

In the Footsteps of Alexander

Introduction and Programme Notes

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. So travel with us from Alexander's birthplace in modern Greece to the furthest reach of his empire in modern Punjab.

Tricia Rees-Jones
April 2025

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Programme Notes

Sappho Fragments

Full notes on this piece may be found by following the link to 'Sappho'. This includes notes by Jonathan Lane on how the text was selected as well as information about Sappho and her world.

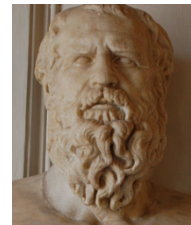
Greece

Heraclitus op.110 no. 4

Stanford

The text of this charming part-song is the translation by William Cory of an epigram by the Greek philosopher Callimachus on the death of his fellow philosopher Heraclitus. The plangent lament suggests an intimacy which isn't borne out by historical fact; Heraclitus probably lived during the reign of Darius the Great of Persia (not to be confused with the Darius defeated by Alexander) whereas Callimachus lived and worked in Alexandria some 200 years later.

Heraclitus seems to have been a properly grumpy and miserable philosopher; in his lifetime he was regarded as solitary and writing works of immense density and difficulty. It's said that when Socrates was asked for his opinion on one of his works he replied: "The part I understand is excellent, and so too is, I dare say, the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver [*famed swimmers from the isle of Delos*] to get to the bottom of it." At least the inclusion of tears in the text is appropriate; Heraclitus was known as 'the weeping philosopher' thanks in no small part to his opinion that the human condition was full of strife and pretty miserable and that people were more or less worthless. No wonder he was solitary.



Callimachus was active in the great city of Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE where he both catalogued the great library and wrote many poems, hymns and epigrams. The latter were a common form of votive offering and at least 60 of these have been attributed to Callimachus. They are short, effective and often very personal short poems of which this is a fine example.

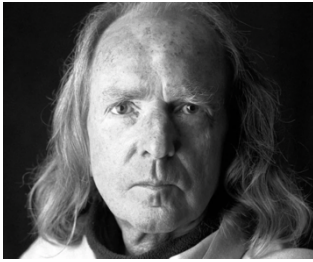


Charles Villiers Stanford was born to accomplished amateur musicians in Dublin in 1852. His early education was at a private school which concentrated exclusively on the classics where, we can speculate, he first came across this poem – almost certainly in the original Greek – although this head start didn't result in lifelong gift for the subject as he graduated from Trinity College Cambridge with a third-class degree. After musical studies in Germany he returned to the UK where he became a major figure in the English musical world and in 1883 he became one of the founders of the Royal College of Music, becoming its first professor in composition, a role he held for the rest of his life. His compositions encompassed everything from opera to solo songs including, as any church musician will tell you, a fine collection of choral works; 1910 proved to be a vintage year for collections of part songs with no fewer than 3 sets including Heraclitus. It is classic Stanford: simple yet effective with beautiful expressive melody and a thorough understanding of the capabilities of a choir.

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Song for Athene

Tavener



John Tavener was born in London to Presbyterian parents who gave their children a religious upbringing while supporting their creative talents. He gained a place at the Royal Academy of Music in London to study piano but transferred to composition on the advice of Lennox Berkeley. His early works were mainly dramatic – operas and cantatas – but his 1977 conversion to the Greek Orthodox faith had a profound impact on his music, not least in introducing him to the remarkable Mother Thekla who was essentially his muse from around 1985 until 2003. Marina Sharf (Mother Thekla) was born in Russia the day after the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II and his family. Her parents quickly took their family to England and they settled in Richmond, Surrey, where Marina graduated from Cambridge and became a much-revered teacher of English (with a particular passion for Shakespeare) in Kettering, North Yorkshire. In 1965 she became a nun in the Orthodox tradition living in a small house near Milton Keynes and taking the name Thekla. In 1974, with increasing urbanisation threatening the peace of their house, the community moved to a remote farmhouse on the North Yorks Moors.

Song for Athene was commissioned by the BBC in 1993. The Athene in question was Athene Hariades, a young actor and family friend of Tavener's, killed in a cycling accident. Tavener had heard her reading Shakespeare and, during her funeral, conceived a choral work combining words from the Orthodox funeral rite with quotations from Shakespeare. He turned to Mother Thekla to provide the lyrics and the work has become one of his most popular and enduring, not least as it was sung at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. This evening we are dedicating our performance to the memory of Pope Francis.

Persia

The Leaves of Life

Gant

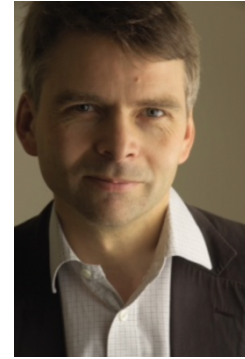
Omar Khayyam (عمر خیّام in Persian) was a mathematician, astronomer, philosopher and poet who lived from 1048 to 1131. Born in Nishapur in modern Iran, he made contributions to the understanding of cubic equations and the the duration of the solar year which led to him designing the Jalali calendar which is so accurate that it is still used as the basis of the Persian calendar to this day. He was also, if certain sources are to be believed, a poet, writing in the form of quatrains (in Persian *rubā'iyāt* رباعیات). While several of his contemporaries describe him as a poet, it is difficult to ascribe any specific lines to him with any degree of confidence.



In 1859 Edward Fitzgerald, a member of one of the richest families in England, published his translation of verses by Omar Khayyam which initially made no impact on the literary world. It was only when the book was discovered first by Rossetti and then by other members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement that it really gained in popularity and, by the time the 5th and final (posthumous) edition was published in 1859 the public was so enthused by it that Omar Khayyam clubs sprang up. It is this final edition which is the text for this work.

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Andrew Gant was born in 1963, studied music at Cambridge and London universities and composition at the Royal Academy of Music under Paul Patterson. He sang tenor with a number of leading choral groups including The Sixteen, The Tallis Scholars and the Monteverdi Choir and was Organist, Choirmaster and Composer of Her Majesty's Chapels Royal from 2000 to 2013 leading the choir in such notable events as the funeral of the Queen Mother, the Golden and Diamond Jubilee services at St Paul's Cathedral and the wedding of the present Prince and Princess of Wales in 2011. He has written a number of books on the history of church music in particular but since 2014 he has concentrated on his political career as a councillor in both Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils.



The Leaves of Life was commissioned by The Langcliffe Singers (based in Settle, North Yorkshire) to celebrate their 21st birthday. The first performance took place in Holy Ascension Church, Settle on 15 July 2006 with the second performance taking place a week later in Christ Church, Skipton. Conducting both of those performances was this evening's conductor, Tricia Rees-Jones. Both performances were enthusiastically received by the audience and it has long been her intention to revive the work which has never been commercially published. This evening's concert is the perfect time to bring The Leaves of Life to life again.

India

TaReKiTa

By the time they reached the Punjab, Alexander's army were a very long way from home. The culture, food and music must have been so alien to them that it is little wonder that they finally demanded to go home. TaReKiTa gives a real sense of a completely different musical sound world based on the Indian scale – or Raga – called 'jog' which is a mixture of what we would describe as major and minor intervals. Here, the composer describes how and why the piece came about:-

Esmail



"I wrote TaReKiTa as a gift for a choir called Urban Voices Project. They are a choir of people who are currently or have recently experienced homelessness on Skid Row in Los Angeles. They are so dear to me, and one day I just decided to teach them about Indian rhythm. They enjoyed the lesson so much that I wanted to write them a piece that would use what I had taught them. The result was TaReKiTa – I literally wrote it in an hour, just in a single moment of inspiration, and recorded myself singing all the parts for them to learn. It has since become a staple of their repertoire, but it's also been sung by so many choirs around the world. There is just something about the piece, perhaps borne out of my love for this choir, that just seems to resonate with people.

Practically speaking, this piece is based on sounds the Indian drum, the tabla, makes, called "bols" – they are onomatopoeic sounds that imitate the sound of the drum. The result is something like a scat would be in jazz – ecstatic, energetic, rhythmic music that feels good on the tongue." (copyright Reena Esmail)

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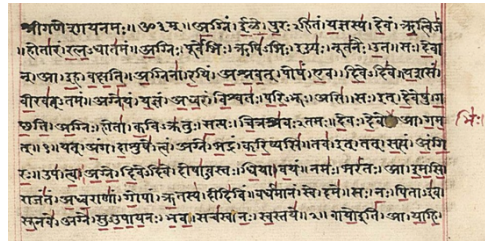
Songs from the Rig Veda Group 3



Gustav Holst was born in Cheltenham in 1874 and began his musical education as a pianist and trombonist. His aim to play the former professionally were thwarted by neuritis in his right arm and he turned to composing (which he had dabbled in from an early age), studying at the Royal College of Music alongside Vaughan Williams who became a lifelong friend. With money always tight, he took on a number of jobs most particularly teaching most notably at St Paul's Girl's School and Morley College in London. In 1898 while playing trombone in the Carl

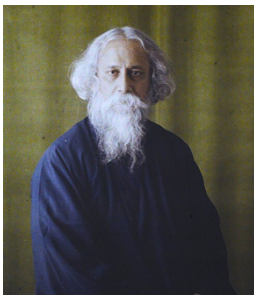
Rosa Company, Holst began to take an interest in various Sanskrit texts, not least of which were the Rig Veda hymns; ancient Hindu texts, indeed, the oldest version is thought to be one of the oldest extant texts in any of the Indo-European languages with some scholars

suggesting that it has been handed down orally from at least 1500-1000BC. Holst came translation by Max Müller existing English unsatisfactory and in linguistics course at London to study Sanskrit



for himself. As a result, he was able to provide his own translation for the Rig Veda Hymns. He set four groups of hymns for different combinations of voices and instruments and we are performing 3 out of the 4 hymns in group 3 which is set for upper voices and harp or piano (the latter being used this evening. They are atmospheric settings which attempt to capture a sense of Indian musical styles without utilising specific raga or rhythms as Reena Esmail does.

Salutation and My Song



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1940) was a hugely influential poet, writer, composer, philosopher, social reformer and painter. In 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for the English translation of his collection of poetry 'Gitanjali' including the text for Salutation. He was a passionate advocate for independence from the Britain and turned down a knighthood in 1919 in protest at the British massacre at Amritsar.

Ēriks Ēšņvalds was born in 1977 in Russian-occupied Latvia and trained as a singer and composer at the Latvian Academy of Music where he is currently the Head of Composition. His music has been described as "emblematic of a new golden age of choral music" (Suzi Digby, Ora) and "an inventive Latvian composer with an ear for a good hook and a knack for evocative effects" (New York Times). At the annual convention of the Association of British Choral Directors in October 24, he described the musical landscape of his childhood; almost exclusively official Soviet music was the diet at school and over the radio but, somewhat inexplicably, with the inclusion of a single



Ēšņvalds

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Western artist in the form of Whitney Houston. Young Ēriks was very taken with Whitney's music and worked out that much of it was built around four chords which he could then play on his piano. From there it was but a small step to composing his own melodies over those chords and then adding more chords. From such small acorns..... My Song sets a poem by Tagore which speaks of the power of song as comfort, love and guidance and utilises the hallmarks of successful commercial music; memorable melody (ask any of the choir about the most persistent earworm in this programme!) over a simple chord structure. It is, in essence, Ešenvald's thank you to Whitney Houston for that early inspiration.