of Bliss’s previous formal procedures.

After a ternary-form quasi-scherzo, and a slow movement in the tritonic E major, some stylistic attributes of the interwar Bliss are reasserted in the finale, *Vivace*. This movement came slowly to the composer, being completed some time after the first three, but it proves a wonderfully athletic solution to the problem of a musical conclusion. It opens on a rasping discord, which quickly resolves onto a more stable triad of D major in second inversion. Such unconventional use of six-four chords

¹⁶ John Amis, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 1.

will be familiar from works such as *Music for Strings*, which is also launched on a second-inversion chord of D major. The material here is as rhythmically vital as that of any of Bliss's final movements, while the ranges and textures exploited are just as impressive.

There is in this final movement, though, confirmation of a procedure new to the present work. In the opening movement, Bliss had presented a plethora of contrasting themes, linked tenuously by small musical germs. In the interior movements of the quartet, he had reverted to his more common habit of developing and combining a small number of subjects. Now, in this finale, completely new themes are introduced throughout the movement at an astonishing rate. For example, the triplet figure from which the coda is ultimately constructed does not appear until bar 222.



Ex. 23 Bliss: String Quartet in B flat major, IV, bb. 299-307, *cantabile* violin and viola melody

There is, however, retrospection to be found too. A bright, diatonic melody is heard at bar 117, and repeated later at bar 299 (ex. 23). In this restatement, the theme is passed between the viola and the first violin. The phrase was clearly conceived for instruments, but is transformed into a *cantabile* figure by the relative registers and intervallic ranges of the two instruments. The English folksong-like qualities of the melody are immediately apparent. Is this a musical acknowledgement of a yearning for a country from which Bliss was temporarily exiled? The melody, in F major, also faintly recalls the Edwardian diatonicism of the first movement of his student string quartet, composed almost thirty years earlier in 1913.

The String Quartet in B flat major is abstract, yet the music still veers from confidence to anguish. The frequent discords are soon resolved: the violence is not all-pervasive, and the string writing is always full and warm. This is romantic music with an occasional flavour of American popular song and English folksong. The coda, full of arousing minor ninths, is one of the most heartfelt passages in all of Bliss. The *Musical Times* review of the first London performance, given on 27

March 1942 at the National Gallery, warned that, given time, Bliss would soon 'be writing like César Franck'.¹⁷ The composer himself was present at that performance. Indeed, Bliss would soon be in England again.

Passage to England

On 6 February 1941, Bliss attended the first performance of his *Seven American Poems* at a recital in San Francisco. Six weeks later, on 20 March, he received a cable from Adrian Boult offering him a post alongside Kenneth Wright as a BBC policy adviser on home and overseas music: the post carried an annual salary of £1000. The Atlantic was a hotbed of military activity, and Bliss realised that he could not allow Trudy and the girls to risk a crossing with him. After two days of careful consideration, though, he accepted the proposal, and confirmed with Albert Elkus that his Berkeley contract would end on 1 May. Despite the awful prospect of a potentially lengthy separation from his wife and children, he was desperate to be useful, and had been quick to answer the BBC's request.

On 9 April the family attended the first performance of the completed string quartet at Berkeley, after which Arthur and Trudy travelled to New York. They spent a week there together, while Barbara and Karen remained with Hoffmann relatives: on 5 May he bade farewell to Trudy, and left New York to join a naval convoy from Montreal. This was, he claimed later, 'the most anguished moment through which I have lived'.¹⁸ The torment of those first days of separation is revealed in a series of letters from Bliss to his wife reproduced in *As I Remember*.¹⁹

On reaching Montreal he encountered militarily-enforced delays to his crossing, and it was not until 5 June that he eventually joined the convoy and sailed. Meanwhile, Trudy and the girls sought distraction with a holiday in the Mojave Desert and the Yosemite National Park. At that time the *Bismarck* was prowling the North Atlantic, and it was not until the last day of June that Bliss's ship, diverted by a roundabout route, sailed up the Bristol Channel into Avonmouth. By early July Bliss had reached

¹⁷ William McNaught, 'Bliss's String Quartet (1941)', *Musical Times* 83 (1942), 142.

¹⁸ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 130.

¹⁹ See *As I Remember*, 131-8.

London and taken up the post of Assistant Director of Music, for on 3 July Kenneth Wright wrote to Trudy thanking her for her 'generous attitude in sparing Arthur to us for the work'.²⁰

Bliss soon began work with Wright at Overseas Music, an important department during a time of war, with some responsibility for overseeing propagandist elements within musical broadcasts to Europe, America and beyond. Most of the new music that was broadcast tended towards the pastoral, evoking a rural England to stir in expatriate communities fond memories of their homeland.²¹ The appeal was emotional rather than intellectual. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Bliss felt attuned to the requirements of his job: as early as 7 July he confided to Trudy that 'I am going to enjoy my work. It brings me into touch with all sides of music and I shall make my presence felt'.²²

Through the early darkness, recalled so painfully in the letters to Trudy, Bliss was determined to maintain an appropriate sense of levity. In the summer of 1941 he became the near-permanent house guest of Maurice and Nancy Farquharson, who had been neighbours of the Blissés during the 1930s. Nancy later revealed how her guest was at constant pains to lighten the mood of collective anxiety:

We had returned one evening from the theatre – by Tube – Arthur decided that one way was shorter than another and he would demonstrate his point, so we parted company and he went one way and we the other. There was very little in it but we arrived home to find Arthur standing at the top of the stairs in his pyjamas, yawning. He had obviously run the whole way.²³

That summer, too, he gained his first experience of speech broadcasting, when he introduced a Promenade Concert from the Royal Albert Hall on 5 August.

Having resisted full-time administrative employment for so long, Bliss was unaccustomed to the task in hand. However, the greatest pain in his everyday life was now an occasional virtue – the absence of his family and the associated responsibilities meant that he was free to devote as much time as he desired to his

²⁰ Kenneth Wright, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 3 July 1941, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 26.

²¹ Julius Harrison's *Bredon Hill*, a work for violin which strongly recalls *The Lark Ascending*, is but one example.

²² Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 7 July 1941, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 26.

²³ Nancy Farquharson, quoted in John Sugden, *Bliss*, 69.

new post – and, given the longing he felt for his wife and daughters, this time was prodigious. He described his first experiences in his autobiography:

My ignorance of paper work was incalculable as I found the first day when I went to my office in Bedford College ... I just waited to see what would happen. I did not have to wait long. The door suddenly opened and in came a messenger with an armful of memoranda and letters. They were all gibberish to me, mostly signed by inexplicable initials; the memos urged me to take notice of this or that, or to pass on this or that, or occasionally to take some urgent action ... I soon learned that this ruthless machine never stopped; there *could* be no letting up night and day. It had to be fed all the time. My colleagues, long experienced on this treadmill, had learnt how to deal with the BBC's demands without cracking up altogether, and gradually I patterned myself on the tempo at which they worked.²⁴

That autumn Bliss continued to busy himself with the cultural life of London, as letters to Trudy attest. For example, he struck up a friendship with Alan Bush which later resulted in BBC performances of the Bush's works.²⁵ An initial meeting led to a broadcast of Bush's Labour chorus with jazz band, and Bliss reported being 'thrilled by this small choir of shopkeepers, carpenters, typists, etc.'²⁶

Such seemingly spontaneous musical activity became commonplace in wartime London. People migrated toward concerts and recitals as a matter of course, if only to break up the monotony of their war service. When one Promenade concert was disturbed by an air raid, some of the players regaled the audience with chamber music until it was safe to evacuate the hall.²⁷ Bliss found his new friendships with Bush and others to be a natural reflection of a Britain which, during his short exile in America, had shifted politically towards the left.²⁸

On 28 September 1941, Bliss had some important news for Trudy. He wrote: 'I may be making a change in my job shortly – it is still rather vague, but I may take Thatcher's place in the Home Service, BBC with a view to becoming ultimately D[irector] o[f] M[usic] ... I have been approached, and it is a compliment'.²⁹ Bliss's path to the Directorship of Music was ultimately blocked by Hugh Allen at this time,

²⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 140-1.

²⁵ The circumstance of their first meeting casts light on Bliss's social-democratic political leanings: it occurred at a rehearsal by a Labour chorus of Soviet songs.

²⁶ Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 144. For more on the temporary exclusion of Bush's music from BBC broadcasts, see Lewis Foreman (ed.), *From Parry to Britten: British music in letters, 1900-1945*, 239-40.

²⁷ See Hubert Foss and Noel Goodwin, *London Symphony: portrait of an orchestra*, 203.

²⁸ This was an understandable and socially normative response to the adversity of war, and was later reflected in the general election result of 1945.

²⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 28 September 1941, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 26.

but he was able to use his rising star to his advantage: he now contributed keenly to a broad discussion within the BBC on the drafting of a formal music policy.

The Controller of Programmes, Basil Nicolls, prepared an initial consultative paper, and Bliss's response was by far the most extended of any received by the Board.³⁰ Bliss's paper is one of the best examples of his forthrightness and wit, and is far more revealing than many of his public writings.³¹ By the autumn of 1941 Bliss had been in his role for a little over three months, yet he felt confident enough to recall in *As I Remember* that 'I had by now fully taken the measure of the musical policy in the BBC', and that he had found it 'utterly misguided'.³² Some of his suggestions are presented here, under their original subtitles:

Threefold Function of Broadcast Music

1. Inexorably to continue and expand the principle of great music as an ultimate value, indeed a justification of life.
 2. Faithfully to enrich leisure hours with entertainment.
 3. Physically and mentally to stimulate tired bodies and worn nerves.
- N.B. It betrays its trust if it debases the spiritual value of music, acts as a narcotic or drug, or bores by sheer inanity.

Coaxing Caliban

The danger of the theory of maximum audience for music is that it can so soon degenerate into wooing the lowest common denominator of that audience. We are apt to be a timid nation, aesthetically and intellectually, and a bit shamefaced when appealing to the finer instincts of people ... You cannot coax Caliban without losing the interest and respect of Ferdinand and Miranda. It is to the brave new world that future programmes must inevitably appeal.

Popular Rising Values [...]

[Y]ou can no more popularise great music than you can popularise Christianity. [...]

Jazzing J. S. B. ... 'Mr Christ comes to town' will win no more adherents to the Sermon on the Mount. The missionary aim is defeated by the vulgarity of the Hollywood setting. When you hear a messenger boy whistling the first eight bars of Mozart's Piano Sonata in C major, he is not necessarily a convert to Mozart, but simply a convert to swing. After hearing the *Unfinished* Symphony magnificently swung by a prize jazz band at the top of the Regis Hotel in New York, I cannot easily listen to the original Schubert, the former sounds so much more contemporary and exciting. I have had a dose of Benzedrine, and naturally want some more. The jazz band can be used for artificial excitement and aphrodisiacal purposes, but not for spreading eternal truths.

Transcriptions

The above criticisms do not apply to transcription of well-known classics. Liszt and Busoni have transcribed masterpieces from one medium to another, and enlarged the scope of appreciation ... This

³⁰ Members of the board soon included the new Joint Directors-General, Sir Cecil Graves and Robert W. Foot.

³¹ Arthur Bliss, in an internal memorandum, BBC Written Archives Centre, reproduced in part in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 149-52, and in full in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 180-83. Much of the paper is reproduced here, at some length.

³² Arthur Bliss, op. cit., 149.

is not simpering at classical music, like the cinema organ, or leering like the jazz band, but is an honest translation, and as such, is commendable. [...]

Condensed Opera

Due to the 'vision limitation' there is a case for some adjustment and compression in performance of broadcast opera, and the finely rehearsed and spirited performances I have heard will justify the experiment, but I should like it remembered:

1. That a whole opera is relayed through the USA from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York every week, and that the audience that listens to this is one of the largest in the States. *Ergo* Broadcasting limitations may be overcome.
2. That in many cases an alternative to mangling the form of an opera is to give one act at a time complete. Opera is an art form that cannot stand much mutilation, and sometimes the effect produced is not unlike that of the Lyon's Popular Café 2/6d. dinner, masquerading as a Ritz Carlton One.

Crush the Girlish Crooner

This is obviously a case for the application of *peine forte et dure*.³³ Has this actually been done?

Let the Air Breathe

In war time the BBC must be kept on the air, but in peace time these breathing moments of silence are indispensable for life. These pauses should avoid such frequent instances as:

Announcer: I think we just have time to play you the beautiful sonata by Scarlatti, etc., etc.

After thirty seconds the beautiful sonata of Scarlatti is faded out, one more bleeding chunk from the knacker's yard.

Announcer: I am sorry we have no time to finish this beautiful sonata by Scarlatti, etc., etc.

Music and Defeatism

A certain type of music I believe to be debilitating – the recent plugging of such songs as 'Russian Rose' and 'My Sister and I'. Their appeal is mawkish and forced. Again, the 'Sincerely Yours, Vera Lynn' type of programme is effective just because it is a sure tear-jerker. Does this kind of broadcast regularly given soften or stiffen an army's morale?

Scrappy-Mindedness

A glance at the *Radio Times* is like looking at a jigsaw puzzle. A paper like the *Daily Mail* will give the same impression to the eye. The Harmsworth Press years ago decided that sensationalism sold a paper. To induce love of sensationalism, a reader must be prevented from concentrating his attention on any one subject more than a minute or so. Hence the birth of paragraph technique, and headline announcements. A word to the wise!

A Fantasy

The ideal method of broadcasting throughout this country would be to have three separate channels. Available for all citizens that are worth fighting for would be two contrasted services, so that at any minute of the day he or she could draw on two of the three categories in my note on functions. For the Calibans, there would be a third service, 'the dirt track', a continual stream of noise and nonsense put on by untouchables with the use of records.

Bliss's manifesto must be considered alongside a wholesale drive for intellectual improvement which had taken hold with vigour during the interwar years. The BBC's concert series, including the Promenades, had brought orchestral music to new audiences, while general improvements in school education had been coupled

³³ 'Hard and forceful punishment'.

with innovative approaches to introducing children to serious music. Britain was now more musically literate than ever before.

These efforts were motivated by a desire to resist large-scale commercialisation, as Stewart Macpherson had insisted as far back as 1923:

The true appreciation of music by the community at large can only come about by means of some kind of systematic endeavour, on the part of musicians, to present the best examples of their art in such a way as to make clear to all and sundry that in such things there is really some element of greatness and truth which it is *worth while troubling about*.³⁴

This eulogy to high culture – and, to some extent, Bliss’s too – now seemed out of step: rapid social change had been prevalent during the 1930s, and this was followed by the swiftly-shifting and unstable societal mores of wartime. A carefully-contrived diet of culture could no longer be handed down with patronage to an uneducated proletariat: indeed, the thriving intellectual activity of the working class made this inappropriate and injudicious. But serious art music was certainly under threat from popularist trends: a new culture was sweeping in from America, and the tide could not be held back. Bliss, with his two years of exile amid the superficial distractions of a new America, might have been more aware of this than most. This very awareness may have provoked the strong sense of fear carried in his BBC paper.

Bliss’s prescriptiveness seems a regression from the keen sense of social democracy he had honed during the interwar years. His conception of national culture had then been rooted in ‘the people’, but now his approach to popular modernity bordered on elitist. What were his points of cultural reference here? Surely not the active cultural pursuits of the Edwardian years? Cultural evolution, with increasing internationalisation, now encompassed top-down commercialism which could induce a new level of passivity. Bliss’s engagement with modern culture would fade further in peacetime.

Was this tirade a covert job application for the Directorship of Music? Surely not, for his tone in the paper is strident, even reactionary. Once again, this was not lost on Hugh Allen who, according to an internal memo written by Basil Nicolls on 26

³⁴ Stewart Macpherson, *The appreciation class*, 3. The italics are Macpherson’s own, his implication being that a large swathe of the public was then concerned with art which was far from worth being troubled by. Indeed, this style of interface with high culture dates back to the late nineteenth century, when Bliss was still at preparatory school.

February 1942, regarded Bliss as ‘mercurial and possibly difficult’.³⁵ Nevertheless, the poor health of R. S. Thatcher led to Bliss being considered as a temporary replacement, on the understanding that he would relinquish the post once the war was over and return to freelance composing.

After the Pearl Harbor attacks on 7 December 1941, the output of the overseas music department grew to acknowledge a need for cultural coalition with Dominion allies. For this reason, Bliss proposed the broadcasting of works by Canadian and Australian composers. Despite such evident diplomacy, Bliss’s chances of becoming the BBC’s Director of Music still hung in the balance during the first months of 1942: this is unsurprising, given his dynamic personality and his blistering manifesto for the future of broadcast music.

However, Bliss’s insistence that his would be a temporary tenure made him an attractive candidate. He even offered to exclude his own works from broadcast, in a demonstration of his commitment to impartiality. Bliss’s concern at the time taken by the BBC to come to a firm decision is evident from his letter to Albert Elkus of 17 March 1942, enquiring as to whether he might secure a post at Berkeley similar to the one he had previously held. Another contemporaneous letter from Bliss to Cecil Graves confirms Bliss’s anxiety at his prolonged separation from his family, with a secure BBC role seemingly not forthcoming.

Bliss’s pleadings had the desired effect, for on 1 April 1942 he was installed as the interim Director of Music for the duration of the war, with Thatcher as his deputy. Graves took the opportunity to write to Hugh Allen, with some words of reassurance. He acknowledged that Bliss ‘was possibly a bit of a thruster who might want to do all sorts of revolutionary things’, but promised that this was of little concern ‘so long as he understood the chain of responsibility.’³⁶ Bliss would draw an annual salary of £2000.

³⁵ Basil Nicolls, quoted by Lewis Foreman in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 253.

³⁶ Cecil Graves, in a memo to Hugh Allen, BBC Written Archives Centre, also quoted by Lewis Foreman in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 256.

Director of Music

Bliss wasted no time in making his presence felt. He set to work on organising a 'Music of Our Time' monthly concert series, which began a stronger BBC commitment to new music, both British and European. He sought advice from Edward Clark, who was a personal friend of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern: with Clark, Bliss would introduce British audiences to new works by Stravinsky, Chávez, Martinů and Hindemith.

In May 1942 Bliss invited British composers to submit works for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and it was this commitment to British music that drove him forward during the war years, fuelled by an undiminished national pride.³⁷ However, he was also keen to promote the music of the European composers he had encountered in America, and managed to schedule a broadcast performance of Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* and even two of Shostakovich's symphonies.

In an interview with the *Radio Times* that month, Bliss reaffirmed his commitment to 'living' music: 'There is no such thing as "modern" music, any more than there is a modern horse', he wrote. 'No progressive country wants to live too much in the past.'³⁸ Now, at last, he was able to help his country turn away from the conservatism of his youth. This commitment to living music extended to live performance, and he shunned the serviceable library of recorded music at every opportunity. By the summer he had some promising news for Trudy. On 27 July he wrote to tell her that 'I've got the DG [Cecil Graves] to agree to my visiting USA ... this autumn'.³⁹ The visit never transpired, and Bliss continued with his administrative duties for the rest of the year.

During 1943, Bliss used his position at the BBC to award chamber-music commissions to a number of British composers, including Gordon Jacob, Armstrong Gibbs, Lennox Berkeley and William Alwyn. In January he spent three days in Liverpool supervising a recording of his *Piano Concerto* with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. An official visit to America was again proposed for the

³⁷ Premieres were given to works by Rubbra, Berkeley, Bush, Tippett and Dale, to name but a few.

³⁸ *Radio Times*, 15 May 1942.

³⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 27 July 1942, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 27.

spring, with the backing of both the BBC and the British Council, giving Bliss hope of a brief reunion with his family. By the beginning of March, though, he could give Trudy 'no more definitive news of my visiting the USA'.⁴⁰

Later in the year Albert Elkus intervened in the quest to secure Bliss's passage to America, issuing an official invitation for his friend to conduct a series of lectures at the University of California. Again, the proposal came to nothing, and no preparatory manuscripts are among Bliss's extant papers. Resigned to prolonged separation from his family, he turned his attention to music from further afield, and to improving accessibility to Western music in the far reaches of the globe. For example, he attempted to introduce Indian music to Western audiences, and to promote Western music which was influenced by Eastern traditions.⁴¹

By the summer of 1943, Trudy had become convinced that, after two years apart from Arthur, she and her daughters must return to England without further delay. In September, with safety in the Atlantic much improved, they set out on a still-hazardous crossing from Philadelphia to Lisbon, thence flying to Poole in Dorset. The family were reunited at Waterloo Station on 5 November. Bliss had secured a flat in Cavendish Square, where they would remain for the next three years.

Family life resumes

On 15 January 1944, wishing to make up for the time he had lost with his family, Bliss announced his intention to leave his post at the BBC and formally tendered his resignation. He left on 31 March, and was succeeded by Victor Hely-Hutchinson: he had served the Corporation for almost three years, two of them as Director of Music. In his short tenure, he had overseen more than fifty performances of new works by the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Since the arrival of his family some five months earlier, Bliss had been keen to resume his usual practice of working at home surrounded by his family. The administrative rigours of his BBC post had not allowed this, and so his resignation

⁴⁰ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Trudy Bliss, 3 March 1943, reproduced in Stewart R. Craggs, *op. cit.*, 28.

⁴¹ Bliss's interest in world music was demonstrated after the war in his selections for his two appearances in *Desert Island Discs*.

was to some extent inevitable. He wrote: 'I was glad to shake off such a restricting administrative position, but it was with real regret that I said "good bye" to my colleagues. We had been through many crises together and firm friendships had been formed.'⁴² On 5 April he received a formal letter of thanks from Adrian Boult, and shortly afterwards became a Fellow of the Royal College of Music.

Free from the tiresome administrative burdens of the BBC, Bliss took on a project which would invite further superficial comparisons with Elgar. Elgar had enjoyed a friendship with George Bernard Shaw, and a film commission brought Bliss into significant contact with Shaw for the first time: on 6 June 1944 he signed a contract with Independent Productions to provide music for the film *Caesar and Cleopatra*, based on Shaw's play of 1901.

Gabriel Pascal, the director of the proposed film, had already brought two of Shaw's plays to the big screen. Like those of his Hungarian compatriot Alexander Korda, his cinematic visions were generally on a grand scale. *Pygmalion* had been filmed in 1938, and *Major Barbara* two years later: music for these films was supplied by Honegger and Walton respectively. Shaw had specifically requested that Bliss be approached to compose the music for *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and had been granted permission to approach him personally. Shaw's direct personal experience of Pascal allowed him to offer Bliss some friendly advice:

Be careful not to let yourself be placed in the position of an employee of Pascal or of the film company [on this occasion Independent Productions], as anything you compose for them in that capacity will belong to them and not to you. If I were a composer writing for a film I should make a skeleton piano score of an orchestral suite ... I should copyright this in my own name in England and America. Then, being in an impregnable position as the sole owner of the music, I should license the film people to use the material as an accompaniment to their film for a stated period on stated terms, giving them no *rights* whatever ... Remember that an orchestral suite by you will long survive Pascal's film and become a standard concert piece quite independently of my play, like Grieg's *Peer Gynt*. Let no parasite fasten on it.⁴³

Shaw was, of course, teaching Bliss to suck eggs, but the advice was welcomed all the same. Shaw's advice was followed to the letter, and Bliss drafted music for several scenes in piano score.

⁴² Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 164.

⁴³ George Bernard Shaw, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 30 April 1944, reproduced in Arthur Bliss, *op. cit.*, 166-7.

Bliss ultimately produced nearly eighty pages of manuscript, much of it fully scored.⁴⁴ But there the project was to end. The precise reasons for this are unclear, but Bliss was later scathing in his assessment of Pascal: ‘One look at him made it self-evident that he would never be a sympathetic collaborator, and I withdrew from the assignment.’⁴⁵ Another source finds him in even more candid form: ‘I have had unforgettable experiences with one director who, where music was concerned, was a certified lunatic, and I had to discontinue the collaboration.’⁴⁶

The wasted effort was galling, but Bliss had had a lucky escape: the film that resulted, with a score by Georges Auric, is one of the great disaster stories of British cinema. It ran vastly over budget, and Vivien Leigh – in the role of Cleopatra – suffered a miscarriage halfway through filming. John Cottrell reports that

the director was bitten by camels. A German buzz-bomb fell close by the location site. There were technicians’ strikes, endless script changes and delays, wild extravagances such as the shipping of an eighty-ton model of the Sphinx from England to Egypt, and eighteen months of feuding, fussing and general mismanagement.⁴⁷

Bliss had made the correct decision. A section from the drafts was later recycled in an unrelated work, *Présence au combat*, but the squandered time and creativity must have frustrated Bliss, who had produced few new works since returning to England. Certainly, his output during the war did not come close to matching his productivity of the 1930s, when he had written some of his best music. Once again, a global conflict had interrupted a potentially fertile phase of Bliss’s career. He would have to make up for lost time.

With his administrative duties relinquished, his position as head of a family restored, and the Allied forces gaining ascendancy in Europe, Bliss found his mental state conducive to composition once again. He turned his attentions to a second ballet score, *Miracle in the Gorbals*, to a scenario by Michael Benthall. Unusually for a Bliss stage work, the narrative had a contemporary setting: this was the choice of Benthall, rather than of the composer himself. The ballet is set in the Gorbals area of Glasgow, and describes a Christ-like second coming of a figure who mysteriously resurrects a drowned suicide, before himself being set upon by an angry mob.

⁴⁴ These manuscripts have since been worked in to a suite by Giles Easterbrook and Malcolm Binney.

⁴⁵ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 168.

⁴⁶ Arthur Bliss, quoted in Roger Manvell and John Huntley, *The technique of film music*, 209.

⁴⁷ John Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, 209.

The orchestral score for *Miracle in the Gorbals* was completed on 15 October 1944, much of which had been prepared during the summer in the studio at Pen Pits. Some years later the production, which was choreographed by Robert Helpmann, received praise from Arnold Haskell:

It dares more than other works; its success is all the greater ... It is obviously dramatic, but presents many dangers from offensive bad taste to mawkishness ... The setting is the Gorbals in Glasgow. This is a singularly happy choice, enabling the choreographer to probe behind the Palais de Danse atmosphere of the crowded city slum on a Saturday night and to find the true emotional depths of these people in their national Scottish dances. Arthur Bliss has written a brilliant score on those lines, making full use of natural sounds, such as the wailing of a ship's siren, and also of Scottish national music. The result is not a sordid slum picture, but a sympathetic study that presents people as they really are, that looks under the surface and can rise to lyrical heights.⁴⁸

The company – as with *Checkmate* six years earlier – was the Sadler's Wells Ballet, the lead Robert Helpmann himself, and the conductor Constant Lambert. It was first performed at the Prince's Theatre, London on 26 October 1944.

The following year brought Bliss another opportunity to compose for the big screen. After the long-winded production processes of *Things to Come* and *The Conquest of the Air*, and the unsatisfactory outcome of *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Bliss had still not lost his appetite for cinematic composition. Perhaps, in truth, this was more of a fascination than an appetite – a fascination with a medium whose development Bliss could consciously trace through his own lifetime. In March 1945, he agreed to provide a score for a film with a musical theme, *Men of Two Worlds*, directed by Thorold Dickinson.

The plot made much of a public tolerance for international multiculturalism in Britain that had been fostered by the presence of foreign troops from across the world. The film starred Robert Adams, a British Guyanan black actor, as an African composer who returns to his native village after an extended period in England. The plot details the conflict between Adams's character, Kisenga, and the local witchdoctor, Magole, played by Orlando Martins, another black actor who enjoyed enormous popularity in Britain in the 1940s.

The film's narrative concerns a serious illness which is being spread through the village by the tse-tse fly. Kisenga attempts to persuade the villagers to relocate to an

⁴⁸ Arnold Haskell, *Ballet*, 173-4.

area of land free from the deadly fly: this idea is resisted at all costs by Magole. The situation is acerbated, and the plot thickened, by the looming presence of colonialism in the form of a British district commissioner. The film was produced by Two Cities Films and in Dickinson Bliss found 'a man of imagination, sensitive to music, and serious in aim' – a happy improvement after his dealings with Pascal.⁴⁹

As with many films produced during the Second World War, the motivations were not entirely artistic. While Eric Portman's district commissioner character makes uncomfortable viewing for modern eyes, the purpose of the film – with encouragement from the British Cabinet – was to demonstrate the efficacy of colonial guidance towards ultimate self-government. Indeed, the short story on which the film is based – by one E. Arnot Robertson – was prepared with input from the Ministry of Information. A script was then written by the Irish novelist Joyce Cary, who introduced the film's central conflict by inventing the character of the witchdoctor.

Dickinson and Cary had travelled to Africa in early 1943 to undertake some preparatory work, but Dickinson had contracted malaria. After his recovery later that year, the location shots were filmed in Africa, but the equatorial heat warped the reels of completed film and all of the scenes were lost. On 26 February 1945, work began on reshooting the lost scenes at Denham Studios, in a makeshift African village that had been hurriedly constructed by studio staff.⁵⁰ Much of the soundtrack was recorded by African musicians resident in England, and was based upon recordings made on location by Dickinson with assistance from the anthropologist Hans Cory.

Bliss's primary contribution was a kind of cinematic piano concerto, *Baraza*, which is heard being performed at the beginning of the film by the character Kisenga in a British concert hall, the conceit being that it is a work composed by Kisenga himself.⁵¹ Elements of the concerto then reappear throughout the film.⁵² *Men of Two*

⁴⁹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 168.

⁵⁰ See John Huntley, *British film music*, 84-8; Jeffrey Richards, *Thorold Dickinson: the man and his films*, 122.

⁵¹ *Baraza* is a Swahili word for a community meeting, with argumentative implications.

⁵² Jeffrey Richards reports that the concert venue is supposed to be the National Gallery, but that the venue itself had to be recreated within the Denham Studios, because Myra Hess would not allow a black man to perform there.

Worlds received an African premiere, in Dar-es-Salaam, in July 1946, but it was not received well in England, perhaps because of its alien subject matter, or because of its overt propagandism. However, it was the first colour film for which Bliss provided music, and it may have been this innovation that prompted him to maintain his desire to compose for the cinema, his next assignation in that field coming only four years later.

During May 1945, the Sadler's Wells Ballet was still staging performances of *Miracle in the Gorbals*: a printed programme for a matinee performance on 2 May survives in a private collection.⁵³ Bliss's work appeared as part of a triple bill at the New Theatre, St Martin's Lane, alongside *Les Sylphides* and *Les Patineurs*. At least three performers from the October 1944 premiere appeared at the New Theatre still: these included the nineteen-year-old Moira Shearer as one of The Lovers, Robert Helpmann in his original role of The Stranger, and Constant Lambert as conductor.

The programme as an artefact describes a Britain of severe austerity, with its eight small sides containing the titles of the ballets and the names of the dancers, with no programme notes at all. Indeed, four of these pages are taken up by advertisements – one, for Schweppes, reads poignantly 'To Absent Friends And to Their Return'. The end of the war in Europe was only a week away. An announcement from the management on the same page proudly boasts that 'The cost of teas in this theatre remains at the pre-war price of 1/-.'

Victory in Europe arrived on 8 May, and Bliss's *Three Jubilant and Three Solemn Fanfares* were broadcast in a celebratory programme by the BBC. His contemporaneous *Peace Fanfare* was also broadcast as part of a special edition of *Children's Hour*. Slowly, the horrors of the war began to filter out to the British public, with media reports of Nazi concentration camps and, later, the dawn of the new age of nuclear weapons. There was no room here for Empire: Britain's dwindling supremacy had entered its final hour.

During the war years musical activity had enjoyed an unexpected and unprecedented surge in popularity. Live performances had been well attended, and gramophone records had sold like never before. Self-improvement was a desire of many, and a

⁵³ Sylvia Strange, private collection.

familiarity with an established canon was now within the practical grasp of most people. In the wake of the war, R. J. Manning reflected that

Despite the absence of hundreds of professional and amateurs on service, and despite the blackout and general war-weariness, music has had in this country an extraordinary flowering. This increased activity, however, raises certain problems. It will be very easy for the growth to decay as quickly as it came, and for this disorganised, almost hectic music-making to have a deleterious effect in the long run upon standards of musical taste.⁵⁴

How concerned would Bliss now be with halting that decay, and ensuring that true art music, whether ancient or modern, would conquer such faux-classics as Richard Addinsell's 'Warsaw Concerto'? Indeed, was this now the task of a new generation of British composers?

⁵⁴ R. J. Manning, 'The future of the amateur', *Music Review* 8 (1946), 140.

PART THREE

1945—1975

“...in the third he has become indifferent to his audience,
and writes only for himself.”

Indian summer

1945—1975

The post-war years saw an astonishing late blooming for Bliss, beginning with a series of dramatic works such as The Olympians, his first opera. Some chamber works followed – including another string quartet – interspersed with larger-scale projects such as a violin concerto and several works employing variation techniques. He was knighted in 1950, and his centrality in English music was confirmed with his appointment as Master of the Queen’s Musick in 1953. During his last years Bliss combined a number of ambassadorial roles with frequent conducting activities, until his death in London after a short illness in 1975.

After the war, Arthur and Trudy decided to sell the house at East Heath Lodge and make the summer retreat at Pen Pits their permanent residence; they also kept on the London flat at Cavendish Square, later exchanging it for a similar city apartment at Cottesmore Gardens, Kensington. Bliss’s first engagement after the inevitable relief of the Nazi surrender was at the Cheltenham Festival, where he conducted a suite of music from *Miracle in the Gorbals* on 15 June: this marked the beginning of a long association with Cheltenham, which culminated in his Presidency of the Festival there, and has also resulted in a strong representation of the Bliss Society in the Gloucestershire and Bristol area.

Buoyed by complimentary notices for *Miracle in the Gorbals*,¹ Bliss began work on another ballet score, again in collaboration with Helpmann and Benthall. An allegory of human life, *Adam Zero* follows the principal character's passage 'through the spring, summer, autumn and winter of his existence'.² An accident involving Helpmann would cut short the run in April 1946, and the forty minutes of music were thus soon neglected. Despite this, Bliss considered *Adam Zero* his 'most varied and exciting ballet score'.³ The production itself was most memorable for its innovative set: at the opening of the ballet, Adam's birth, the stage is entirely empty – this is also the case by the end, as Adam approaches death. In between, the stage gradually fills and then is cleared of props, the acquired accoutrements of every human life.

Some years later, Bliss acknowledged the work of his two collaborators in a number of aphoristic contributions to a volume entitled *British Ballet*. Here, he asserted that

in ballet the synthesis of several arts advocated as an ideal by Wagner can be obtained. A composer, a choreographer, and a painter can, from the start, work on equal terms and create together a new form of art – intelligible dialectic!⁴

While neither *Gorbals* nor *Adam Zero* quite matches *Checkmate* for scenic interest or inherent quality, they are nevertheless interesting set pieces in their context of European art: certainly, Adam's lonely life journey and the Messianic scapegoat of the *Gorbals* both add to a discourse of fictional characters developed by authors such as Priestley and Wells.

By now the first seeds of an opera, *The Olympians*, had been sown. It was a project which would occupy four years of Bliss's life, from his first correspondence with his librettist in August 1945 to the premiere of the opera in September 1949. Bliss's commitment to *The Olympians* was near total: during the years of gestation he turned down no fewer than five major commissions, and composed little else of any substance.

Bliss attached much weight to this project, his first and most ambitious opera: indeed, this was possibly his greatest artistic challenge to date. The interruptions of a

¹ See Arnold Haskell, *Ballet*, 173-74.

² Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 169.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Arthur Bliss, 'Grace Notes on Ballet', in Peter Noble (ed.), *British Ballet*, 129-30.

second war had again focused his mind, and once more he was forced to re-establish himself as a central figure in British music. Bliss's librettist was J. B. Priestley – renowned playwright, essayist and novelist, and a friend of many years standing. When their collaboration began in August 1945, they had known one another for more than fifteen years.

Since their friendship began in 1929 the two men had experienced both edges of the critical sword, but reaction to the work of Priestley had been the most polar. His wireless 'fireside chats', broadcast at the beginning of the Second World War, had been immensely popular with the public, but had been cancelled by national and BBC authorities threatened by the attractiveness of Priestley's brand of social democracy. He then experienced personal anxiety and insecurity, born possibly of his position as a national semi-icon with the status of the 'other', a man with humble, northern roots. Like Bliss, he developed a marked habit of snapping when pushed. Of course, it took one curmudgeon to know another: Bliss knew Priestley well enough, and Priestley recognised the 'life-enhancing gusto about Bliss.'⁵

Bliss had demonstrated an ability and willingness to comment and reflect upon political trends with his incisive scenario for *Checkmate*. He had also leapt at the opportunity to be involved with the film adaptation of *Things to Come*. Now, in this new atomic age, with international relationships cooling into a Cold War and the hydrogen bomb in serious development, one might have expected Priestley and Bliss to be drawn towards such themes: after all, their first correspondence concerning the opera began only nine days after the bombing of Nagasaki. However, as we shall see, any contemporary zeal was curiously absent. The need to make the present a subject of their art now seemed not to be pressing.

On 17 September, Bliss was at last appointed a full member of the BBC's Music Advisory Panel. Now he would have real opportunities, alongside Boult and Thatcher, to bring to fruition some of his modernising proposals. After all, this was an era during which war-induced idealism began to be reflected in reality: after Clement Atlee swept to power in July 1945, the birth of the modern Welfare State followed soon after, a societal innovation surely welcomed by progressives such as Bliss and Priestley. Bliss's return to part-time administration did not, however,

⁵ J. B. Priestley, 'My friend Bliss', *Musical Times* 112 (1971), 740.

seriously distract from his compositional activities: on 8 November a radio play by Trudy entitled *Memorial Concert* was broadcast by the BBC, and incidental music for it was provided by her husband.

The following spring proved busier for Bliss, for it brought an exciting performance opportunity. In May 1946 he travelled to Vienna to conduct the city's Philharmonic Orchestra in his Piano Concerto – with Shulamith Shafir as soloist – and the *Checkmate* suite. Conducting such an orchestra was undoubtedly a thrill, but Bliss was appalled by his experiences outside the concert hall: 'After so many years' absence it was a shock to see post-war Vienna, the proud city, brought so low, and its people looking so impoverished and under-nourished'.⁶ On his return to England he attended the first London screening of *Men of Two Worlds*.

By the summer of 1946, work on the opera was well under way. Priestley, with Bliss's input and agreement, had woven together a simple scenario, set in the south of France in 1836: it made use of several elements entirely familiar to the experienced opera- or theatre-goer. Much of the plot focuses on Lavatte, a member of the French *nouveau riche*, whose daughter, Madeleine, is to be married – unwillingly, it seems – to an elderly gentleman of equal financial standing. The engagement is celebrated at an inn, The Golden Duck, at which a group of travelling players is staying. These players are commanded to perform a play, *The Comedy of Olympus*.

Meanwhile, Madeleine has met a thrusting young poet, Hector, with whom she has fallen passionately in love. However, their tryst is complicated by the revelation that the players are not all that they seem. In fact, they are the ancient Olympian Gods, now stripped of their powers, in disguise, and struggling in seemingly hard times. On this night, though, they mysteriously recover their lost powers, and chaos ensues. The Gods – among them Bacchus, Mars and Diana – perform their play, but their true identities are now revealed. In the final act, the internal play ends and the Gods return to their mortal status, having tricked Lavatte into acquiescing to a different marriage – that of Madeleine and Hector.

⁶ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 169.

Priestley had suggested an intimate ending involving only the two lovers, but Bliss was determined to close with a full ensemble finale: ultimately, his solution of managing a slow exit for the Gods while introducing a wedding chorale settles on neither, with limited success. However, Christopher Palmer found this music more than satisfactory: 'Loveliest of all was surely the almost Delian fade-out at the very end ... with chromatic harmonies melting into each other like sunset colours.'⁷

Priestley generated a number of potential plots and scenarios, but it was Bliss who plucked from the selection a story involving the classic civilisations, and one which would allow interaction between everlasting and mortal, ancient and modern. With the narrative fleshed out in an exchange of letters in 1945 and 1946, Bliss set to work on the first sections of Priestley's libretto in his composition studio at Pen Pits.

In August 1946 H. G. Wells died, a man who had connected Bliss and Priestley through his professional involvement with one and close personal friendship with the other. One of the main currents of *The Olympians* – that of the 'ancient' Gods interacting with the 'modern' villagers – seems to chime with Wells's interest in time travel. This fits into a broader literary tradition encompassing Max Beerbohm (*Enoch Soames*), T. S. Eliot (*Burnt Norton*) and even C. S. Lewis (*That Hideous Strength*). Priestley's libretto strongly recalled his breakthrough novel *The Good Companions* with its troupe of downcast players. He also revisited familiar territory by setting the story in a pre-industrial age, an era for which he had expressed nostalgia in his *English Journey* of 1934.

Shortly before the premiere of the opera in the autumn of 1949, Bliss and Priestley were interviewed by Charles Reid for a feature article on their collaborative process. Reid went to Savile Row for his analogy:

[Bliss and Priestley] went about with pins in their mouths, so to speak, patterned, cut, re-cut, tailored, hand-stitched, used a big iron. Cutting your coat according to your cloth is hardest when there's too much cloth. If Bliss and Priestley had retained everything they jointly wrote, *The Olympians* would run five hours solid. They produced material enough for two operas. In its final form *The Olympians* is, they consider, reasonably compact. But next time, if there is a next time, they will have stop-watches in their hands from the start.⁸

⁷ Christopher Palmer, review of *The Olympians*, *Musical Times* 113 (1972), 375.

⁸ Charles Reid, 'An opera is built', *Leader Magazine*, 1 October 1949, 10.

It is hard to imagine why brevity had proved such a difficult skill to master. Bliss had plenty of experience of composing 'to the clock', having already tackled three film scores: the tribulations of *Things to Come* require no repetition here. Priestley had a tendency to be rather more verbose in his novels, but his dramatic works demonstrated a conciseness to match the economy of Bliss. And yet, when it came to the first performances, much of the opera seemed to drag, often losing its narrative thrust, particularly during the set pieces of the second and third acts. Frank Howes observed 'a near success which just failed to be stage-worthy ... through a last act which took too long to unravel the plot.'⁹ Harold Rosenthal concurred, finding a 'typical Priestley finale, untidy, inconclusive and dramatically an anti-climax.'¹⁰

Olympian commitment

Bliss's devotion to his first opera seemed absolute. He may have taken on more administrative responsibilities during its composition – for example, he was appointed to the executive committee of the British Council in July 1947 – but in that year alone he rejected three potential BBC contributions. On 21 July he was invited to take part in a programme on the difficulties and opportunities involved in writing opera, a request which seemed relevant to his present work, and was later asked for an overture to celebrate the first twenty-five years of the BBC. A commission of a new work for the Third Programme was also refused.

In December 1947 he made another foreign visit to conduct his Piano Concerto, this time to Budapest. It was a visit that Bliss later described with some intrigue, particularly in the apparent objectivity with which he recounted certain aspects:

I had often wished to visit this city, but on the way thither had always so enjoyed Vienna that, with pockets depleted, I had been compelled to turn back ... Budapest was [now] held by the Russians, and to get there I had to acquire a specially stamped visa from the Russian authority in Vienna ... One of my fellow members in the Savile Club during the war had been Peter Chalmers-Mitchell, a fervent admirer of Russia and its ideology. When Russia came into the war against Germany he had distributed to his friends some little pins carrying the red five-pointed star. I had stuck one in my wallet and forgotten all about it. It was still there when I arrived in Vienna. I pinned it to the lapel of my coat, and started for the frontier ... I went up to [the sentry], smiling broadly, and displayed my

⁹ Frank Howes, *The English musical renaissance*, 267.

¹⁰ Harold Rosenthal, quoted in Richard Buckle, 'Four Opinions on *The Olympians*', *Opera* 1 (1950), 15.

pin. Whether he could read or not, he certainly understood this friendly symbol. It acted as a talisman – this is sober fact, not a film fantasy – the barrier was lifted, and I was through.¹¹

In all of his writings, this is the closest Bliss ever came to revealing his relationships with prominent communist sympathisers.

On his return to England, he took a proud paternal role at the wedding of his eldest daughter, Barbara, to Richard Gatehouse. In April 1948 he ventured abroad again, this time under the auspices of the British Council, to attend the Anglo-Turkish Music Festival in Ankara. Here, quite unexpectedly, he came face-to-face with a literary celebrity:

I had never actually met her, but had so enjoyed her company during, for example, long train journeys or on wakeful nights, that I felt I knew her well – Agatha Christie. She had an impressive manner, with a Queen-Mother charm, and at a reception given in our Embassy she sat as though enthroned among the other guests who like me must have owed to her many hours of relaxed pleasure. I certainly thank her for her books: they are my literary Soneryls.¹²

Work continued on *The Olympians* throughout 1948, and by the summer of 1949 the score was nearing completion. Rehearsals soon began in anticipation of the first performance at the Royal Opera House on 29 September.

The Olympians seemed doomed from the moment on press night that the scenery ceased to be operable: scenery and costumes were both ambitious in scale, as contemporary photographs demonstrate. During rehearsals the conductor, Karl Rankl, and the producer, Peter Brook, had not been on speaking terms: it was these problems and others which marred the opening run.¹³ Bliss was unable even to secure adequate rehearsal time with an important leading singer, blaming a number of ‘too-late decisions ... I did not get my principal tenor until ten days before the opening night.’¹⁴ The work never entered the established repertoire and has seldom been revived.

The first night proper was an occasion of some note, with many familiar faces of British music in the audience. Benjamin Britten was there with Peter Pears, as were

¹¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 183. Here, Bliss also details a visit to a Budapest cabaret, at which he witnessed a ‘strip-tease artiste’ with a figure that recalled ‘the voluptuous outlines of the Venus de Milo’.

¹² *Ibid.*, 185.

¹³ Brook was then embarking on what became an enormously distinguished career, and Bliss was delighted with his contribution.

¹⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 179.

Constant Lambert and William Walton. Bliss declined to take a place in the auditorium, choosing instead to pace around in the foyer before retiring to the Garrick Club. Priestley's wife and family attended, but he too expended his nervous energy away from the scene of performance. Both librettist and composer, at least, returned to appear on stage for the curtain call.

This was the first premiere of a British opera that Covent Garden had staged since Holst's *The Perfect Fool* of 1923. Despite this, audience numbers soon began to fall away after the first week of performances. A grand sense of expectation turned into a pronounced disappointment. Priestley kept his confidence in his libretto, and instead sprayed non-specific criticism at the imperfect performance conditions. Bliss was more forthright and targeted. He had little time for the conductor – and it seemed that the feeling was mutual.

Rankl proved far from popular during his five-year tenure at the Royal Opera House: he gained a reputation as a difficult character and drew especial criticism for his poorly-regarded *Carmen* of 1947.¹⁵ Bliss felt that Rankl was underprepared, as this letter to his friend George Dannant in 1971 revealed:

I have spent today playing on my gramophone disks of the Opera that Novellos sent me yesterday, and timing the Acts. The sound is of course torture to the ears, the singing often flat and in Diana's case hardly ever near her notes, while Rankl hurries along desperately, hating every minute of it.¹⁶

The full staging received nine more performances at Covent Garden, and four more in a national tour during the spring of 1950.

Shortly after the Covent Garden premiere, Bliss received a letter of cautious congratulation from Edward Dent, his mentor at Cambridge and the author of a recently-published history of opera. Dent was rather more measured in his assessment of Rankl, preferring to praise the conductor's handling of the instrumental and vocal balance. Turning his attention to the opera itself, Dent pronounced:

The real trouble about the opera is that like Mozart, Busoni and others, you have put everything you had into it, and there is too much stuff – it makes the opera feel very long and rather exhausting

¹⁵ Rankl was at the Royal Opera House from 1946 until 1951.

¹⁶ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to George Dannant, 2 September 1971, Dannant private collection.

though never tedious. I think it is all much too 'grand' and I should have preferred it treated more as opéra comique...¹⁷

Dent was right, of course: there was 'too much stuff' for a single work. Bliss even made several cuts to the second act during the initial run. The effect is of a hack grand opera, and one that looks back rather than forward. For Neville Cardus it was 'lyric antique', although 'over the general sky of it comes from time to time shadows of unusual beauty and pathos'.¹⁸

The first act is comfortably too long, and presumably owes much to its long gestation. Priestley was a quick worker, and the correspondence between him and Bliss suggests no major loss of momentum. And yet the project took four years. Their correspondence is instructive: for once, Bliss was led happily by his librettist's managerial style, while conversely Priestley insisted that Bliss – and his music – should be the primary focus of the creative process.¹⁹ Writing after a later concert revival, Edward Greenfield suggested that 'if only Bliss and Priestley had had a row or two during the writing the result might have acquired the degree of extra tension needed to grip one'.²⁰

A week after receiving Dent's appraisal, Bliss wrote to Bridges Adams to report that he and Priestley were 'thinking of trying again with a new subject'.²¹ Nearly a year later, Bliss was still keen on the idea, writing to Éva Gauthier that 'I am on to another opera with Priestley (a comic one of the Edwardian period, 1900 or thereabouts)'.²² This could well have been a better outlet for the two men: two great wits, tacking a period in which they had both been keenly-observant schoolboys. Ultimately, a second collaborative project with Priestley never materialised.

Even an Edwardian theme, though, would have confirmed Bliss's penchant for historical retrospection. John Warrack has criticised Bliss and Priestley for looking back for source material at a time when – in the austere wake of the Second World

¹⁷ Edward Dent, in a letter to Arthur Bliss, 3 November 1949, quoted in Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 181-2.

¹⁸ Neville Cardus, quoted in Richard Buckle, 'Four Opinions on *The Olympians*', *Opera* 1 (1950), 13.

¹⁹ See Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 171-79.

²⁰ Edward Greenfield, 'The Olympians', *The Guardian*, 22 February 1972.

²¹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to W. Bridges Adams, 11 November 1949, quoted in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 31.

²² Arthur Bliss, in a letter to Eva Gauthier, 3 September 1950, quoted in Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a source book*, 31.

War – audiences expected something more modern: ‘At the end of the 1940s what was needed was not a backward look at 19th-century opera, but an idea about valid mid-20th century opera; and this Priestley, for all his qualities, was not the man to provide.’²³ *The Olympians* had been Bliss’s vehicle for re-entering the critical mainstream of British music: it was this work, therefore, which proved to Bliss that his standing had changed. He was now faced, once again, with a lengthy period of cultural isolation. In the works that followed Bliss embraced this new reality, and began to compose increasingly for his own pleasure.

An abstract response

With a succession of dramatic works behind him, Bliss adopted his invariable practice of responding with a piece of abstract music: he chose to retreat again ‘into the intimate and private world of chamber music’.²⁴ The Griller Quartet was scheduled to perform at the Edinburgh Festival of 1950, and so during the spring of that year Bliss composed them a work to celebrate their twentieth anniversary. 1950 would also bring a double celebration for Bliss himself: Arthur and Trudy reached their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary on 1 June and, three days later, Arthur was knighted at Buckingham Palace for his services to music. His quartet was completed soon afterwards, and was performed at Edinburgh on 1 September.

Although the String Quartet in B flat major has better endured, both popularly and critically, it was this second quartet that Bliss regarded as his ‘most substantial chamber work’.²⁵ Indeed, he once told George Dannant that his F minor quartet was his ‘best work in chamber music’.²⁶ Bliss took particular satisfaction in the scherzo third movement, of which he claimed ‘I am pretty certain that I have never written more brilliantly for strings’.²⁷ The level of virtuosic string writing in that scherzo is evident from the fact that the Griller Quartet often played it separately at university recitals, to demonstrate the demands made by contemporary composers.

²³ John Warrack, ‘Wrong Time’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 27 February 1972.

²⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 186.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Arthur Bliss, quoted by George Dannant, sleeve note for Hyperion CDA66178.

²⁷ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 186.

The String Quartet in F minor, like its wartime antecedent, is set out in a traditional four-movement form: similarly, the two outer movements are the most substantial. The B flat quartet had begun anchored firmly in the home key, albeit with a semi-ambiguous chord of that triad. It had also ended in B flat. The F minor quartet, on the other hand, begins on an A natural, and the four flats of the home key do not appear until bar 37 of the first movement. Indeed, a chain of implied perfect cadences in B flat are instigated on the very first page of the score. After thirty minutes of music, the tonality continues to hover between F minor and major.

Despite the shared four-movement scheme, another significant difference between the two mature quartets concerns structure. When the Grillers came to record the F minor quartet, Bliss compiled his own structural analysis.²⁸ In it, Bliss identified just twelve primary themes across the entire work, a good deal fewer than appear in the B flat major quartet. The first subject group of the first movement, *Allegro con spirito*, contains three of the twelve themes. The most important of these is the opening phrase, which returns many times throughout the movement. The two other themes are a homophonic phrase at bar 23, and, Bliss suggests, a percussive motif which does not appear until bar 141. This last subject is, however, clearly derived from the opening music. A contrasting second subject, in B flat minor, is introduced at bar 180, but the first subject of the movement soon reappears on the cello. Typically for Bliss, all of the themes are then combined in what he described as a ‘classical recapitulation’. Only three primary themes – or four if we accept Bliss’s own analysis – were utilised in the construction of the movement.

Dotted rhythms predominate in the slow movement, while the scherzo, an energetic tour de force to be played ‘at top speed’, makes use of three new subjects. A sprightly opening introduces triplets as the principal rhythmic cell: these triplets then accompany a first subject in alternating 5/4 and 6/4 metre. A new violin subject founded on sevenths is heard at bar 54, and an entirely new rhythmic idea appears 15 bars later. Through development and counterpoint, and a variety of advanced string techniques, the movement ends in A minor. Structurally, this is more redolent of the Bliss to which we have become accustomed. The finale, however, is even more thematically economical. There are just two contrasting subjects, which occur in

²⁸ Typescript in the Bliss Archive, and reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 192-5.

alternating sections: a short coda employs both themes. This was Bliss's last ensemble chamber work, a piano sonata two years later his final essay in chamber music. But with this greater economy emerged a new musical voice for Bliss, and one through which he would speak for the rest of his career.

After the first performance of the new quartet Bliss was elected vice-chairman of the Performing Rights Society, marking the start of his rise as an administrative figurehead in British music. That autumn he attended the International Conference on Musical Copyright in Madrid, and on 1 May 1951 he led protests at the London County Council against their decision to withdraw grants from the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Throughout these months, he had also been working on a new work for voice and orchestra.

The Enchantress was a collaboration between Bliss and the poet Henry Reed: the work was composed with Kathleen Ferrier directly in mind.²⁹ The theme is love, taking text from the Idyll of Theocritus, described by Robert Trevelyan as 'the greatest love poem in the whole of classical and modern literature.'³⁰ Bliss worked with Reed to adapt the Idyll into an 'extended scena'.³¹ The two men had been friends for some years through their work at the BBC, and Reed's contemporaneous radio dramas betrayed the influence of Greek satire.

Theocritus's 'bucolics' were all concerned with expression through the natural world, and the Bliss-Reed interpretation is no exception. Bliss's scoring is, in fact, strikingly pastoral, requiring an orchestra that omits clarinets and bassoons, instead 'relying on the nasal tone of oboe and cor anglais, and the sardonic sound of muted brass'.³² Bliss outlined the synopsis of the work in the score:

Simaetha, a proud Cyracusan lady, has been deserted by her lover Delphis. In despair, she resorts to sorcery to charm him back. She orders her slave girls to bring her the materials for her rites, laurel leaves, a bowl of flame, a potion. She prays to the Moon, bright goddess of Heaven, and to Hecate, dark goddess of Hell. She prays for the power of Circe and Medea. She casts on the barley grains to burn as the bones of her lover and the laurel leaves to burn as his flesh. She melts in the fire a waxen

²⁹ Ferrier's star had risen since her appearance in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* in 1946. She died, of course, tragically young in 1953: Bliss remembered that 'Our encounter was brief, but to me unforgettable' (see *As I Remember*, 192).

³⁰ In Trevelyan's translation of the second Idyll.

³¹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 191.

³² *Ibid.*

image of him. Her prayers are answered. Dogs baying betray the presence of Hecate and Simaetha's lover is drawn back to her arms.³³

This is rural sorcery at its best, and reviewing this narrative it is puzzling to understand why the tale of Simaetha and Delphis never became a standard of post-Renaissance European literature.

Musically, there is significant dialogue between the vocal soloist and woodwind instruments: instrumental colouring is used to convey and augment the changing emotions of the text. It is certainly true that, as mentioned frequently in this survey, Bliss was aided by the muse of so gifted a performer, and it was Ferrier who gave the first performance at the BBC in October 1951, and the first concert performance at the Royal Festival Hall in April of the following year.

Musical master

Around the time of Bliss's sixtieth birthday in August 1951, Arthur and Trudy conceded that his administrative duties were making full-time residence in Somerset increasingly impractical. For this reason they sold Pen Pits in 1953, gave up the Kensington flat, and bought a home at 8 The Lanes, St John's Wood. It was here, amid the chaos of relocation, that Bliss composed the music for a screen version of *The Beggar's Opera*. This was shown at London's Rialto Cinema on 31 May 1953, a few days after Bliss had accepted a BBC commission for a violin concerto.

So began a busy week for Bliss. *The Beggar's Opera*, which starred Laurence Olivier as Macheath, received a private first screening at which the audience included several of the foreign dignitaries visiting London for the forthcoming Coronation. The project had reunited Bliss with the young director Peter Brook who, not yet thirty, was already the darling of the post-war avant garde, having overseen a production of *Salome* at the Royal Opera House which incorporated sets designed by Salvador Dalí.

³³ Arthur Bliss, in the preface to the score of *The Enchantress*. This was not the first appearance by Hecate in a Bliss score – she is also mentioned in the lines of Homer he set in *Morning Heroes*.

Bliss had also prepared a number of short works for the Coronation. On 1 June, at a concert billed as 'A Garland for the Queen' at Royal Festival Hall, his *Aubade for Coronation Morning* was heard for the first time. The Coronation itself was held the following day, a Tuesday, and Bliss was in attendance to witness the *Processional* of his that accompanied the entrance of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. He received the Coronation Medal for these works, and later that month he was elected an Honorary Fellow of his alma mater at Cambridge, Pembroke College. The Coronation contributions also made Bliss the obvious candidate to succeed Arnold Bax as Master of the Queen's Musick later in the year.

This, then, was a year of significant professional success for Bliss: he had been thrust into minor national prominence during the Coronation celebrations, and had been elevated with a royal appointment. However, the year ended on a tragic note. Noel Mewton-Wood, who had proved a fine interpreter of the Piano Concerto and who only the previous spring had given the first performance of Bliss's Piano Sonata, committed suicide on 5 December at the age of 31. He had struggled with the social implications of his homosexuality, and had blamed himself for the early death of a recent lover. The loss affected Bliss deeply, and he soon began work on an *Elegiac Sonnet*, scored for tenor, string quartet and piano. The words are by Cecil Day Lewis, also composed as a direct response to Mewton-Wood's death: 'How well those hands, rippling from mood to mood / Figured a brooding or a brilliant phrase!'

Violin Concerto and beyond

On 17 May 1954, Bliss conducted some passages from *The Olympians* in a BBC overseas broadcast, part of a two-programme celebration of his appointment as Master of the Queen's Musick. Bliss took charge of the orchestra and chorus of the Royal Opera House, and the occasion was notable for the quality of its soloists – Anne Leigh, Howell Glynne, and the twenty-seven-year-old Joan Sutherland. The following week he was chosen to present the gold medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society to Igor Stravinsky.

In January 1955 the Royal Philharmonic Society organised a concert devoted to Bliss's music at the Royal Festival Hall: this included the whole of the second act of

The Olympians, with Bliss himself conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Croydon Philharmonic Choir. At this time he was completing his Violin Concerto, and the new work received its first performance on 11 May. As with a number of previous works, Bliss was inspired by the virtuosity of an extraordinary performer: now, it was the violinist Alfredo Campoli. Bliss's understanding of the violin was limited, and he turned to his latest muse for necessary, often theatrical, technical guidance:

As each section of the concerto was sketched I would take it to his house, and we would play it through together. If a passage seemed to him ineffective, he would exaggerate its difficulty, distorting his face in anguish. He would suggest an alteration, and then play it through again, murmuring 'beautiful, beautiful!' I was always amused by his play-acting, but the result of his persuasive cajoling was that, whether the concerto be liked or not, it certainly is apt for the instrument.³⁴

Shortly after the first performance, Bliss supplied his own structural analysis in the *Musical Times*: 'In my first movement I have followed classical precedent and made its structure depend on clearly defined and contrasting themes, with interlocking sections in which these themes, or most of them, show growth.'³⁵

Here again, then, is Bliss's now-invariable penchant for organic development. In this movement, though, the growth is not restricted to a clear middle section, as in Bliss's classical precedents: there is more of a sense of through-composition, if only in his handling of tonality. The movement begins in A minor and ends in A major, but the music moves through a series of unconnected keys, including C sharp minor, B flat major, G flat major and E flat minor. Themes are presented and then recalled with significant variations, in keys completely unrelated to those of their original presentation. All of the main subjects are grouped in what we may loosely call an 'exposition', but the rest of the movement is far too rhapsodic to bear the scrutiny of formal analysis.

The second movement is a scherzo with Shakespearean allusions: the autograph manuscript is marked 'Ariel from *The Tempest*', while Bliss noted that 'If I had "Queen Mab" in my mind as I wrote it, it was chiefly in order to keep Berlioz's

³⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 194. This description recalls the collaborative efforts of Elgar and W. H. Reed although, unlike Bliss, Elgar was a competent violinist.

³⁵ Arthur Bliss, 'Concerto for Violin and Orchestra', *Musical Times* 96 (1955), 304-5.

exquisite scoring before me as a warning against overemphasis.³⁶ The rhythms are spiky and balletic, and although the movement is characterised by an impressive sense of delicate agility, its climax is shockingly unexpected, as Christopher Palmer has explained: ‘the thistledown Scherzo erupts into a tutti of extraordinary violence, unparalleled elsewhere in the work.’³⁷ Palmer’s comparative model is the percussive outburst in the scherzo of Elgar’s Second Symphony: Bliss’s figure is similarly Jekyllian.

Rehearsals with the soloist began before the final movement was even attempted by Bliss. The accompanied cadenzas are redolent of Elgar, as is the primary lyrical theme of the movement’s slow opening, a section which replaces a formal slow movement. Throughout the main body of the movement – tantalisingly labelled *Allegro deciso in modo zingaro* – the violin dominates the orchestra, as it does during the concerto as a whole: indeed, this is a feature of Bliss’s mature concerto writing. Bliss’s analysis in the *Musical Times* was accompanied by a review of the new work by Donald Mitchell, in which he urged that ‘soloists who regard the violin as the rhapsodic instrument *par excellence* should certainly turn to this concerto.’³⁸ His use of the word ‘rhapsodic’ is apt, for it describes both the solo instrument and the work composed for it. Increasingly, it was describing the very musical style of the composer himself.

On 13 December came another important premiere of a work which confirmed Bliss’s tendency towards the rhapsodic. After completing the Violin Concerto, Bliss had turned his attention to finishing a Feeney Trust commission for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, his *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*. The inspiration, once again, was external:

This came almost immediately in the form of a present from Anthony Lewis, Professor of music at the University of Birmingham – a copy of the *Coronation Anthems with Strings* by John Blow, recently published in the collection of *Musica Britannica*. Playing over these Anthems I was greatly struck by the beautiful tune in the Sinfonia for strings which precedes the verse anthem ‘the Lord is my Shepherd’. At once I felt compelled to write a set of variations on it.³⁹

³⁶ Arthur Bliss, ‘Concerto for Violin and Orchestra’, *Musical Times* 96 (1955), 304-5. Queen Mab is a dream fairy in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* who drives a chariot into the noses, and thence the brains, of sleepers, inducing them to visualise their wishes fulfilled.

³⁷ Christopher Palmer, ‘Aspects of Bliss’, *Musical Times* 112 (1971), 744.

³⁸ Donald Mitchell, ‘Bliss’s New Violin Concerto’, *Musical Times* 96 (1955), 324.

³⁹ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 194.

Here, then, is Bliss's compositional process enshrined, with his gift for variation applied to existing source material. The title does not necessarily imply variation, however. We are promised meditation, and much of the music is certainly not meditative. Rather, the 'meditations' are Bliss's own contemplations on the imagery of Psalm 23: four of the five meditations reflect upon the text of a specific verse. These are flanked by an introduction, and at the end by an interlude and a finale.

The rural qualities of the psalm text – with its 'still waters' and 'green pastures' – need hardly be stated. The first-person narrative is one of bucolic innocence, extolling the power of the Lord (or shepherd) to 'comfort me' and 'restore my soul'. There are the now-familiar violent outbursts in Bliss's setting,⁴⁰ but these are balanced with moments of delicate beauty: the slow chords of the introduction representing 'comfort and reassurance, the presence of the Shepherd'⁴¹ are surely among the finest portrayals of pastoral calm in all of twentieth-century British music. This calm is short-lived, though, as it gives way to 'peril and lurking evil' in the form of descending discords and an agitated trumpet interjection, before tranquillity returns with the still waters of the first meditation.

The *Meditations* employ a similar tonal ambiguity to that of the Violin Concerto: this confirms Bliss's *modus operandi* in the final phase of his compositional career, and reminds us of his disregard for standard tonal progressions, also evident in his interwar works such as *Music for Strings*. In the fifth meditation, 'In green pastures', the scoring of woodwind, harp and celesta is combined with familiar added sevenths and ninths. This serenity is soon ruptured through the valley of the shadow of death, where obstinate percussion and brass fanfares recall Bliss's most graphic depictions of war. The Blow theme emerges finally in triumph, being passed around the orchestra and concluding in a bright and joyful A major.

Of all Bliss's multifarious influences this was the only occasion on which his stimulus was another piece of music, and yet he worked Blow's baroque theme skilfully into the musical language of the twentieth century in an achievement that he regarded as 'the best of me'.⁴² Press notices were complimentary, and drew familiar

⁴⁰ See Christopher Palmer, *op. cit.*, 744.

⁴¹ Arthur Bliss, in a programme note, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 223-7.

⁴² See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 282.

comparisons: *The Times* claimed that ‘Not since “Enigma” has so fertile an idea for incorporation into variation form been so convincingly worked out.’⁴³

Foreign adventures

Thanks to Bliss’s association with the British Council, he was asked to lead a delegation of British musicians on a short tour of Russia. He was keen to visit such a fabled musical nation, and the group duly departed for Moscow on 14 April 1956. By then, of course, the Iron Curtain had descended, yet Bliss was heartened by his experiences:

We all found the Russians a warm and friendly people. The young would come up to us in the street, and try their English on us ... They did not seem to have much curiosity about England and our way of living: they were too anxious to find out what *we* thought of *them*. Showing an interest in *their* plans and ideals was the surest way to a quick friendship, and no musicians could wish for a warmer reception than we got from the concert audiences, consisting mostly of young Russians. Looking from the platform at them was exactly like facing one of our own Promenade Concert audiences.⁴⁴

Bliss’s status as Master of the Queen’s Musick, alongside his promotion to the Presidency of the Performing Rights Society, made him an ideal candidate for a number of diplomatic trips abroad throughout the rest of his life. The delegation returned to London on 8 May.

Bliss’s next major work did not appear until the following year, by which time he had led further tours of Berlin and Helsinki. On 23 October 1957, Louisville in Kentucky was the venue for the premiere of *Discourse for Orchestra*: Bliss had completed the score in May 1957. After its first performance, the work was not heard again until 1965, by which time it had undergone extensive revision – ‘recomposed’ in Bliss’s opinion – with one section removed entirely, and the remaining material rescored for a larger orchestra.⁴⁵

⁴³ *The Times*, 27 April 1956.

⁴⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 199.

⁴⁵ See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 264. In truth, the alterations are not as severe as Bliss’s label suggests: this is clear from an examination of the 1957 autograph manuscript at the Bliss Archive.

Bliss's own analysis of the work describes a piece akin to a tone poem or symphonic study. The title *Discourse* also suggests an element of oratory, and Bliss proposed that:

The subject of this 20-minute dissertation is announced in the first few bars. The work can be divided into five clearly-defined sections.

1. Preliminary statement: (a) emphatic (*allegro*); (b) calm (*larghetto*)
2. A gayer and more impudent view (*vivace*)
3. A contemplative view (*andante tranquillo*)
4. A restatement of 1(a) with a brief return to (2), leading to
5. The peroration, and a quiet and enigmatic close.

As in all speeches, there are a few anecdotes and small digressions, but I hope the subject appears sufficiently throughout, in one form or another, to warrant the title I have given the work.⁴⁶

The orchestral discourse here is between winds and strings: this is not on a Beethovenian scale, but rather in the instrument-specific textures that Bliss creates, and in the prominence given to the orchestral sections as the musical material is divided charitably throughout. The section that disappeared by 1965 is a particularly violent passage, thus depriving later audiences of one of the characteristic outbursts so prevalent in Bliss's music.

The following year, 1958, brought two significant foreign visits: a return to Russia in April was followed in May by Bliss's first engagement as President of the London Symphony Orchestra. This was an orchestral tour to the Brussels International Exhibition, during which he took the opportunity to visit the Menin Gate war memorial. It was the first time he had returned to the trenches since visiting them with Ulrich Nisbet in 1920:

[Ulrich] and I made a pilgrimage to the places in the front line which we had known during the war. We set off in France on bicycles. I was not drawn to return by any morbid desire such as murderers are said to have in haunting the scene of their crime, but I wanted to satisfy the craving to know what was 'beyond' – what I had never been able to reach or see all those months of trench warfare – a glimpse of the dark side of the moon as it were. *What* lay further than the stumps of those battered trees in that minefield? *What* did that sinister looking mound hide? Where *exactly* was the road up which at night we heard German transport moving? It was an eerie sensation to step out of a familiar trench into no man's land, and meet absolute silence instead of machine gun fire, macabre to visit the dug-outs of our fellow troglodytes opposite, and look back at our own parapets through their eyes. A year or so later, and all this terrain was to heal over and grow fresh and green, but at that time it still

⁴⁶ Manuscript for a programme note, Bliss Archive, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 264.

depicted utter desolation. That bugle call at the Menin Gate in 1958 saluting the dead as dusk fell, seemed not only a poignant reminder, but a dark warning as well.⁴⁷

Later in the year he attended the memorial service for Vaughan Williams at Westminster Abbey as the official representative of the Queen.

In 1959, Bliss made his first appearance on *Desert Island Discs*. The pieces he chose were the Credo from Bach's B minor Mass, 'Ach, ich fühls' from *The Magic Flute*, Ravel's *Pavane*, an excerpt from *Petrushka*, Beethoven's third Rasumovsky quartet, a recording of a dawn chorus, part of his own Violin Concerto, and one of Schoenberg's *Orchestral Variations*. This final work he described as 'a tough nut to crack', yet its very appearance is a demonstration of his arch commitment to variation forms. His luxury item was a telescope and his book was a guide to astronomy: he would visit the island again in 1972.

Since the war, Trudy had participated in the radio series *Pictures of a Road* for the West of England Home Service: she undertook journeys along the A343 and A30 from Andover to Salisbury, and reported her experiences in occasional weekly broadcasts. Other contributors included the farmer Ralph Wightman and the comedian Johnny Morris.⁴⁸ Wightman's reports concentrated on wildlife, the countryside and the physical landscape, while Trudy was more interested in the people she met along the way, and quoted poetry to describe the scenes which she found most attractive.

Trudy's interest in the medium of radio stemmed, perhaps, from her experiences of broadcasting during wartime. She was an intelligent and active woman of varied interests, yet she had experienced a relatively long period of domesticity earlier in her life, in her role as mother and wife. The wireless was a well-used instrument in the Bliss household, and offered 'soundposts' by which to mark the passage of days.⁴⁹ The medium of radio, then, contributed to the underpinning of traditional female roles. With her active role as a mother finished, Trudy was now free to pursue her many other interests.

⁴⁷ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 204-5.

⁴⁸ Wightman (1901-1971), with his thick Dorset accent, provided the inspiration for Kenneth Williams's character Arthur Fallowfield in the radio comedy *Beyond Our Ken*. Morris (1916-1999) later found fame as the presenter of children's television programmes such as *Animal Magic*.

⁴⁹ See Dorothy Hobson, 'Housewives and the mass media' in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Culture, media, language*, 105-14.

Ancient riddles

Bliss celebrated his seventieth birthday in August 1961, and in March 1963 received the gold medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society. That summer he attended the first performance of *A Knot of Riddles* at the Cheltenham Festival. The commission for this new work came from the BBC, and it is dedicated to the then-Director of Music, William Glock.⁵⁰ Perhaps it was this input from the avant-gardist Glock that prompted Bliss to produce a work with scoring more redolent of his experimental period of more than forty years earlier: *A Knot of Riddles* requires a baritone soloist accompanied by an ensemble of eleven instruments.

The textual impetus for the work's composition was provided by a publication with which Bliss had enjoyed a long association. Around this time, *The Listener* had published some of Kevin Crossley-Holland's translations from the Exeter Book, which included some old English riddles. The texts date from around 940, and have resided at Exeter Cathedral since some time during the eleventh century.⁵¹ Bliss selected seven of the riddles, and each reflects his well-exercised predilection towards the natural world. The subjects include animals and birds, as well as medieval tools such as the weathercock.

The baritone introduces the clues of each riddle (described by Bliss as 'obscure as a Torquemada Crossword'),⁵² before declaring the solution at the end of each, rather in the manner of Debussy's piano preludes. Bliss skilfully used musical material and innovative scoring to breathe life into the often-unintelligible clues: the baritone is accompanied by a wind quintet, string quintet and harp. Bliss believed that the riddles 'seemed to demand a chamber orchestra', and indicated on the score that the size of the string band could be increased if necessary. The texts may be placed alongside those of Li Po set by Bliss earlier in his career: like those poems, the riddles are short epithets. The wit of the texts – and that soul of wit, brevity – is reflected in Bliss's concise and fluid settings.

⁵⁰ It seems strange that a work by Bliss should be dedicated to Glock, whose penchant for the avant-garde did much to suppress to music of composers of Bliss's generation (including of Bliss himself).

⁵¹ See Kevin Crossley-Holland (ed.), *The Exeter Book of Riddles*, iv.

⁵² Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 213.

Three of the riddle settings demand closer attention here. A trait of Bliss's entire set is the independence of the baritone part from its orchestral accompaniment. For example, in 'Fish in River', the first of the set, a vivid aural picture of moving water emerges, featuring a prominent harp glissando and lapping flute figures. The effect recalls Debussy's depictions of the sea, and a whole-tone string introduction also appears, seemingly as a matter of course. The vocal line, by contrast, is far more declamatory, thus portraying the voice of the actual fish and leading the listener to the riddle's solution.

'A Weathercock', the fourth riddle, uses slightly modified scoring, with the flautist moving to piccolo and the horn and harp both absent. The effect is again French, now of a baroque overture with dotted rhythms and trills both abounding. The music of the other riddle settings describe the object of each verse, but here any overt musical references to cockerels are avoided, save for the 'waving tail' acknowledged in the contour of the vocal melody. The lead instrument is the clarinet, and the trills in this part shift the musical emphasis away from 'cock' and towards 'the weather'. The riddle ends with a degree of doubt – a reflection, presumably, upon the foibles of the weather – with the open fifths of G and D juxtaposed by an F minor triad above.

In 'Sun and Moon', which concludes the set, a conservative approach to instrumentation emerges, with the strings used as a base layer for the wind colouring above. Later, the winds move independently to decorate the vocal melody. Sunrise brings a climax driven by rhythms in the lower strings, crowned by a sojourn to the piccolo. The setting of this riddle begins and ends in C major, the clearest of all tonalities, for the most fundamental of all natural phenomena.

The composition of a related work, *The Golden Cantata*, occupied Bliss throughout the autumn of 1963, and it was performed for the first time in Cambridge on 18 February 1964. The new work owed much to Thurston Dart, who had commissioned Kathleen Raine to compose a set of poems to honour the quincentenary of Cambridge's first music degree. Bliss and Raine had enjoyed a long friendship, and so Bliss, himself a graduate of Cambridge University, was the clear choice to set the

poems to music.⁵³ The work, in essence a song cycle, follows logically from *A Knot of Riddles*: the two should be considered partner pieces. The cantata, as the name implies, is larger in scale than the cycle of riddles, and requires a tenor soloist, mixed chorus and orchestra. Two days after the Cambridge performance, Bliss received his Honorary Doctorate at a special university ceremony.

Five years passed before Bliss set words by Raine again, and in that time he and Trudy saw much of the world. Later in 1964 they visited their daughter Karen, who had emigrated to Perth, Australia, and en route back to London they stopped in Japan and Sri Lanka. In July 1965 Bliss became President of the Cheltenham Music Festival, and the following month he was the subject of a *Workshop* portrait on BBC2, produced by John Drummond. He began work on *As I Remember* during a vacation to Brittany in May 1966, and on 2 August of that year was invited to conduct a special seventy-fifth birthday concert at the Royal Festival Hall. The summer of 1967 took Arthur and Trudy to their beloved America, where he served as composer-in residence at the Florida International Music Festival.

The Cambridge quincentenary commission had been timely for Bliss: he had wanted to set the words of Kathleen Raine for many years, 'but they were as fragile as shells, and as delicate as flowers, and I had refrained.'⁵⁴ In January 1968, though, he took the challenge again in a cycle of seven Raine poems. The completed cycle, for soprano and piano, was given the name *Angels of the Mind*. It is an unusual work, for a cursory glance at a list of Bliss's compositions during his last thirty years shows that almost all were produced in response to a commission of some kind. His elevated positions – his being Master of the Queen's Musick, for example – may have brought commissions for a number of works that otherwise he might not have considered. It is likely that this contributed to his impressively prolific output right until his death.

⁵³ The verses were not written with a musical setting specifically in mind.

⁵⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 218.

Last gestures

Commissions continued to arrive, but one senses that Bliss was also driven by an independent desire to create as he neared his eightieth year. His Cello Concerto of 1970 was not only dedicated to and inspired by the virtuosity of Mstislav Rostropovich – it was also commissioned by him. Like Bliss's two other concerto recipients, Solomon and Campoli, Rostropovich contributed to the preparation of the score. It was by some margin the shortest of the three concertos, and was in fact first conceived as a Concertino: it was under this name that it was first performed at Snape on 24 June 1970.⁵⁵ That original title owes something to the work's mood and the spirit contained within, as well as its scale. In his programme note, Bliss remarked: 'It is a light-hearted work, at any rate in the first and third movements, and is scored for a Mozartian orchestra, with the addition of harp and celesta [two core instruments in the Bliss oeuvre]. There are no problems for the listener – only for the soloist!'⁵⁶

In the first movement of the concerto, Bliss eschewed his practice of beginning and ending an opening movement in the same key, choosing instead to journey from D minor to E major. However, like in the Violin Concerto, his method of reaching that destination was oblique. In the second movement, too, he began in B flat minor before reaching C major; and in the finale the initial suggestion is of F major before the majority of the material is presented in A. Despite this complex tonality, though, the Classical scale of the orchestra is matched by passages of diatonic lyricism and underpinned by a collection of tonic-dominant chordal relationships. Unlike his Classical models, however, Bliss continued his habit of allowing the solo instrument to dominate the orchestra, with the solo cello entering in the second bar and then playing almost continually for the twenty-five minutes that follow.

What of Bliss's claim that 'there are no problems for the listener'? It is true that almost all of the work's primary themes have a defined tonal centre, even if those keys are arranged somewhat eccentrically: Bliss's music is genial, but his real joy is in formal design. Similar melodic patterns recur throughout the three movements,

⁵⁵ See Edward Greenfield, 'Concertino', *Musical Times* 111 (1970), 820. It was only at Britten's suggestion that it became a fully-fledged Concerto.

⁵⁶ Arthur Bliss, in his original programme note, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 272.

with earlier figures recalled in the finale: this concerto seems to look firmly backwards. As Robert Meikle has detailed, some of the year's other premieres included Tippett's *Knot Garden*, Maw's *Rising of the Moon* and Berio's *Opera*: it is the music of these more daring composers that has endured, although Bliss's retrospection better stands the test of time.⁵⁷

In February 1972 Bliss was treated to a rare revival of *The Olympians*, in a semi-staged, two-act production at the Royal Festival Hall. Perhaps out of deference to this man of the establishment, or perhaps through genuine feeling, the critical reception was far more positive than that for the original 1949 staging. In a newspaper review of the concert performance, Andrew Porter drew links with some of Bliss's earlier works: 'The emotional climax of the opera is Jupiter's noble, humane address in Act II ... This is the world of *Pastoral* and *Morning Heroes*. Act III is part lament for, part acceptance of, the fact that we cannot sustain divine splendours.'⁵⁸ Porter's identification of an elegiac thread running through Bliss's music is particularly compelling.

That year, Bliss made his second appearance on *Desert Island Discs*. On this occasion he chose three of his own works – a song from the *Serenade*, an excerpt from *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* and the 'Song of the Reapers' from *Pastoral*. He also chose, in another somewhat eccentric selection, Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, the sound of wolves, the song of the kookaburra, and some Indian music. His luxury item was a pair of binoculars, and his book was *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

Bliss was by now working on what proved his last major work, inspired in part by the artwork of his friend George Dannatt. During his many visits to the Dannatts' Dorset home at East Hatch, Bliss had been struck by the paintings that hung in the music room – he acknowledged this in a letter to his friend:

'Yes – the original idea of Variation form for my new commissioned work did come from studying your visual variations 'Tantris', mostly in your studio at E[ast] H[atch], or stacked in your music room, I forget exactly where – and perhaps your format suggested the basic idea of No.1, *Elements* –

⁵⁷ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 40.

⁵⁸ Andrew Porter, 'The Olympians', *Financial Times*, 23 February 1972.

(a) a large cantilena for solo oboe (b) a two bar chordal phrase (c) a short coda formed of a hushed (*pp*) cluster of notes.⁵⁹

Indeed, the resulting *Metamorphic Variations* are dedicated 'To George and Ann Dannant in token of a long and cherished friendship', and it was by the title 'Variations' that they were first performed at Croydon on 21 April 1973. Bliss had rejected the words 'Transformations' and 'Transmutations', and had also toyed with the more traditional 'Symphonic Variations'. By February 1974 the work had become *Variations for Orchestra*, but still Bliss sought a distinctive title. It was Dannant who supplied the word 'Metamorphic', which Bliss gratefully accepted on the grounds that the main group of musical material 'undergo[es] a greater transformation during the progress of the work than the simple word "Variations" implies.'⁶⁰

The work's three basic ideas were described by Bliss in a programme note for a concert that ultimately took place shortly after his death.⁶¹ These are the oboe cantilena, the two-bar phrase (for horns, then strings), and the semitonal cluster first heard in the woodwinds. This work, then, is not a typical theme-and-variations: indeed, it is even less typical than the John Blow *Meditations*, in which the main theme is not fully revealed until the final few bars. The relationship between much of the later material and the opening group is obscure at best, and much of the work bears little or no relation to those primary elements: this is by no means the most successful rendering of Bliss's much-loved metamorphic techniques. Nevertheless, it serves as a final confirmation of his all-conquering interest in formal design.

In April 1974, shortly before his final illness, Bliss recorded an analysis of his *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*. Here, he revealed much about his private, creative personality:

I think most people like to feel that they leave behind them a remembrance of a definite personality – hence the photos, portraits, biographies, autobiographies; but in the case of an artist it's a little different, because what he wants to leave behind is his work – the poet his verses, the sculptor his works of art, the painter his canvasses, the musician his scores; and of course, there is a reason for this, because with an artist, very often the outer persona that he shows to the world is very different from the inward man at work on his art ... in many cases the composer is a man of two beings – one which perhaps, for self-preservation, he shows the world, the other he keeps hidden – and it is only

⁵⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to George Dannant, 8 January 1973, Dannant private collection.

⁶⁰ Arthur Bliss, in a letter to George Dannant, 4 November 1974, Dannant private collection.

⁶¹ See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 279-80.

behind the closed door of his workroom that he is really himself, and possibly only his nearest and dearest, in my case my wife, for instance, can blend the two. I have written an autobiography detailing my life to the age of 75, but whoever wants to know the *real* me must listen to my music.

You remember that Elgar wrote on the score of *The Dream of Gerontius* 'This is the best of me', by which I think he meant, 'This is the *real* me'. I have chosen as a portrait a characteristic work of mine written at the age of 64. It is music that I should wish to have survived me. In Elgar's sense I can write in this work, *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*, and in my choral symphony *Morning Heroes* – 'this is the best of me'.⁶²

It is perhaps fitting that one of Bliss's 'best' works should be a meditation, given his tendency to avoid wholesale commitment to established formal procedures: in the John Blow *Meditations*, as we have seen, we hear Blow's psalm theme only at the very end of the work, leaving the first-time listener ill-equipped to appreciate fully his impressive treatment of the source material. In the title of his last major work, *Metamorphic Variations*, Bliss hinted at not one but two transformative processes, those of variation and metamorphosis. But which ultimately wins out? The material is indeed transformed, like Gregor Samsa in his bed – and Bliss himself admitted that the work's principal ideas 'undergo greater transformation than the simple word "variations" implies'.⁶³ Yet the smaller units synonymous with variation forms are also present, and with them a compositional method Bliss had advocated almost forty years earlier:

If I taught composition, I would make my pupils write endless variations on the most unpromising beginnings. It teaches the possibilities of growth. That is why the *Diabelli Variations* of Beethoven are a course in composition themselves. With them on the piano, the pupil requires no further master.⁶⁴

This dictum had been prescribed by Stanford to his pupils at the Royal College: truly, Bliss had come home.

In June 1974 Bliss was admitted to St Mary's Hospital, Paddington for an operation, and on 11 January 1975 he conducted for the last time. That week the *Metamorphic Variations* had been recorded, in Bliss's presence, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Vernon Handley at the Maida Vale studios. When the work was broadcast on 22

⁶² This was published posthumously as 'Arthur Bliss (1891-1975): A Testament', in Arthur Jacobs (ed.), *British Music Yearbook 1976*, 39.

⁶³ See Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 279.

⁶⁴ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 100.

March, it was the last music of his own that Bliss heard. After a steep decline, he died five days later at the age of 83.

Bliss reconsidered

The music of Arthur Bliss is no longer familiar to the broad musical public. He is not an Elgar, a Vaughan Williams, or a Holst – nor is he a Walton, a Tippett or a Britten. This apparent indifference is reflected in the amount of Bliss ‘scholarship’ undertaken since 1945. While the life and works of, say, Elgar have been the subject of lengthy critiques by Kennedy, Moore, Anderson, Young (and the list goes on), such appraisals of Bliss are fewer. Bliss himself wrote extensively on music, of course, and before his death he also produced his own account of his colourful and varied life. That autobiography, together with an impressive anthology of Bliss’s essays and articles collected by Gregory Roscow in *Bliss on Music*, stands as the principal source of information concerning Bliss’s life and opinions.

Besides those two volumes, there are other books devoted to Bliss. John Sugden’s biography, *Bliss*, is in many ways a simplified version of *As I Remember*, although it has the slender added benefit of objectivity: this thesis is, to a certain extent, an antidote to the Sugden hagiography. A number of reference works have proved invaluable to the study of Bliss’s music, including Lewis Foreman’s *Arthur Bliss: Catalogue of the Complete Works* and Stewart R. Craggs’s *Arthur Bliss: a Bio-Bibliography*. The latter, a comprehensive inventory of materials pertaining to Bliss, has been revised and updated as *Arthur Bliss: a Source Book*. This has proved an indispensable volume to all Bliss scholars.

This leaves a wealth of shorter journal and newspaper articles, as well as brief passages in historio-musicological surveys. However, in critical anthologies which attempt to describe English music from the Renaissance until the present day, for

example, Bliss's music has always received short shrift. It is these summaries, though, which constitute the main body of Bliss 'scholarship', and which provide appraisals of his work by such notable musical commentators as Norman Demuth, Frank Howes and Christopher Palmer. These shorter reviews are the most widely available and frequently read accounts of Bliss's music, and therefore have contributed much to a broad understanding of Bliss. It is these which are gathered and critically assessed in the first section of this chapter: what follows serves as a redaction of post-war scholarship and commentary on Bliss.

Critique and commentary during Bliss's lifetime

In the year of Bliss's sixtieth birthday, 1951, Alec Robertson – an authority on the music of Schubert and Dvořák – contributed a chapter on Bliss to A. L. Bacharach's collection *British Music of Our Time*. Robertson had worked with Bliss in the Music Department of the BBC, and was a year his junior; as well as being a critic and broadcaster, he was an organist and a chorusmaster. On Bliss, Robertson's chief tenet was that, by the time of writing, his former colleague had 'gone through two clearly defined phases.' Robertson continued: 'After the [Great] war ... he revolted against a form of romanticism that seemed false in the light of the disillusionment that came upon the returning soldier.'

Robertson set out his proposed first phase of Bliss's compositional career as encompassing the immediately post-Armistice chamber works, the *Colour Symphony* of 1922, and the songs and piano pieces of the American interlude. Indeed, Robertson included all of Bliss's music 'until 1926, when the first phase of his creative activity came to an end and he turned increasingly, though not exclusively, to classical ideals'. He warned, however, that 'it would be quite wrong to regard this first phase as a sort of naughty-boy period and see in it merely a young composer aping Stravinsky and Ravel.'¹ Here, Robertson highlighted one of the many problems of classifying not only Bliss's but also most other twentieth-century music. This simplified appraisal of Bliss's harmonic language is particularly perceptive: 'Though at times some of his harmonies may exacerbate the conservative, [his]

¹ Alec Robertson, 'Arthur Bliss', in A. L. Bacharach (ed.), *British music of our time*, 148-9.

works ... contain many pages of lovely sound that bear testimony to an unusually acute ear.'²

Indeed, amongst these 'lovely sounds' Robertson numbered the Clarinet Quintet, thus implying a succession from the quintets of Mozart and Brahms.³ He noted that the clarinet's 'true nature is warm-hearted and romantic', and that it is this facet of the instrument which predominates in Bliss's work. The opening subject is described thus: 'these bars are merely a short introductory meditation preceding a gracefully lyrical tune without any of the wide, rather angular, leaps that are typical of so much modern melody.'

This analysis necessitated further comment upon the conflict between classicism and romanticism in Bliss's music. Robertson obliged, suggesting that "'classical" is a term which in text-books excludes romantic: but classical music does not come out of a refrigerator. Romanticism can be found in the music of every period.'⁴ As early as 1951 – nearly twenty-five years before Bliss's death – here was perhaps the most satisfactory solution to this perennial problem: the two can exist happily together. Certainly, in a work such as the Viola Sonata, Bliss's rigorously neoclassical logic had been obfuscated by the composer's eulogies for the romantic viola. Besides, in hermeneutical terms, how conscious could Bliss have been of his own neo-classicism or neo-romanticism?

A year after the publication of Robertson's chapter, Norman Demuth – a composer, writer and, like Bliss, a keen follower of French music – produced his book *Musical Trends in the Twentieth Century*. Bliss was considered in a chapter entitled 'The English Panorama', which followed chapters on Milhaud and Honegger, and, perhaps surprisingly, preceded a chapter on Delius, Holst and Vaughan Williams. Demuth was particularly interested in Bliss's earliest significant compositions, and insisted that 'the Great War came at the right moment, since it drew him away from the then current trend of musical affairs'.

² Alec Robertson, op. cit., 149.

³ This was a parallel not lost on the critics of the 1930s. Shortly after the Quintet's first performance, a columnist for *The Saturday Review* stated that 'I should like to hear it in association with works of Mozart and Brahms for the same instruments. I think it will be found to deserve its place'. *The Birmingham Post* went further still: 'Asked yesterday how many great Clarinet Quintets there are, one would have counted Mozart, Brahms, and – what else? Today one would say without hesitation: Mozart, Brahms, and Bliss'.

⁴ Alec Robertson, op. cit., 152.

The early small-ensemble works – such as *Rout* and *Conversations* – were described as ‘cheerful things’, containing ‘a vein for lyrical beauty absent from the composers on the other side of the Channel.’ After all, Demuth continued, ‘in those days knowledge of Stravinsky was limited and anything which sounded at all outré was immediately stigmatised as being a reflection of this composer’s latest thoughts. Consequently, a good deal of criticism was levelled against Bliss on this charge.’⁵ Bliss’s standing in the 1920s was clarified later: ‘When in attempting to avoid sentimentality on the one hand and sheer cerebrality on the other [British music] adopted a flaccid and uncertain technique, Bliss stood out by reason of his energy and vitality’.⁶

Like Robertson, Demuth also identified elements of stylistic evolution in Bliss’s music of the late 1920s. *Serenade*, he claimed, ‘wavered between the two lines of thought’ (i.e. overt modernism and neo-classicism/-romanticism), but *Pastoral* and *Morning Heroes* ‘left no doubt that Bliss had turned away from the earlier style and was following a technique obviously more in line with his basic traditions as an Englishman’. Later, Bliss succeeded in combining ‘the Grand Manner with mature twentieth-century thought.’⁷

This change impressed Demuth, who admitted that ‘it takes a wise and sane man with no little courage to turn his back so completely upon what he apparently believes in no longer, and to realise that it was driving towards an impasse’. He concluded that Bliss had ‘progressed [rather than *regressed*] backwards, because the quality of his present style ... is superior to that of the earlier one.’⁸ The use of the word ‘progressed’ is important here, as Demuth suggested that Bliss’s stylistic retrospection was not born of a wish to turn away from modern composition, but of a need for interaction with his own national musical heritage.

In 1954, a new edition – the fifth – of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* was published. The editor of that edition, Eric Blom, contributed to the entry on Arthur Bliss, revising and supplementing the existing article by Edwin Evans, who

⁵ This analysis helps to account for Bliss’s early notoriety, as well as the sceptical reception his works received from many critics.

⁶ Norman Demuth, *Musical trends in the twentieth century*, 122-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 123-4.

had died in 1945. Blom's primary input was to reinforce the now-popular two-period formula for Bliss's compositional output, describing the two as 'experimental' and 'classicist'. Evans's brief biography highlighted a marked leaning towards 'absolute' music upon Bliss's return from America (with works such as *Hymn to Apollo* and *Introduction and Allegro*), and suggested that his more 'classical' attitude was apparent towards the end of the 1920s. This stance corresponds with the emphasis placed by Bliss on structure and proportion in almost all of his music from the Oboe Quintet onwards. Surely aware of the romantic flavour of some of Bliss's post-*Morning Heroes* works, though, Evans offered these words of caution:

The 'classicist' tendency is, however, by no means exclusive. It represents a predilection rather than a vigorous creed, but it affects his style even in music written for a specific purpose [*Things to Come* or *Checkmate*, for example]. It is characterised by a greater concentration upon formal construction, and the conciseness resulting from it.⁹

A few years later, Blom would place Bliss alongside Poulenc, Prokofiev, Honegger and Milhaud in a chapter within *Twentieth Century Music*, edited by Rollo H. Myers and published in 1960. Blom described these composers as a group of 'traditionalists who have contrived to establish and maintain a distinctive individuality'. Each was audacious and experimental at the beginning of his career, he claimed, but later 'settled down' to an 'expected conformity' and, in doing so, set important stylistic standards for the generations which followed.¹⁰

Returning to our chronological survey, we come to a 1957 volume entitled *Chamber Music*, edited by Alec Robertson and containing contributions from some of the finest and most perceptive minds of that period, including Blom, Roger Fiske, John Clapham and Denis Stevens. Two of the chapters are of interest here – John Warrack's 'Chamber Works with wind instruments' and David Cox's 'English Chamber Music' – for they contain pronouncements upon some important works by Bliss.

Warrack began by comparing the oboe quintets of Bliss and Bax, emphasising the warm, pastoral nature of the latter. He observed that 'Bliss avoids ... truly rural effects', and that even the quotation of 'Connelly's Jig' is 'unique for him and not in

⁹ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', in Eric Blom (ed.), *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, i, 760.

¹⁰ Eric Blom, 'How It Started: The Nineteenth Century Pioneers', in Rollo H. Myers (ed.), *Twentieth century music*, 18.

the least “folky” in effect.’ Warrack’s greatest reverence, though, was reserved for Bliss’s Clarinet Quintet, which he described as ‘head and shoulders above all other chamber works for clarinet and strings in the [twentieth] century, and possibly above all other modern wind chamber works’. He too recognised an indebtedness to Mozart and Brahms, and drew parallels between the string writing in the quintet and the later *Music for Strings*. He claimed that the work ‘will have nothing to do with the angular bite that Stravinsky and other moderns have drawn from the clarinet’ – as Bliss himself might have done had he attempted the quintet ten years earlier – ‘but returns to the nineteenth-century style of clarinet writing while employing a thoroughly contemporary idiom.’¹¹

Eric Blom’s assertion that Bliss had set stylistic standards for later composers received support from Warrack. This was confirmed in his final paragraph, which followed directly from and served as a conclusion to his comments on Bliss’s Clarinet Quintet:

This is the modern tendency. It has been proved often enough that to write a work which pays no attention to the requirements of its medium is to write a bad work, and this is nowhere more true than with wind instruments. Having less emotional range than stringed instruments they cannot adapt themselves to an alien manner of expression so convincingly. The composer must meet them halfway, as it were. There will be little chance of him reaching the highest peak of greatness with a wind work. But one cannot always live among peaks, and the lower slopes of the mountain have had their attractions and delights.¹²

Warrack clearly regarded the work as a high-water mark of wind composition, and an example for others to follow. Despite his declaration that such works reside on ‘the lower slopes of the mountain’, many others have come to regard the Clarinet Quintet as one of Bliss’s finest works.¹³

In David Cox’s survey of post-1700 chamber music in England, he collected together the names of Howells, Bridge, Bax and Bliss in a group of composers he described as ‘the most important in the field of chamber music’ during the interwar years. Few of Bliss’s works were mentioned by name in this chapter, although the Clarinet Quintet was judged to be ‘his most beautifully written chamber work’, and the String Quartet in F minor deemed ‘typical of the composer’s fine craftsmanship.’

¹¹ John Warrack, ‘Chamber Works with wind instruments’, in Alec Robertson (ed.), *Chamber music*, 319-20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 320.

¹³ See the foregoing discussion of the work in chapter 5.

Rather, Cox – like so many before him – divided Bliss’s compositional career into two distinct periods. He described the young Bliss as an *enfant terrible*: ‘high-spirited, reckless, Stravinskyish, eccentric, completely on the surface. Since then,’ he continued, ‘he has become more traditional and diatonic, but with many asperities; and he is apt to be hard and unyielding even when he is lyrical.’¹⁴ Elsewhere, Cox disputed Bliss’s affinity with Elgar: ‘The musical influence of Elgar is in fact slight: a scrupulous care in the scoring, a melodic figure or two, a rhythm, a sequence, perhaps – but this is quite superficial.’¹⁵

In 1966, the year in which Bliss began to write his autobiography, Frank Howes’s seminal *The English musical renaissance* was published. The book is divided into three sections. The first is entitled ‘Gestation’, and is a cultural history of music in Victorian England, encompassing the revivals of folk and Tudor music and assessing the contributions of such composers as Sullivan, Mackenzie, Cowen and Parry. The second section, ‘Birth’, was intended as music criticism, and discusses at some length the music of Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Holst, the ‘Late Romantics’, national trends and the ‘Post-War (1914-1918) Group’. It is in this final chapter of the second section that we find mention of Arthur Bliss. The third section of the book is called ‘Growth’, and examines the ‘Post-War Scene’, symphonic development, and the ‘Domestic Revolution’.

Among Howes’s so-called ‘nationalists’ are Ireland, Rubbra, Finzi, Moeran and Warlock; this classification then excludes these composers from a place in his ‘post-war’ group. These nationalists, Howes noted, died young, or, at least, before Vaughan Williams, their ‘founding father’. But alongside this group, another emerged after the Great War, a group ‘whose music was marked by an athletic vigour which was a symptom of their self-assertion against the basically romantic axioms of the older generation’. In this group, Howes placed William Walton, Lennox Berkeley, Constant Lambert, Michael Tippett, Alan Rawsthorne and others alongside Bliss. In terms of age, at least, Howes believed Bliss to be the senior of this group of progressive composers.

¹⁴ David Cox, ‘English Chamber Music’, in Alec Robertson (ed.), *Chamber music*, 343. It is revealing that Cox did not state precisely *when* this perceived change occurred.

¹⁵ David Cox, ‘A View of Bliss’s Music’, *The Listener* 74 (1965), 818.

In addition to the shared ‘athletic vigour’ mentioned above, Howes set out a further trinity of shared characteristics:

They began as neo-classicists but were subsequently seen to be crypto-romantics.

They were moderns in their day but lived to be established figures who resisted the revival of Schoenberg’s influence in the fifties.

Their Englishness was tempered by French influences, Stravinsky being included therein, and by a twentieth-century outlook.¹⁶

The term ‘crypto-romantic’ seems especially pertinent with regard to Bliss who, as a young veteran, could hardly bring himself to acknowledge the role of the German romantic tradition in the renaissance of English music.¹⁷

Howes accepted that there are obvious stylistic differences between the composers of his post-war group, but suggested that there is a stronger tie which binds them: ‘Much as they naturally differ from one another they do constitute a generation affected by the disruption of the 1914 war, yet having its roots in the soil prepared by the academics [Stanford, Parry et al.] and the nationalists [see above].’¹⁸ This statement applies to none more than Bliss, the only of Howes’s group to experience active service during the Great War. The historical importance of this group was not underestimated by Howes, who claimed that ‘they are the bridge between the pre-war and post-war worlds.’¹⁹

In his discussion of Bliss’s music Howes made many sweeping statements but, as in the rest of his book, he failed to underscore these with firm evidence. He wrote of Bliss’s ‘post-Armistice feeling of break-away and adventure’, the development of a ‘more serious, neo-classical trend during the twenties’ and, ambiguously, a ‘rather strenuous [later] style’.²⁰ Howes detected ‘latent romanticism’ in not only *Pastoral* but also *A Colour Symphony* but, unlike Alec Robertson, he failed to consider the dual influences of classicism and romanticism. This omission leaves a somewhat

¹⁶ Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 264.

¹⁷ On 2 July 1921, Bliss gave a lecture to the Society of Women Musicians entitled ‘What Modern Composition is Aiming at’. In it, he attacked the old and praised the new, claiming that ‘I fear I cannot say a good word of German music: it is to me anathema, not because it is Teutonic, but because to my mind it is at the same time ponderous and trivial, or, in the jargon of present-day science, boundless, yet finite’ (see chapter 3).

¹⁸ Frank Howes, op. cit., 264.

¹⁹ Ibid., 264-5.

²⁰ Ibid., 267.

confusing impression of Bliss's stylistic evolution, sidestepping any explicit reference to a two-period classification of his output. In his concluding sentence, however, Howes left no doubt as to the provenance of Bliss's style: 'The emergence of an English grand manner in Elgar enriched the tradition and it has been saved from disappearance as a purely Elgarian fingerprint by Bliss'.²¹

During the week of Bliss's seventy-fifth birthday in August 1966, an article by Howes on his life and works – a kind of 'birthday greeting-card' – appeared in *The Times*. Perhaps because of a need for brevity and simplicity, Howes offered a more convincing précis of Bliss's style than he had in his book of the same year:

His style and idiom have not much changed. What seems to have happened is that different strands in his creative personality have been successively revealed. When he began composing in 1918 he was, in reaction to the inheritance of the nineteenth century, interested in novel textures, such as a solo voice mixed with chamber ensembles in various mutations; they hardly seemed like chamber music and were non-romantic in feeling. The chamber music he went on to write could be called neo-classical. But like a younger contemporary, who also emerged in the post-Armistice upsurge created by Diaghilev and Stravinsky, William Walton, Arthur Bliss was forced to reveal that behind the mask of neo-classicism there was a romantic composer waiting to get out.²²

This was not, Howes admitted, the romanticism of Delius or Strauss, but of an innovative, progressive and thoroughly twentieth-century composer, yet one in whose formal structures 'there still remains a strongly classical element'.²³

In addition to his autobiography and published articles, Bliss gave many interviews, some of which were recorded. One of these was broadcast by the BBC on 4 May 1970, a recording of an interview conducted by Donald Milner shortly before the first performance of Bliss's Cello Concerto at the Aldeburgh Festival. A transcript of the interview has been published in the anthology *Twenty British Composers*, edited by Peter Dickinson. This is not Bliss scholarship in the purest sense, but this self-appraisal is important source material nevertheless. In the context of an interview, Bliss – a meticulous editor and reviser of his prose as well as his music – was unable to erase an unplanned or unintended response. The Milner interview, like the other sources cited in the present chapter, addresses Bliss's evolving style.

²¹ Frank Howes, *op. cit.*, 269. This obsession with Bliss's Elgarian heritage may lead us to suppose that Howes was the author of the anonymous review of Bliss's *Music for Strings* in *The Times* (see chapter 6). Indeed, Howes also contributed an analytical essay on *Music for Strings* to the *Musical Times* in 1936.

²² Frank Howes, 'The creative personality of Arthur Bliss', *The Times*, 29 July 1966, 8.

²³ *Ibid.*

Bliss began by admitting that 'in seventy-nine years one's aesthetic creed is bound to change a good deal. As a young man, immediately after the First World War, I was all for sound for sound's sake ... Then one grows up and realises that an aural experience, however exciting it may be, is simply not enough.' He pointed out that, even early in his career, he 'stuck fast by tonality, and I've kept this conviction in all my major works.' Bliss was noticeably careful not to entrap his music with such terms as 'neo-classical', 'neo-romantic' or 'modernistic'. Returning to his early works, he preferred to admit to what he then disliked rather than what he revered: 'I was protesting against the great influence of nineteenth-century music. I mean the rather inflated music of the Wagners, Bruckners and Mahlers'.²⁴ Milner suggested that Bliss was greatly influenced by Elgar, whose music drew upon that same Austro-German tradition. 'Yes, I think I was,' replied Bliss, before continuing enigmatically, 'but my feeling about Elgar was that he was not only a very English composer, but also a genius. And they're outside the realm of protest, really.'

In 1971, Bliss celebrated his eightieth birthday and, by way of recognition, the *Musical Times* included a number of Bliss-related articles in its August issue. These included a personal tribute from J. B. Priestley entitled 'My friend Bliss', and a broader musical survey, 'Aspects of Bliss', by Christopher Palmer. Palmer was unwilling to accept the neat and familiar two-period scheme, complaining that 'potted biographies on record sleeves usually make some reference to an early tendency to *enfant terrible* yielding very quickly to a compromise with the Establishment and a perpetuating of the Elgar tradition with all its varied appurtenances popularly supposed to be characteristically English'.

He continued with several pertinent observations concerning themes apparent throughout Bliss's music, and clarified his views on Bliss's stylistic derivations. He noted that Bliss

began to compose in the immediate wake of the First World War, a war which rent asunder the entire fabric of Western civilisation. A whole generation of English moral and intellectual talent was gutted; decisive reserves of mental and physical potential were annihilated and lost to the preservation and future evolution of Western man and his institutions. Few composers who witnessed this carnage and

²⁴ This statement is remarkably similar to one made in Bliss's address to the Society of Women Musicians almost fifty years earlier (see fn. 17 above).

its inevitable consequences could remain unaffected and prevent, or wish to prevent, it from conditioning in some measure the emotional tone and temper of music they subsequently undertook.²⁵

Palmer posited that Bliss's experiences of war were responsible for an 'unmistakable streak of violence' which appears intermittently in his music, and for a 'constant stream of sad processions' which wind their way through his output.²⁶

Little was made of Bliss's youthful susceptibility to 'contemporary developments in the Paris of Stravinsky and Les Six', although Palmer detected a slight affinity between Bliss and Debussy with regard to Bliss's orchestral woodwind arabesques.²⁷ Bliss's own national heritage was emphasised more heavily, however: 'An idiom steeped as thoroughly in the Parry-Elgar tradition as Bliss's always runs the risk of degenerating into mere jingoism or rhetorical complacency, but Bliss's apotheoses are hard-fought and fairly won'. Palmer identified in some of Bliss's themes a 'truly Elgarian nobility and warmth' (a comparison that might have given pleasure to Bliss) and even an 'almost Brucknerian grandeur and stateliness' (less so).²⁸

Critique and commentary since Bliss's death

When Bliss died in March 1975, comparisons with Elgar were a common feature of the newspaper obituaries. Both men had occupied prominent positions within their own generations of English composers, and both had held the royal post of Master of the Musick. Even their physical similarity – military moustaches and all – was noted by some less musically-minded obituary departments.

Ronald Crichton's tribute in the *Musical Times* was a little more cautious. No doubt aware of Palmer's rejection of the two-period scheme, Crichton acknowledged only that Bliss *could* be considered 'a classic example of an avant-garde artist gradually evolving into a conservative'. By way of qualifying these descriptions, he offered this expansion upon them:

²⁵ Christopher Palmer, 'Aspects of Bliss', *Musical Times* 112 (1971), 743.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 744. Palmer observed some 'Syrinx-like' flute writing in Bliss's *Pastoral*, a claim he later reasserted in his book *Impressionism in music*.

²⁸ Ibid.

The early music was more the product of high spirits, healthy, whole-hearted curiosity about and sympathy with what was happening in the fermenting world of art than of fundamental originality or desire for innovation. At the other extreme this most likeable, approachable, punctilious but tolerant man did not become an Establishment figure in the dull or stuffy sense.²⁹

Like many other commentators, Crichton attempted to identify the start of Bliss's journey to maturity. He chose the composition of *A Colour Symphony* in 1922, a work which he claimed marked 'the beginning of a new phase, a settling-down soon to be distinguished by fine examples of the typically English genre of anthology cantata' such as *Pastoral*, *Serenade* and *Morning Heroes*.³⁰ Forty years after its first performance, the derivation of *Music for Strings* from Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* had long been accepted, and Crichton was prepared to reinforce that link: '*Music for Strings* ... revealed strong ties with Elgar but is one of Bliss's most personal and most accomplished works. The link is with the extrovert side of Elgar rather than the melancholy introvert.' Here, at least, he recognised the exuberant nature of the music.

When an artist dies, his reputation often diminishes: Elgar provided an accurate cautionary parallel. The popularity of Elgar's music began to wane even in the aftermath of the Great War. Within five-and-a-half years of his death another global conflict had begun, after which his body of work – with its roots so obviously in the Austro-German tradition of Wagner and Brahms – seemed even less relevant to modern ears. Likewise, after Bliss's death his music was performed far less frequently, and was seldom recorded. Andrew Burn described the struggle for Bliss's music during the composer's last years:

Even by the 1960s, when Bliss was in his 70s, his music had become unfashionable. When set beside the music of the emerging young generation of British composers, such as Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle, Bliss's work (like Finzi and Moeran and others who emerged in the interwar period) seemed anachronistic.³¹

This lack of popular exposure is reflected in the amount of 'Bliss scholarship' that appeared in the years immediately after his death. During this time much was achieved by Stewart Craggs and Lewis Foreman in cataloguing his works, but for many years no articles on Bliss were published in journals, and only very few in the

²⁹ Ronald Crichton, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 116 (1975), 436.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Andrew Burn, 'From Rebel to Romantic: the music of Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 132 (1991), 383.

national press. However, in his book *Sensibility and English Song*, Stephen Banfield tackled Bliss's early interwar works, noting an alignment 'more with the visual arts than with literary sensibilities.'³² As we have seen, he also questioned Bliss's reputation as an *enfant terrible*, pointing out the geniality of works such as *Rout*.

Bliss's centenary in 1991 prompted a reawakening of interest in his music, despite stiff competition from other anniversary celebrations for Mozart and Prokofiev. Bliss was a featured composer at the Hereford Three Choirs Festival and the Norfolk and Norwich Festival; a suite from the ballet *Adam Zero* was performed in Liverpool; *Morning Heroes* was heard at the Royal Festival Hall; and the Piano Concerto was played at the Proms. A new edition of Bliss's autobiography was published, and Andrew Burn, secretary of the Bliss Trust, contributed a lengthy biography to the *Musical Times*.

In July of that year, an article by Paul Driver entitled 'A centenary of honest charm' appeared in the *Sunday Times*. Driver began by acknowledging the difficulties the Bliss canon had faced since 1975:

The substance and detail of his large, varied oeuvre is, one cannot help feeling 16 years after his death, hardly familiar at all, except to the sort of slightly batty British music devotees who invariably cluster round an ailing reputation, and sometimes finish it off.³³

Despite this widespread indifference, Driver claimed that it was, after all, Bliss who had transmitted to post-Edwardian England the 'wicked continental avant-garderies being perpetrated by Debussy, Ravel and particularly Stravinsky.' He warned, however, that the 'novel, witty and bright' *Conversations* are 'never disarmingly pungent or raw in the way, for instance, of Stravinsky's Three Pieces for String Quartet.'³⁴

Of Bliss's stylistic development during the interwar years, Driver alleged that it was 'a matter of deepening his English roots'. This may be true, but the proposed instance of this evolution is perhaps misjudged: he described the Oboe Quintet as containing a 'mellifluous pastoral prettiness,' and that it had been 'so obligingly written for the instruments that sometimes the listener wants to scream.' This

³² Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English song*, 368.

³³ Paul Driver, 'A century of honest charm', *Sunday Times*, 21 July 1991, v, 7.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

unfailingly idiomatic writing is surely, though, the defining feature of the quintet, for in this work we find a comprehensive exploration of instrumental timbre, combined with innovative harmonic language and structural technique. Only a short section in the final movement could reasonably be described as 'pastoral'.

Driver asserted that Elgar was 'the crucial English influence on Bliss', a claim he attempted to strengthen with evidence from *Music for Strings*; he maintained that the work 'fits comfortably into the tradition of Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*, even if Bliss's Elgar has clearly been listening hard to Stravinsky's *Apollo*.' It is true that Bliss carried with him a signed score of Elgar's *Cockaigne Overture* through the trenches of the Western Front, and that he studied its orchestration keenly. But much of Bliss's scoring in his orchestral music is designed – like that of Stravinsky – to separate instrumental timbres rather than to blend them.

Peter Evans devoted a few paragraphs to Bliss's music in a chapter in *The Twentieth Century*, edited by Stephen Banfield. By the time of publication, several of Bliss's smaller works had been recorded by the Nash Ensemble – some for the first time – and scores of his ensemble music had been reissued by Curwen. Early in his chapter, Evans noted that Bliss's first orchestral works were 'venerated by Ravelian smartness and some metrical quirks'.³⁵ This was further qualified in his discussion of Bliss's chamber music: 'this [early] iconoclasm is jocular rather than ruthless, and before the end of the 1920s Bliss had turned to more traditional media and rhetoric'.

Bliss's instrumentation certainly became more conventional (full symphonic forces in *Morning Heroes*; a standard string orchestra in *Music for Strings*), as did his choice of genre (the anthology cantata; the three- or four-movement quintet). Evans also observed a change in Bliss's style around the composition of *Morning Heroes*: 'the restoration of key signatures in the Clarinet Quintet signifies the reimposition of a control much loosened in the Oboe Quintet, and Bliss's expansive neo-romanticism of line is well adapted to the clarinet's character.'³⁶

Our final source, published almost fifty years after Alec Robertson's chapter in *British Music of Our Time*, is James Day's thought-provoking *Englishness in music*.

³⁵ Peter Evans, 'Instrumental Music', in Stephen Banfield (ed.), *The Twentieth Century*, 206.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

Over those fifty years, much had been written on the different national influences felt by Bliss – Elgar in England, Stravinsky and Les Six in France. Day recognised that Bliss’s post-Armistice ‘statement of principles’³⁷ was ... a declaration of war on the Victorian and post-Victorian musical tradition of Germanic seriousness, complexity and intensity, which had for so long dominated English musical thinking at the universities and academies.’ It was nineteenth-century ideals which had, after all, brought about the Great War. As a veteran of that conflict, Bliss’s low opinion of Germany never entirely lifted. Day attempted to encapsulate it thus: ‘how could a nation so devoted to earnestness in art and high ideals in musical craftsmanship have produced a political system that had, it was thought, plunged Europe into a cruel and ruinous war?’³⁸

A new schema

In each of the sources collected above, the author acknowledges a mid-career change in Bliss’s aesthetic creed. Some – particularly those written during the 1950s when the composer was still active – popularised a two-period schema which is still accepted by commentators whenever any of Bliss’s music is broadcast today. Robertson writes of a revolt against romanticism, followed by an adherence to classical ideals. For Demuth, Bliss was an *enfant terrible* who drifted towards the English tradition. The schema is most explicit in the Blom *Grove* article, and Warrack and Cox both agree that Bliss’s youthful, high-spirited eccentricity soon gave way to a more traditional, diatonic lyricism. Even later writers such as Evans and Day make cautious reference to such classification.

It is my contention that such binary grouping is simplistic and crude, and that the body of work described in this chapter thus far, while often insightful and illuminating, constitutes a corpus of received opinion that must be countered. It is true that cautious efforts have been made since Bliss’s death to reassess his music – witness the circumspection of Crichton, Banfield and Day, and Palmer before them. But, as yet, no cogent alternatives have been proposed.

³⁷ Bliss’s address to the Society of Women Musicians in 1921 entitled ‘What Modern Composition is Aiming At’, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 15-24.

³⁸ James Day, *Englishness in music*, 198.

A potential solution lies in the modern musicological maxim of separating a man from his music – a modern maxim supported, however, by a century-old critique. Consider the following argument, laid out by Edward Dent in his critical study of Mozart's operas, first published in 1913:

It is, of course, generally possible to divide any man's life into three periods. Dante's three animals symbolize them as the ages of lust, ambition and avarice; an old jest said that a man entered his profession to get on, remained in it to get honour, and left it to get honest. The musician's three ages may be described in various ways. We may say that in the first he is asserting himself and trying to obtain an audience; in the second he has obtained his audience and is trying to develop himself to the fullest extent compatible with remaining in touch with it; in the third he has become indifferent to his audience, and writes only for himself.³⁹

This hypothesis was offered nearly a hundred years ago while Bliss was himself one of Dent's tutees at Cambridge, yet it is still relevant to the present discussion. Dent's three-period proposal makes no direct reference to the musical or stylistic content of each period; instead he describes the composer's relationship with his audience and thus, more importantly, his evolving intentions and motivations.

Let us then, for the sake of enquiry, strike out Dent's references to Mozart's short life, and consider instead Bliss's four score years. After his demobilisation in early 1919, he set about obtaining an audience with small-scale, innovative chamber works – which stood more chance of performance than music for larger forces – and asserted his desire to free himself from the values, societal and stylistic, of Edwardian England. That audience having been obtained, Bliss was able to 'develop himself' during his approach to his 'golden years, the high point of his career, the late 1930s.

While he never became entirely indifferent to his audience – his diligent execution of the post of Master of the Queen's Musick is testament to that – it is clear that after the Second World War he felt able to indulge his personal ambitions: he composed a poorly-received opera, and his fascination with structural innovation and thematic manipulation found outlets in works such as *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* and *Metamorphic Variations*. As Bliss claimed in his Royal Institution lectures, the greatest artists must have the ability to discern 'that which is a mere fashion which dies with next year's models, and that very small, scarce, and seemingly permanent

³⁹ Edward J. Dent, *Mozart's operas: a critical study*, 141.

fraction which enriches one's own art'.⁴⁰ We have seen some features of stylistic permanence – or, at least, logical evolution – in Bliss's music: despite this, he once led fashions, then followed them, then turned his back on them altogether.

Obtaining an audience, 1891-1923

In constructing a first stylistic period, the defining aspect of Bliss's music of those early post-Armistice years emerges: that is, his desire to remove music as far as possible from the romantic aesthetic and, in the face of the pastoral establishment, to find a willing audience. His childhood and war service are therefore grouped with the years 1919 to 1923: having decided early upon a career in either composition or performance, Bliss's first thirty-two years represent a period in which he sought connection with a potential public.

Bliss's formative years were metropolitan, spent in the capital city of the world's foremost empire under the guidance of a father, not forgetting, who was a cultured industrialist. The arts flourished in the Bliss household in a cultural regime which included theatre, ballet, concerts, trips to art galleries and bookshops, and domestic music-making of an impressively high standard. Bliss was taught piano by Ursula Creighton, and he continued to play publicly until the 1940s. His brother Howard made recordings on the cello in the era of the 78 rpm disc, while the clarinettist Kennard was described as 'the most talented of us all'. It is also worth remembering that when his mother died Arthur was not yet four, and so the aspect of his American heritage predominated in the inflexible social fabric of the 1890s.

Bliss's education was conventionally upper-middle class: Bilton Grange, Rugby, and then not music college but Cambridge: one imagines, though, that his father would not have objected to Arthur's entering a specialist institution sooner than he eventually did. At Cambridge he came under the tutelage of the fastidious Charles Wood, but perhaps more importantly he experienced the refreshing breeze of Dent himself, friend of Busoni and Bartók, and enemy of anything parochial and insular in the arts. Dent was keen that music should look beyond the past and beyond national

⁴⁰ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 8 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 70.

borders, a view that found favour with Bliss's already cosmopolitan attitude. Bliss was now protected from the rigid forces of late-Victorian British music: he was distanced from cathedral traditions and the folk revival not only by upbringing and inclination but also, laterally, by education.

On entering the Royal College at the age of 22, it is perhaps not surprising that Bliss clashed so vehemently with Charles Stanford. Even had they connected personally, their musical attitudes were vastly different: Bliss found Brahms to be an irrelevance, and he abhorred the Stanfordian derivation.⁴¹ Although his pre-war works are redolent of the Edwardian age during which they were composed, it is obvious that his stated musical tastes, at least, were now directed towards Europe and, by extension (via the Diaghilev ballets), Russia. The pre-war string quartet also tacitly acknowledges Vaughan Williams, with its curious blend of Ravelian quirks and pastoral pastiche.

That quartet, completed before the true horrors of war struck Bliss at the Somme, reflected his pre-war lifestyle and outlook, a life in which he was able to spend summer evenings acting in Shakespeare plays at country houses in Herefordshire: this music is untroubled and optimistic. It also neatly demonstrates the conflict which runs through Bliss's music between on the one hand the classical, with an emphasis on proportion, purity of line, understatement and a general disregard for sweeping rhetoric; and on the other the romantic urge for direct expression and dramatic colour. This conflict, it seems, was never satisfactorily resolved: rather, a controlled assimilation emerged, with some success.

Let us also consider the musical milieu of this whole first period, in the context of an apparent early affinity with Elgar. In the first of his Birmingham lectures, Elgar had made specific demands of the future:

The [future] that I want to see coming into being is something that shall grow out of our own soil, something broad, noble, chivalrous, healthy and above all, an out-of-door sort of spirit. To arrive at this it will be necessary to throw over all imitation.⁴²

⁴¹ Even so, Bliss's ultimate approaches to compositional teaching echoed those of Stanford.

⁴² Edward Elgar, quoted in Percy Young (ed.), *A future for English music and other lectures by Edward Elgar*, 57.

Later, Bliss would frequently derive inspiration from the natural world, yet an ‘out-of-doors’ not necessarily of English landscape as imagined by Elgar. Bliss’s love of nature and his musical vigour fulfil one half of Elgar’s demands, and yet his style, though it drew on several disparate sources, was largely derivative: it failed to throw over imitation.

However, in Bliss’s post-Armistice rejection of folk influences, and of what Hughes and Stradling have termed the ‘historical-pastoral’,⁴³ perhaps the Elgarian alignment is justified. Despite Bliss’s frequent contact with both Vaughan Williams and Holst – working for a time in the same house as the former, receiving coaching from the latter – his dismissal of folk quotations places him apart from them. Bliss and Vaughan Williams shared similar backgrounds: they were born into wealthy families, and were educated at good public schools. From there, they both studied music, with some history, at Cambridge. Both were even ‘finished’ at the Royal College.

Crucially, though, Vaughan Williams was twenty years older: while Bliss was in short trousers, Vaughan Williams was having the Austro-German tradition thrust upon him by Stanford, and there seemed no reason to resist it. And in those years, too, lay the roots of the fashion for folksong and of the popular Tudor revival: it was in the mid-1890s that Vaughan Williams first met Holst, and the two became inclined towards the renewal of England’s musical past, then in fashion in South Kensington.

Elgar, self-taught and non-academic, had little time for such retrospection: nor, musically speaking, did Bliss. His dislike of the artistic climate at the Royal College went beyond a simple clash of personalities with Stanford: he found the self-conscious reinvention of English tradition distasteful, and the reliance upon the past wearisome. This he shared with Elgar. Both were distanced from the Tudor revival, and from the Anglican tradition: Elgar’s anthems do not mask the ‘otherness’ of his Catholicism, and although Bliss seemed only half-heartedly to adopt that line of faith, his contributions to church music were far fewer still.

⁴³ Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English musical renaissance, 1840-1940: constructing a national music*, 74 – a term borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

While the judicious Bliss did not wage an active war on the pastoral school in the wake of the Armistice, his wholesale rejection of it provides a useful yardstick by which to measure his loyalties and affiliations. He had felt disillusionment after attending the first private performance of Elgar's Violin Sonata, but the direction he began to take in 1919 unwittingly satisfied the criteria of Elgar's champion, Ernest Newman, in an influential article he had written at the beginning of the war.

In the *Musical Times* in 1914, Newman had shown great perceptiveness. In 'The War and the Future of Music', he had warned against a national haste of throwing out the baby with bathwater, the baby in this analogy being the stylistic gifts the Austro-German tradition had bestowed upon a late-nineteenth-century renewal of English music. He understood that a European war might well cause this island nation to isolate itself culturally, and for the outward-looking nature of its music to suffer irreparable damage as a result.⁴⁴

Earlier that year, Newman had dismissed the burgeoning folksong movement, insisting that an ambition to be 'national' need not force a composer towards introspective nationalism. It was wrong, he argued, to be 'asked to believe that the "English national character" is fully expressed in the folk-songs of a few humble country singers of several generations ago!'⁴⁵ For Newman, the true path of progress was clear, and that path lay with Elgar. He was not to know that Elgar's creative career was almost at an end, but in Bliss there may have been an unlikely successor in the pursuit of a compelling – and non-pastoral – national music.

There was still a need for some to express anti-pastoral sentiments several years later, as exemplified by Constant Lambert in *Music Ho!*: 'The English folk song, except to a few crusted old farmhands in those rare districts which have escaped mechanisation, is nothing more than a very pretty period piece with the same innocent charm as the paintings of George Morland.' Lambert was certain that this 'self-conscious Englishry practised by the folk-song composers is in itself curiously un-English.'⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ernest Newman, 'The War and the Future of Music', *Musical Times* 55 (1914), 571-72.

⁴⁵ Ernest Newman, 'Russian Opera and Russian "Nationalism"', *Musical Times* 55 (1914), 505-08.

⁴⁶ Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! a study of music in decline*, 124. Lambert was, of course, the conductor of the first performances of Bliss's *Checkmate*.

He was equally as scathing of the Tudor revival, to which he referred in this coruscating analysis:

The argument that England is England still is an intellectual one to which the musical nerves refuse to listen. If the composer imagines that he can treat present day Surrey with its charabancs, filling stations, hikers, road houses, dainty tea-rooms, and loud speakers discoursing cosmopolitan jazz, in the way the Elizabethan composers treated the 'woodes so wilde' he is living in a narrow world of escape, incapable of producing anything more than a pretty period piece.⁴⁷

Given these views, it is unsurprising that Lambert seemed to express scepticism towards Vaughan Williams, on whose music he felt able to pass judgement:

Vaughan Williams, whose style is based on material without classical or international precedent and which, without necessarily being folk-songy in the picturesque way, is intimately connected with the inflections and mood of English folk music cannot be said to share the freedom of provinciality shown by Elgar and Walton. His appeal is undoubtedly more intense but it is also more limited.⁴⁸

Like Newman before him, Lambert had nailed his colours to the Elgarian mast: in this context, we may easily add the name of Bliss to those of Elgar and Walton.⁴⁹ Comparisons with Walton have long since abounded, with many commentators noticing a corresponding shift towards conservatism in both Walton and Bliss. Certainly, they both made early impacts, Bliss with his 'experiments in sound' and Walton with his *Façade*. Of the two, it is Walton's star that has burned longest: after the Second World War, however, Bliss generally avoided the kind of harsh criticism reserved for works such as Walton's Second Symphony, though subsequent reassessments of their respective oeuvres have been kinder to Walton.

In the early 1920s, Bliss was singled out by many commentators as a young man striving for something more than pastoralism, keen to assimilate the modern continental trends. Had it not been for the Great War, though, Bliss's may not have been such a lone voice. Of the high-profile musical figures that were killed, those that were mourned most – Butterworth, Farrar, Browne, Kelly – all demonstrated a tendency towards pastoralism before their untimely deaths.⁵⁰ But so had Bliss. If

⁴⁷ Constant Lambert, op. cit., 128. Note Lambert's reiteration of the pejorative 'pretty period piece'.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 107-8.

⁴⁹ It is revealing that some of the sources cited in this chapter have proclaimed Bliss and Walton together as the natural successors of Elgar.

⁵⁰ Indeed, it is a view generally held that Butterworth 'achieved an idealisation of idiom never surpassed by later exponents of the English Pastoral style' (Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English musical renaissance, 1840-1940: constructing a national music*, 142). However, Butterworth also revealed an assimilation of Debussy and Scriabin, and Browne's *Arabia* is at times almost Bergian.

Bliss's flame had been extinguished by the machine guns of the Somme, his artistic legacy would have amounted to little more than his undergraduate string quartet, a work which betrays little of the mild experimentation that was to follow. Who can say what trends those mortally wounded would have instigated?

Edwin Evans, unlike the newspaper critics of the day, was able to appreciate the geniality of Bliss's music, and to make distinctions from the European modernists which the pressmen were so quick to use as a weapon for pejorative comparison. He noted that, in some ways, Bliss was

the very antithesis of Stravinsky, despite all superficial resemblance. The apparently conventional clarinet *arpeggio* in the Prelude to the second tableau of *The Rite of Spring* remains practically unique in Stravinsky's music. In that of Bliss such incidents occur constantly, but they do not attract attention because they occur naturally. They are part of Bliss's mode of expression, which stands much nearer to the vernacular than one imagines at a first hearing of his music. His musical speech does not consist of an unbroken string of pungent words, but he has a useful stock of these available when required.⁵¹

If the music is genial to modern ears, then Bliss's settings were then at least 'modern' – the street carnival, the tube train, the committee meeting. These correlate to the Elgar creed in his Birmingham lectures of 'the present': 'it is easy to go back to ... the glories of those days and earlier ... but such thoughts have no practical value on the music of the present day'.⁵² However, even by the end of the 1920s Bliss was looking back in history for external stimulation, and his habit of regressive contemplation soon became a recurring principle.

Audience found, 1923-1945

In 1923, Bliss left England at just the moment it seemed that his star was rising. Some reasons for this have been proposed in chapters 3 and 4: in summary, though, it seems that *A Colour Symphony* obtained Bliss a popular audience, and he soon began to exploit this upon his return from America in 1925. His campaign began with works such as the *Introduction and Allegro* and the Oboe Quintet, and continued with the 'anthology-cantatas' which culminated in the heroic *Morning*

⁵¹ Edwin Evans, 'Arthur Bliss', *Musical Times* 64 (1923), 22.

⁵² See Percy Young (ed.), *A future for English music and other lectures by Edward Elgar*, 51.

Heroes. These works of the late 1920s paved the way for a period of critical acclaim and cultural integration, and his ‘golden years’ of the late 1930s.

The 1920s had been a period of pronounced stylistic development for Bliss, from experimentation towards a mature style. The 1930s brought his period of greatest achievement and productivity, yet still elements of the modernist remained. It is these years – as J. G. Ballard argued shortly before his death – which cover the period of heroic modernism.⁵³ Taking an architectural approach, Ballard repeated the modernist mantra that ornamentation – or over-elaboration of any sort – conceals rather than embellishes. ‘Less is more’ came the war cry. This aligns with the younger Bliss, with his dislike of ‘laborious super-textures’, and his description of Mahler’s music as ‘ponderous and trivial’, ‘boundless, yet finite’. But what of the more mature Bliss, the Bliss of the 1930s?

‘In its heyday,’ continued Ballard, ‘modernism was a vast utopian project.’ This is the facet of Ballard’s heroic modernism which is of most relevance here: it was during the 1930s that Bliss composed his score for *Things to Come*, and wholly embraced that great democratising force, the cinema. With the birth of cinematic sound, Bliss established himself successfully as a composer for film, although it is important to recognise that the lure of money was a significant factor in this: indeed, none of his later film scores came close to matching the brilliance of *Things to Come*. He admitted that there were ‘at least two films where the pull was a distinctly financial one. So I suppose a graph would show a downward slope: enthusiasm and curiosity for the new thing – admiration for a particular picture – greed.’⁵⁴ Financial gain and popular appeal, it is true, often sit side by side.

Bliss also became aware, early on, of the potential competition from sound effects and their technicians – but this he felt able to broadly dismiss:

I do not seriously think we are in danger, as pure musical sound will always have a wide importance on the films. It is powerfully expressive. It can bring nostalgia to a landscape, drama to any hour of the day or night; it can express undercurrents of human emotion, when the actors involved show little of it outwardly. It can suggest what is going to happen, it can recall what has happened; most important of all, perhaps, it can make what has turned dead and dull in a picture come alive and

⁵³ J. G. Ballard, ‘A handful of dust’, *Guardian*, 20 March 2006.

⁵⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 168.

exciting ... The music should do its work so smoothly and perfectly that it is only when you see the same picture run through in the studio without it, that you realise its irreplaceable importance.⁵⁵

In this assessment, he demonstrated confidence in the connection between a composer and his audience. Indeed, in this second proposed period, technological advancements brought a greater national integration in general. The radio invited the individual citizen to be allied to the state, and enabled the conceit of a collective society.

Returning to Ballard's architectural theme, there are musical parallels to be drawn too. The classical pillars, the pediments, and the pilasters of the 1920s and 30s found counterparts in Bliss's music. In 1933, Bliss commissioned the art deco country retreat at Pen Pits. Bliss's Viola Sonata of the same year betrayed the influence not of romanticism, but of classicism, and therefore perhaps an adherence to the heroic modernism of the 1930s. It owed much to classical concepts of form – its patterns of rhythms, themes and episodes were strictly wrought. Bliss, of course, could not resist muddying the waters with this contemporaneous reflection: 'The viola is the most romantic of instruments; it is a veritable Byron in the orchestra.'⁵⁶

However, even with the evidence presented above, it is unsatisfactory to consider Bliss in the 1930s, stylistically and aesthetically, as a modernist. In his 1934 lectures, for example, in which he proclaimed the romantic spirit of the viola, he added such sentiments as 'the very wish to create is a romantic urge, and music the romantic art *par excellence*'. He began to describe himself as an 'English composer', using a consciously nationalistic vocabulary. He even exalted, publicly, Wagner's *Tristan* prelude and Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*. At last, the anti-Teutonic chauvinism was fading.

Bliss had proved himself a social and cultural progressive, aligning himself with social democrats, and making room in his administrative arguments for popular, mainstream trends. Certainly, he never degenerated towards what Charles McGuire has described as 'a Ruskinian rejection of the industrial'.⁵⁷ The city was still the

⁵⁵ Roger Manvell and John Huntley, *The technique of film music*, 210.

⁵⁶ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 284.

⁵⁷ Charles Edward McGuire, 'Edward Elgar: "Modern" or "Modernist"? Construction of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Music Press, 1895-1934', *Musical Quarterly* 91 (2008), 11.

great centralising power in British culture: music between the wars was ruled over by the South Kensington establishment. For all their veneration of the indigenous music of the so-called masses, the cultural agenda was not set from the bottom up. Ultimately, though, even top-down authoritarianism could not prevent the rise of commercialism and global popular culture.

Introspection and cultural detachment, 1945-1975

There can be little doubt that the Second World War proved a severe and untimely interruption to Bliss's rich vein of creativity. In attempting to revive his career in peacetime, he devoted four years to an opera which ultimately proved an embarrassing failure. He then retreated into the comfort of his own favoured technical procedures, and although he continued to support the activities of younger composers, he seemed to close himself off from contemporary musical trends.

Despite this, Bliss was demonstrably proud of his later music, such as the scherzo of the String Quartet in F minor and the *John Blow Variations*. He developed an obsession with formal design, but in this adherence to organisational procedures he achieved the ultimate autonomy from a consciously 'national' style: not for him the four-movement symphony. At the end of his life he created music primarily to please himself, and found great satisfaction because of it. He was no longer mortgaging any aspect of his creative personality.

After 1945, the anger and friction that had inspired Bliss during the interwar years began to ebb away. Our prevailing understanding of Britain since the 1930s, in terms of its social and political history, is of a journey from Depression, through a People's War, and on to the Keynesian consensus of the post-war settlement. In national terms Bliss had little to rebel against in old age, and this showed in his stylistic ambition. The intervention of American culture simply represented a continuation of popular interwar trends, and an anxiety surrounding national identity only resurfaced in the light of greater European integration, by which time Bliss had died.⁵⁸ During his last

⁵⁸ See Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, 1-2.

thirty years he seemed detached from the New Jerusalem, and he certainly did not contribute to its construction.

But while Bliss was somewhat retrospective, disconnected and even self-involved after the Second World War, he was not socially conservative. He did not promote conventional or traditional values, or seek to define an Englishness based on nostalgia or the rural. In his writings, he remained resolutely progressive. In *As I Remember* and elsewhere, Bliss demonstrated his ease with multi-culturalism and post-colonialism. There was no retreat to the hinterland of the past, as described by Martin Wiener and others.⁵⁹ Twenty-first century scholarship has still largely failed to rehabilitate the generation born in the 1890s – due, perhaps, to their later overriding conservatism – despite a general questioning of the intrinsic connection between Englishness and the countryside. James Vernon has argued, for example, that English national identity ‘has always been, and remains, radically unstable’.⁶⁰

In David Matless’s fine study of the relationship between the English and their national landscape, he demonstrates how the binary perceptions of the interwar years – modern and traditional, urban and rural, progressive and preservationist – allowed a casual and ill-defined attitude to social reconstruction and rural nostalgia. Like Vernon, Bliss did not require such clear (and, indeed, false) delineations, and continued to welcome social progress as part of a national whole.⁶¹

It is all too easy to consider art only from the standpoint of today rather than forcing oneself to experience it as if anew, in the very moment of its conception. It is perhaps easiest, counter intuitively, to examine Bliss’s music of the 1920s, a period which now seems so fabled and so far away as to already contain the necessary distance for cold-blooded analysis. The historical context of the post-war period is more familiar, more present, and so it seems harder to match music with history. Yet for some, it seemed, Bliss’s music still had relevance.

⁵⁹ See Martin J. Wiener, *English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit 1850-1980* in which he charts a century-long regression into an invented past.

⁶⁰ James Vernon, ‘Englishness: narration of a narration’, *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997), 248.

⁶¹ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*. See also Peter Mandler, ‘Against “Englishness”’: English culture and the limits to rural nostalgia, 1850-1940’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997).

For Britten it was Bliss's freshness that most appealed, as he confessed in a letter marking Bliss's seventy-fifth birthday: 'Happy you, who can preserve youthful exuberance without youthful immaturity!'⁶² It is true that Bliss's style matured considerably over a career of more than fifty years, but that some hallmarks of the 1920s remained. For Peter Evans, though, those high spirits led on occasion to 'uncomfortably big gestures' and 'flatulent reiteration'.⁶³ Bliss's compositional habits and processes reveal him, as we have seen, to have been far from a natural composer: Evans is correct to note that Bliss's music is not full of freshly-introduced material in the same way as is, for instance, the music of Elgar.

Always, though, as Andrew Burn has suggested of both man and music, the legacy of the Great War is present. For all his efforts, Bliss never broke free of the Romanticism of his youth – putting him further out of touch with his post-war audience. As Robert Meikle has suggested, Bliss's pronouncement on Arnold Bax could easily apply to himself: 'The rapidity with which one musical fashion succeeds another has for the moment relegated Bax's music to some lumber-room, where it lies awaiting a new generation that will admire its uninhibited musical flow and romantic expression.'⁶⁴ There is only a diminishing hope that Bliss's music, of its time and of its place, will acquire a touch of the agelessness that great art requires.

Conflicts and conclusions

The three-period analysis presented here proves more illuminating than simply to chart Bliss's apparent decline into conservatism. The tripartite shines on more than the binary. The need to look beyond black and white, and into the myriad shades of grey, is demonstrated by the many conflicting aspects of Bliss's personality and output. Within those dualities there are no clear answers: urban-rural, war-peace, abstract-programmatic, England-America, even bourgeois-proletarian – and, of course, the most important of all, innovative-conservative. Even this list is by no means comprehensive. It is hard to ignore the stylistic regression in Bliss's music, or

⁶² Quoted by Andrew Burn in *As I Remember*, revised edition (1991), 292.

⁶³ Peter Evans, 'Instrumental Music', in Stephen Banfield (ed.), *The Twentieth Century*, 206.

⁶⁴ Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember*, 192, also quoted by Robert Meikle in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 52.

at least a palpable sense of stagnation – but to cast his musical career in these terms alone is to simplify and ultimately mislead. Instead, as this survey has done, let us marry his life and works closer, and if we must classify at all, then let us take a more nuanced, three-period approach.

Bliss's music seldom resorts to nostalgia. There is restraint, yes, with the occasional eruption of violence as discussed elsewhere – but nostalgia is largely absent. In Jack Westrup's 1947 collection *The Character of England*, he wrote of the inclination of English music 'to be romantic yet reserved. Much of it avoids expansive gestures not from a lack of feeling but from a habit of restraint ... What is particularly noticeable in English music is a nostalgic quality that defies precise analysis.'⁶⁵ By contrast, Bliss's music is expansive rather than nostalgic – although his choice of subject matter, often reliant upon historical sources, certainly betrays a pattern of retrospection.

One of Bliss's best-known source-reliant compositions, *Morning Heroes*, is an intensely personal work – yet, through its subject, it debars any thoughts of affirmative nostalgia. It is not a work necessarily set in England: rather, it is a worldwide response to a worldwide war, drawing upon literature and settings from England, America, Greece and even the Far East. In this work, Bliss did not create a national monument. We can also claim, then, that Bliss's influences from the landscape are not those of a rural England, but from the wonders of global nature. *Pastoral*, for example, depicts the beauty of Italy. Even his major operatic work, *The Olympians*, with a libretto by a great man of English letters, is set in rural France.

For all the nature in his music, Bliss seldom depicts the sea: this seems unusual for a composer from a proudly island nation. Certainly, much of the music now embedded in the national tradition calls upon our great natural defender, ranging from Bax's *Tintagel*, Bridge's *The Sea* and Vaughan Williams's First Symphony to the ritualistic *Fantasia on Sea Songs* heard every year at the Last Night. Bliss was not a proficient choral composer, a medium which has also long been a mainstay in British society thanks to its associated amateur tradition.

⁶⁵ Jack Westrup, 'Music', in E. Barker (ed.), *The character of England*, 406.

With the intensification of urbanisation, and the concomitant loss of treasured environments, the evocation and fetishisation of the natural world became a defining cultural phenomenon of the twentieth century. It is here that we find Bliss's most profound relationship with the rural, in his elegiac treatment of the countryside. Early in his career he conjured aural images of man and industry – the street carnival, the tube train – but was later content to concentrate on the natural. In this, regardless of his distaste for the techniques of late romanticism, Bliss was at his most spiritual. Indeed, by drawing inspiration so frequently from the natural world, we might argue that ultimately Bliss became a pastoralist in intention, if not in folk-shunning execution.

And what of that execution? It is profitable to review and identify some of the themes which run across the broad sweep of Bliss's career. Robert Meikle has identified Bliss's tendency to avoid placing tonality at the top of the 'structural hierarchy'.⁶⁶ We have seen this habit demonstrated in works such as *Music for Strings*, in which Bliss distorts sonata-form thematic organisation in the first movement by abandoning any sense of conventional tonal direction. (This is not to say that tonality itself is abandoned, as Frank Howes noted in his *Musical Times* appraisal of the work.) In the opening movement of the Violin Concerto, too, Bliss appears to centre on the key of A (beginning in the minor and closing in the major), but only completes the tonal journey by following a circuitous and seemingly illogical route.

Tonality is far from absent in Bliss's music, and yet his approach to it is often ambiguous. His harmonic practices, on the other hand, are consistent with those in general use during the first half of the twentieth century. His music is littered with sixths, sevenths and ninths (the opening of the String Quartet in B flat major provides a perfect example), and major and minor chords are often found operating in tandem. But this is not the sum of Bliss's harmonies – his music is frequently dissonant without being atonal, or even bitonal: dissonances are often melodic, with a passing gesture teasing the harmonies beneath.

Christopher Palmer took the subject of musical anguish in his peerless *Musical Times* article to mark Bliss's eightieth birthday in 1971. Unsurprisingly, Palmer

⁶⁶ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 7.

attributed the darker elements of Bliss's style to his service during the First World War:

Was the experience of those years directly responsible for that unmistakable streak of violence which has broken out sporadically in Bliss's music ever since, and which has, in fact, resulted in some of his finest and most convincing utterances? ... There is a constant stream of sad processions winding their way through his music.⁶⁷

It is revealing that Palmer's description of the violence in Bliss's music mirrors most descriptions of the composer's personality. Those anecdotes, deliberately not collected here, often tell of Bliss's generally amiable nature, but acknowledge that he was prone to violent outbursts at the slightest provocation.⁶⁸ Such recollections serve to support Palmer's contention that the completion of *Morning Heroes* did not entirely result in the longed-for personal catharsis.

In his 1934 lectures on contemporary music, Bliss spoke publicly of his war experiences with extraordinary personal candour:

A butterfly in a trench, the swoop and note of a bird, a line of poetry, the shape of Orion became as it were more vividly perceived and actually felt than ever before imagined possible ... One developed a sense of awareness more acute than at any other time in one's life – one saw objects for the first time, simply because, I imagine, it might also conceivably have been for the last.

This knife-like edge of awareness spread to all the senses. One discovered again freshly and vividly as the child, only with the adult's appreciation of the fact.⁶⁹

Here, the first person singular is replaced by the more distant personal pronoun 'one', as if a barrier is required between the speaker and the pain of his memories. It remains one of the most powerful descriptive passages in all of Bliss's prose output.

Even when Bliss mellowed, as he undoubtedly did in his proclamations against German high art, the profound experiences of the two world wars continued to weigh heavily upon him. The first robbed him of his greatest years of potential development, while the second effectively brought his most fertile period to a close. Like Elgar before him, his muse never fully recovered. This mirrors a broader

⁶⁷ Christopher Palmer, 'Aspects of Bliss', *Musical Times* 112 (1971), 743. Robert Meikle has noted that Palmer's expression 'sad processions' is a direct, possibly subconscious, quotation from Walt Whitman's *Dirge for Two Veterans*.

⁶⁸ A written example of such evidence can be found in John Amis's introduction to Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*.

⁶⁹ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 98-9.

national experience, one in which the scars of those conflicts has touched every British citizen throughout the twentieth century – tales of sacrifice to be found in every family, the memorials on our village greens, the same old grudges still occasionally heard on the football terraces. Even now, these two great cultures – Britain and Germany – are seen as somehow incompatible by small pockets of the population. At moments of cultural indolence, Germany still provides a useful national ‘other’.

During the interwar years, Bliss’s most productive period, these prejudices were at their most pronounced. Bliss was too musically literate to shun German music entirely, but his distaste for German culture certainly informed his immediate post-Armistice works: in this crucial period of development he was driven to find a singular voice within an English context, and was wooed successfully by neither the pastoralists nor the German-influenced older guard.

So where, ultimately, did Bliss’s national loyalties lie? Was this complex character, formed in a reconstructed, modern England, truly English? For Peter Mandler, a ‘national’ character may be defined as ‘a cultural, psychological or biological essence that all individuals in a nation share in common, and that directs – somewhat abstractly – all manifestations of national life’.⁷⁰ A nebulous concept, then, but one which demands our final attention. Bliss, so often content with and unafraid of isolation, cannot be reduced to a series of abstract national personality traits, but these discourses of character might at least aid our understanding of nationhood.

Besides, Mandler claims, the idea of a ‘national character’ first surfaced in the middle of the nineteenth century, and entered the national psyche thereafter. For Bliss, who fought in one war and served with zeal in another, this sense of collectiveness was important. He was also associated throughout his life with public figures unafraid to express desire and ambition for specific, usually social democratic, national direction. The mistakes of imperialism had taken the life of Kennard Bliss, and subsequently lingered only in the rhetoric of conservative reactionaries.

⁷⁰ Peter Mandler, ‘The consciousness of modernity? Liberalism and the English “national character”, 1870-1940’, in M. Daunt and B. Rieger (eds), *Meanings of modernity*, 120.

During Bliss's central period in the present schema, in which he was most socially and culturally integrated, many discourses of the national character surfaced: the collective effort of the People's War aside, some of these exhibited a surprising uniformity. Contrary to post-war tendencies towards historical nostalgia and the rural idyll, the 1930s were the years of the suburban semi, of new lifestyles and routines, and an associated semi-modernity. Those who inhabited these new homes were 'kindly, dogged, humorous, patient', able to boast 'an intense "at-oneness" with his environment'.⁷¹ Orwell described a love of liberty and privacy, a sentiment echoed by A. L. Rowse.⁷² In modern redactions, we are left with an impression of instinctive detachment. Britain had migrated away from European collectivism and towards American individualism. Perhaps Bliss had not invested effort in social integration: rather, English society may have adapted and met his own predilections.

Bliss the man gained much from America: his parental heritage, his beloved Trudy – almost four years of his life were spent there. Stylistically, though, one cannot say that the influence was great, although his extended periods in America produced what is perhaps his most romantic music. Comparisons have been made with Copland, but Bliss never attempted to paint the great sweep of either landscapes or culture – in this way, his music uncompromisingly rejected the English pastoral.

There is some jazz in his early works, but this was a jazz delivered through his visits to Paris. Perhaps America contributed to Bliss's outward-looking mentality and to his discomfort with national traits in art or music. For such an apparently archetypal Englishman, he was an impressively international composer. As Paul Jackson has concluded, 'Bliss's strength – like that of all great artists – lay in assimilating experiences and influences and transforming them into something uniquely his own.'⁷³ Bliss himself remarked that music is 'an international language, the only international language'.⁷⁴

At Berkeley in the early 1940s he had the role of teacher thrust unexpectedly upon him once again, and the skills of communication and administration that he honed

⁷¹ Arthur Bryant, *The national character*, 16-17.

⁷² George Orwell, 'The lion and the unicorn', in *Collected Essays*, 76-83; A. L. Rowse, 'The English Spirit', in *The English Spirit*, 35-6.

⁷³ Paul Jackson, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 189.

⁷⁴ Arthur Bliss, in a lecture to the Royal Institution, 22 March 1934, reproduced in Gregory Roscow (ed.), *Bliss on music*, 97.

there served him well as a regular BBC broadcaster after the war, and as a popular and effective chairman of a number of committees – not at all the droning chair of *Conversations*. His international leanings and heritage, combined with his earlier rebellions against the musical establishment, allowed him to stand back from the centre of English music, and to understand how it was perceived around the world – surely a vital component of a successful Master of the Queen’s Musick.

That royal post engenders a formal connection between Bliss and Elgar, and still it is to Elgar that Bliss’s legacy is critically wedded. Several external claims regarding Bliss’s relationship with an Elgarian tradition have been presented in this chapter and elsewhere, and there are more still. Frank Howes claims that ‘Bliss’s place ... is in the Elgar succession’,⁷⁵ an opinion shared by Stewart Craggs: ‘Musically he was in many ways Sir Edward’s heir – his works have the same Romantic sweep and the orchestration has much of the same virtuosity’.⁷⁶

Alec Robertson is more guarded, with this pithy assessment of Bliss’s non-pastoralism: ‘Like Elgar, of whom Bliss’s figuration and richness of texture – but these only – often remind one, Bliss very rarely takes a turn on the village green’.⁷⁷ David Cox is even less uncertain: ‘The musical influence of Elgar is in fact slight: a scrupulous care in the scoring, a melodic figure or two, a rhythm, a sequence, perhaps – but this is quite superficial.’⁷⁸ Hugo Cole in the *New Grove* presents some stylistic and spiritual contradictions: ‘he soon discovered the strong ties that bound him to his predecessors, and most strongly to Elgar’, and later, ‘his music has little of the introspective quality of Mahler’s, Elgar’s or Schoenberg’s’.⁷⁹

For Robert Meikle, the differences between Elgar and Bliss outweigh the similarities. He observes that there is little of the ‘sumptuous opulence’ of Elgar’s textures in Bliss, nor is there the obsession with sequences (other than in Bliss’s early efforts).⁸⁰ Further, the young Bliss rejected the German Romantic tradition in

⁷⁵ Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 265.

⁷⁶ Stewart R. Craggs, *Arthur Bliss: a preliminary survey and synthesis of materials for the study of his music*, i, 59.

⁷⁷ Alec Robertson, ‘Arthur Bliss’, in A. L. Bacharach (ed.), *British music of our time*, 153.

⁷⁸ David Cox, ‘A View of Bliss’s Music’, *The Listener* 74 (1965), 818.

⁷⁹ Hugo Cole, ‘Arthur Bliss’, *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ii, 792-3.

⁸⁰ Robert Meikle, in Stewart R. Craggs (ed.), *Arthur Bliss: music and literature*, 11.

both style and thought, in a way that Elgar, because of his own temporal context, could never have himself achieved.

Andrew Blake has proposed a tripartite scheme of classification: 'Traditional', into which he places Vaughan Williams and the other pastoralists; small 'm' 'modern' – composers such as Walton and Lambert; and capital 'M' 'Modernist' – an epithet, he explains, that 'has to be reserved for a genre which, at least on the surface, rejects all dialogue with the vernacular.'⁸¹ Bliss seldom rejected a dialogue with the vernacular, even if he turned his back on the indigenous. Rather, for a time he was central, in Britain at least, to adapting and reinvigorating the vernacular. On Blake's terms, then, Bliss must be regarded as small 'm' 'modern'.

Surely, though, there is a better word to describe Bliss than 'modern'. In finding a suitable answer, the critical interrelationship with Elgar may justifiably be of great assistance. After a performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* in Düsseldorf in 1902, Richard Strauss hailed Elgar as 'the first English progressivist'.⁸² Shortly after that, Paul Valéry, with whose work Bliss was familiar, observed that 'Not long ago, artists used to dislike what was called Progress.'⁸³ Not Arthur Bliss. If Bliss follows in any Elgarian tradition, he follows in the simple pursuance of the spirit of progress.

⁸¹ Andrew Blake, *The land without music: music, culture and society in twentieth-century Britain*, 54.

⁸² See Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: a creative life*, 369.

⁸³ Paul Valéry, *Reflections on the world today*, 122. Bliss quoted Valéry's remarks on the construction of art in his 1934 Royal Institution lectures.

Chronology of major works

The present chronology of Bliss's major works is arranged to correspond to the chapters of this thesis in which each work appears.

1. Old England

String Quartet in A major, c. 1913

2. First war

'The Hammers', (song, R. Hodgson), c. 1915

'The Tramps', (song, R. Service), c. 1916

3. *Enfant terrible*

Madam Noy (text by E. H. W. Meyerstein), S, fl, cl, bn, hp, va, db, 1918

Rhapsody (wordless), S, T, fl, cor ang, str qt, db, 1919

Conversations, fl / a fl, ob / cor ang, str trio, 1920

Rout (nonsense syllables, Bliss), S, fl, cl, glock, hp, perc, str qt, 1920

Two Studies, orchestra, 1920

Mêlée Fantasque, orchestra, 1921

The Tempest (incidental music, W. Shakespeare), 1921

Three Romantic Songs (song cycle, W. de la Mare), 1921

A Colour Symphony, orchestra, 1921-2

4. America and return

Ballads of the Four Seasons (song cycle, Li Po), 1923

The Women of Yueh (song cycle, Li Po), S, fl, ob, cl, bn, perc, str qt, db, 1923

'The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House' (song, T. Hardy), 1924

Introduction and Allegro, orchestra, 1926

Hymn to Apollo, orchestra, 1926

Oboe Quintet, 1927

Pastoral: lie strewn the white flocks (anthology-cantata, B. Jonson, J. Fletcher, Poliziano, R. Nichols, Theocritus), Mez, chorus, fl, timp, str, 1928

Serenade (anthology-cantata, E. Spenser, W. Wotton), Bar, orch, 1929

Morning Heroes (choral symphony, Homer, W. Whitman, Li Po, W. Owen, R. Nichols), orator, chorus, orch, 1930

5. Rebel tamed

Clarinet Quintet, 1932

Viola Sonata, 1933

6. Golden years

Things to Come (film score, dir. A. Korda), 1934-5

Music for Strings, str orch, 1935

Checkmate (ballet, Bliss, choreog. N. de Valois), 1937

Conquest of the Air (film score, dir. A. Korda), 1938

Piano Concerto, 1938-9

7. Second war

Seven American Poems (song cycle, E. St Vincent Millay, E. Wylie), A/B, pf, 1940

String Quartet in B flat major, 1941

Miracle in the Gorbals (ballet, M. Benthall, choreog. R. Helpmann), 1944

Men of Two Worlds (Baraza) (film score, dir. T. Dickinson), 1945

8. Indian summer

Adam Zero (ballet, M. Benthall, choreog. R. Helpmann), 1946

The Olympians (opera, 3 acts, J. B. Priestley), 1946-9

String Quartet in F minor, 1950

The Enchantress (scena, H. Reed, after Theocritus), C, orch, 1951

Elegiac Sonnet (C. Day Lewis), T, pf qnt, 1954

Violin Concerto, 1955

Meditations on a Theme by John Blow, orchestra, 1955

Discourse for Orchestra, 1957

A Knot of Riddles (Old Eng., trans. K. Crossley-Holland), Bar, wind qt, hp, str qt, db, 1963

Cello Concerto, 1970

Metamorphic Variations, orchestra, 1972

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