

On the idle hill of summer,
Sleepy with the flow of streams,
Far I hear the steady drummer
Drumming like a noise in dreams.

Far and near and low and louder
On the roads of earth go by,
Dear to friends and food for powder,
Soldiers marching, all to die.

East and west on fields forgotten
Bleach the bones of comrades slain,
Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
None that go return again.

Far the calling bugles hollo,
High the screaming fife replies,
Gay the files of scarlet follow:
Woman bore me, I will rise.¹

At 7:00 AM on July 1st, 1916, near the village of Beaumont Hamel along the Somme river, massed British artillery launched a barrage of 250,000 shells that could be felt 200 miles away in Hampstead Heath, north London.² Twenty minutes later, a British officer prematurely detonated a 40,000 pound mine that had been placed below the Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt, a line of heavily fortified German trenches. At 7:30 AM, thirteen divisions (roughly 110,000 men) clambered over the British parapets and walked towards the German machine guns.³ By the end of the day, British casualties numbered 57,470, with 19,240 dead and the remainder missing or wounded.⁴ Winston Churchill described this July morning as being “the greatest loss or slaughter sustained in a single day in the whole history of the British Army.”⁵ A sensible man would have called off the attack after such horrific losses, but commanding general Sir Douglas Haig (later elevated to Field Marshal Haig) pressed on for another 140 days.

It was the battle of the Somme that finally triggered a deep sense of despair in Britain; after two years of war and hundreds of thousands of casualties, “the big push” yielded less than 5 miles of ground and over 350,000 fresh dead, missing and wounded. It was the Somme that forced the British public to admit that the war had not ended before Christmas of 1914 as promised, that the inconclusive battles of 1915 were nothing but wheel-spinning slaughters, that the much-vaunted “big push” had solved nothing and offered no end to the muddy inferno busily devouring an entire generation. The poet Edmund Blunden, a veteran of the Somme, would write years later

By the end of the day both sides had seen, in a sad scrawl of broken earth and murdered men, the answer to the question. No road. No thoroughfare. Neither race had won, nor could win, the war.

The War had won, and would go on winning.⁶

On the 35th of the Somme’s 140 days, Lieutenant George Butterworth was shot in the head by a German sniper. The men of his platoon buried his body in the side of their trench, but in the furious bombardments of that section over the next two years, his remains were destroyed.⁷ Butterworth was an unlikely candidate for the soldier’s life, being a composer whose chief hobbies were Morris dancing and folk song collecting.⁸

When the simmering powderkeg of European militarism ignited in August of 1914, Butterworth enlisted in the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry. The war was a solution to feelings of shiftlessness and dissatisfaction with his

¹ A. E. Housman, *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman*, Revised ed. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1971), 52.

² Martin Gilbert, *The Somme: Heroism and Horror in the First World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006), 50.

³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory: The Illustrated Edition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Sterling, 2009), 13.

⁴ William Philpott, *Three Armies On the Somme: the First Battle of the Twentieth Century*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Knopf, 2010), 10.

⁵ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis ii* (London: Odhams Press, 1938), 1077.

⁶ Edmund Blunden, *The Mind’s Eye* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), 38.

⁷ Martin Gilbert, *The Somme: Heroism and Horror in the First World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006), 146.

⁸ Peter J. Pirie, introduction to *A Shropshire Lad*, by George Butterworth (London: Stainer and Bell, 2003), ii.

life as a music critic and composer; joining the army “seemed to provide something to do.”⁹ At the time of his enlistment, his body of compositional work was complete, from the song cycle presented today and its mate, the other A.E. Housman-based cycle *On Bredon Hill*, to the orchestral rhapsodies *A Shropshire Lad* and *On the Banks of the Green Willow*. Butterworth’s preoccupation with the poetry of Housman (shared by many Britishers) was perhaps due to the gathering war clouds which had begun to form since the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. The European powers were headed for a violent collision; Housman’s poetry obsessively addresses over and over again the leave-taking that must occur in a time of war: it responded to a powerful need in those young men who felt destiny quickly approaching.

In A.E. Housman’s collection *A Shropshire Lad*, the lads of the poems see portents all about them, from the inevitability of winter and aging, to missing other fellows at the fair. In Shropshire, love is always in the past tense, friends are always just out of reach. These are not darkly-drawn subjects, but wistfully accepted truths that must occur as a natural way of things. The distant marching of red-coated soldiers to whom the Lad must always be drawn is an ever-present theme in Housman. In the poem reproduced above, the Lad sits alone on a hill in the wild, but cannot ignore the sound of faraway drums. He must rise and go: it is his destiny. The often faceless figure of the soldier is the Lad grown up, a man who has accepted responsibility and will leave the village to die for an unspecified cause. In many of the poems, the narrator (due either to physical unsuitability, youth, cowardice, sexuality or some other unknown reason) is often left behind to watch as the men march away forever, leaving only the Lad to remember their shades. In only a handful of poems do we experience the voice of a Lad who has himself gone away; in the final song of the cycle heard today, the distant words of the dead man whisper to one who lives: “Is my team ploughing? Is football playing? Is my girl happy? Is my friend hearty?” The unasked question is, “Why?”

Butterworth’s settings of the Housman poems are stark in their simplicity, each song emanating entirely from a melodic line which drifts unimpeded through the vocal part and through the hands of the pianist. This is Wagner’s “continuous melody” stripped to its barest essentials; even the most active accompaniments of the group are always linear in character, never really pausing to savor any horizontal effects. Subtle sound-painting effects occur in all of the songs, from the dip of the cherry branch to the exuberance of the “falling sky.” Butterworth’s Housman settings are much more reticent than the heartbroken and impassioned settings of John Ireland, less ornate than those of C.W. Orr, better thought-out than the settings of Arthur Somervell or Ivor Gurney. When the German bullet felled Butterworth on the Somme, it ended the life of the composer who perhaps best understood Housman’s bittersweet poetry.

While the Butterworth cycle clearly offers references to war and its effect on the lives of those who remain behind, the John Ireland Second Violin Sonata could easily be listened to with ears that do not comprehend the piece as a war work. Without historical context, the sonata is dramatic and tuneful, a pleasing work that deserves to be part of the standard repertory. With historical context, the work becomes more than an Edwardian relic, existing not only as a work of art, but as a symbol of national suffering and sacrifice.

The majority of the sonata’s composition took place in 1916, the work being finished in January of 1917; the battle of the Somme therefore would have taken place at the height of the compositional process.¹⁰ The work was premiered on March 6 of that year by Albert Sammons and William Murdoch, both of whom appeared onstage clad in the uniform of their Grenadier Guards regiment. The audience would have been made up of civilians (parents, children, siblings, spouses and friends of soldiers) as well as military men in uniform or in mufti. The excellent review of the work that appeared in the next morning’s *Times* was on page 9. In order to get to the page with the review, it was necessary to flip past page one, which contains the latest officer casualties (killed in action), and past page two, which contains 913 names of enlisted men on a “Roll of Honor.” These 913 are either listed “killed,” “died of wounds,” or “wounded.” This is the casualty list for the week. The following week (on March 14th), page five reports 1,020 names. The week after that (March 21st) on page four, there are 1,950 names. In three weeks, a total of 3,883 casualties occurred; more than half of these are killed or died of wounds, ca. 2,000 men.

⁹ John Rippin, “George Butterworth 1885-1916,” *The Musical Times* 1482 (1966): 682.

¹⁰ Fiona Richards, *The Music of John Ireland* (Aldershot, Hants, England.: Ashgate Pub Ltd, 2001), 24.

These numbers do not include the missing, a figure that would later greatly inflate the number of killed (in a war involving millions of tons of high explosives, “missing” has a grim meaning). In March of 1917, no important offensive was occurring; these numbers are the usual attrition rate for three weeks in the trenches. To give some context to these numbers, ponder this: the U.S. military has been fighting in Afghanistan for ten years. As of November 2, 2011, in those ten years, we have lost 1, 716 soldiers.¹¹

These casualty lists represent the only concrete information coming from the front. On the same pages as the casualties, the publishers of the *Times* were careful to print stories claiming Germans on the run and successes in the field, but any reader would see past these to the staggering lists of dead and wounded. These readers had read about the horrific losses at the Somme, and before that the losses at the first and second battles at Ypres, and before that, the losses at the battle of Mons. These readers constituted the audience for the premiere of John Ireland’s second violin sonata and received it with thunderous applause. Its resonance with them was such that a publisher was camped out on Ireland’s doorstep before breakfast the following morning. A contemporary of Ireland’s described the work as striking “some latent chord of sentiment that had been waiting for the sympathetic voice to make it articulate.”¹²

What did the audience perceive in this work that lead them to give it such acclaim? The Edwardians and their children were prone to finding programmatic elements in absolute music (see. E.M. Forster’s fanciful analysis of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in 1908’s *Howards End*), so it might be worth indulging here. Contemporary and later analyses have claimed the piece as a war work; composed as it was during the worst of the British war experience, there is no reason to disagree. The movements could be described as a triptych of the war experience: war, remembrance, homecoming.

The first movement of the Sonata is brutal. That adjective might seem extreme (this is not Boulez or even Prokofiev, after all), but it is apt; the martial opening figure, with its jagged dotted rhythm, permeates the movement, its unforgiving melodic cell forcing its way into every bit of thematic material presented. Even in quasi-triumphal passages in the major mode, the rhythm is stark and unbending, grimly marching the movement towards its violent conclusion. The second theme is wistful, even hopeful, but it is weak, hiding the opening material within its soft cadences. Any respite it offers is shattered by the further development of the opening theme and its recapitulation. There are no patriotic lies here, the major mode does not adapt the opening material and promise any sort of victory, but only continued sonic destruction.

The second movement is in ternary form, with two elegiac, melancholy sections bookending a barcarolle in 12/8 time. The theme which develops at the beginning of the movement and returns near the end contains to these ears a powerful sense of loss and yearning; its measured tread is a processional of emotions, gathering strength as it goes. The driving war motive of the first movement has been turned into a keening, desperate plea, melodically inverted from its violent predecessor. In her analysis of the work, the Ireland scholar Fiona Richards suggests that the opening material is an “expression of grief for people, places, ways of life lost.”¹³ Those familiar with the Chopin *Barcarolle* will be surprised to recognize a snippet in the piano part in the middle section. Its inclusion might have struck the audience as odd, not knowing that John Ireland associated such water music with the area of West London known as Chelsea. Chelsea sits upon the banks of the Thames River; in 1917, it was an area populated by bohemians and artists. After the war, John Ireland re-used the barcarolle themes heard in this movement for the first of his *London Pieces*, “Chelsea Reach.” With this in mind, the listener can experience this section as a reflection on London and home. A repeat of the increasingly impassioned opening material occurs, and the movement ends with the mournful tolling of bells in the piano.

The final movement begins with a rhythmic and dynamic vehemence that suggest a return to the battlefield, but a sudden shift from minor to major mode signals a new motive, a joyful A Major theme that banters with tremolo figures in the piano. This is the singing of men on their way home from battle, men who have been released from a purgatory of mud and death and come through to the other side. The contrasting sections that follow are the

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) U.S. Casualty Status,” U.S. Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2011).

¹² Edwin Evans, “John Ireland,” *The Musical Quarterly* 2 (1919): 217.

¹³ Fiona Richards, *The Music of John Ireland*, 210.

welling of emotions with thoughts of home, the distant thunder of guns that have not finished their work, a return to singing. The piano attempts to recall the grief of the second movement, but the singing theme will not allow any dwelling upon the lost. The movement ends in a breathless dash to the finish; to borrow some Edwardian fancy, the final pages are a soldier's sprint through the gate, returned to his family, never again to be parted.

The violin sonata was such a success after its premiere that before it was in print, it caught the attention of virtuoso violist Lionel Tertis. A trailblazer and evangelist for the viola, Tertis made a habit of "borrowing" historically important and commercially successful works and re-imagining them for his instrument; alongside the Kreisler bonbons and popular tunes in the Tertis transcription catalogue are works like the Delius violin sonatas and Elgar Cello Concerto. The pianist of the 1917 premiere, William Murdoch, was a frequent chamber music partner of Tertis, and perhaps suggested that it might make a ripping good viola sonata. By November of 1917, Tertis had premiered his own version of the work with Murdoch at London's Wigmore Hall.^{14 15} His arrangement has never been published, and it is only through the good graces of John White (Tertis' biographer and executor) and Roger Chase (British-American violist) that we are able to perform it for you today.

Ireland's Piano Sonata of 1920 lacks the same resonances of war carried by the other pieces on our program; the first movement teems with life and optimism, while the final movement contains epic references to the Iron Age hill fort in Sussex, the Chactonbury Ring. It is in the slow movement (a slowly unfolding meditation on a theme surprisingly close to that of the violin sonata's second movement) that we find our memory space, and can hear echoes of a private grief that Ireland may have been reluctant to share in the violin sonata.

When the war ended in 1918, artists, writers and musicians busily went to work erecting monuments, both literal and figurative, attempting to commemorate the lives and values that had been lost in the European conflagration. Veterans like Edmund Blunden and Robert Graves wrote memoirs as a way of exorcising painful memories. The composer E.J. Moeran (seriously wounded in action in 1917) wrote a Housman cycle in 1920 that focuses on four of Housman's darkest poems; in the same year his teacher Ireland created one of the most important English-language song cycles – *The Land of Lost Content* – also utilizing Housman texts. Some of these monuments remain as works of art in their own right, while others have disappeared. For example, the Cello Concerto of Sir Edward Elgar will always be heard in concert halls due to its stature as a work of art; its status as a war work, however, has faded into insignificance with the passing years.

Though it is right and just to listen and appreciate important war works for their craft, emotional impact and timelessness, a small corner of our minds upon hearing them should be set aside. There we can quietly contemplate the lads who marched away never to return, reflecting upon the effect of their disappearance on their friends, their society, and the future.

- Richard Masters

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

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.¹⁶

¹⁴ W.W. Corbett, "More Plain Words," *The Musical Times* 900 (1918): 62.

¹⁵ John White, *Lionel Tertis: the First Great Virtuoso of the Viola* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 41.

¹⁶ A. E. Housman, *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman*, Revised ed. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1971), 80.