

In the Footsteps of Alexander

Introduction by Tricia Rees-Jones

Why Alexander?

I've been fascinated by history since childhood. Within just a few miles of my childhood home in the Yorkshire Dales you could trace with an inquisitive finger enigmatic Neolithic stone carvings, explore the Twelve Apostles stone circle, walk on one of the many Roman roads crossing the moors, and admire beautiful medieval and later buildings. History was all around. It's no surprise, then, that I love a good history documentary and in 1998, Michael Wood presented a series which completely captured my imagination and gave me the title for this evening's programme. 'In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great: a journey from Greece to India' opened my mind to the world of this extraordinary young man (he died aged but 32) and his epic journey of 22,000 miles over 2000 years ago.

From Idea to Concert Programme

Could I somehow capture this journey in music? In 2006 I was conducting a local choral society, the Langcliffe Singers. The previous year my mum had passed away and I decided to commission a piece in her memory. I turned to Dr Andrew Gant and, for reasons now lost in the mists of time, we settled on a text formed from verses selected from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Initially intended to be 10 minutes long, Andrew got a bit carried away and The Leaves of Life ended up as a substantial 20 minute piece for choir and piano. The premiere and second performance were a resounding success but then life moved on, I moved to Somerset and the scores languished in the Langcliffe Singers library. As far as I know, the piece has not been performed since. This seemed a golden opportunity to revive it and the words by the 11th/12th century Persian served as a substantial base for the rest of the programme.

From this point it was a case of tracking down suitable repertoire. Stanford's setting of Heraclitus and John Tavener's Song for Athene were soon on the list to represent Greece and India offered settings of the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore by Ēriks Ešēvalds, the ancient Vedic Sanskrit texts known as the Rig Veda by Gustav Holst and a work by the Indian/American composer Reena Esmail in the Raga Jog traditional melodic framework. So far so good but there was something missing:- how to represent Alexander's wanderings through these regions?

I approached my friend and composer Jonathan Lane; would he be willing to write something to fit the overall theme of the concert but with an especial focus on Greece? The result is Sappho Fragments which will receive its first performance at this concert. Jonathan describes the process elsewhere in these programme notes but suffice it to say that both the choir and I are absolutely delighted with it. The five movements of Sappho Fragments represent Alexander beginning in his native Macedon and ending our concert in India. It is a particular joy to bring this woman's exquisite poetry to life in this way. In her lifetime (c. 630 – c. 570 BCE) she was considered one of the greatest lyric poets of the age and it is thought that most of her poetry was written to be sung making this setting particularly fitting.