

In Terra Pax - Gerald Finzi (1901 - 1956)

A series of tragedies profoundly affected Finzi in his early years. By the time he was eighteen he had lost his father, three elder brothers and his much-loved music teacher, killed in action. This dreadful sequence of events, and the appalling losses of the First World War that formed the backdrop to his adolescence, gave Finzi an acute awareness of the impermanence of life, confirmed with grim finality when at the age of fifty he discovered that he was dying of leukaemia. These experiences to a large extent account for the hint of melancholy underlying much of his music.

Finzi's musical inspiration sprang primarily from his love of literature and the English countryside - the same sources that inspired Elgar and Vaughan Williams. *In Terra Pax* was composed in 1954 and was almost the last piece that Finzi wrote, though its genesis can be traced to an event some thirty years previously, when one Christmas Eve he had climbed up to the church at the top of his beloved Chosen Hill, between Gloucester and Cheltenham. The sound of the midnight bells ringing out across the frosty Gloucestershire valleys evidently made a lasting impression on him, retrospectively providing the idea for *In Terra Pax*, as he told Vaughan Williams. The work is a setting of two verses from Robert Bridges' fine poem, 'Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913', subtitled *Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis (Peace and goodwill to all men)*, which Finzi imaginatively and skilfully uses to frame St Luke's account of the angels' appearance to the shepherds. *In Terra Pax* is subtitled 'Christmas Scene', and Finzi explained that '*the Nativity becomes a vision seen by a wanderer on a dark and frosty Christmas Eve in our own familiar landscape*'. This placing of the Biblical story into an English pastoral context is entirely consistent with Finzi's close affinity with the English Romantic tradition, and his lifelong dedication to the creation of his own rural paradise at his home in Ashmansworth, near Newbury. The two soloists and the chorus have clearly defined musical roles; the baritone soloist takes the voice of the poet, the soprano is cast as the angel, whilst the chorus narrates the familiar biblical text. In the opening section the poet is standing on a hill contemplating the events of the very first Christmas, the sound of the distant church bells becoming for him the sound of an angel choir. This image is expressed in a pealing-bells motif which, together with the refrain from 'The First Nowell', provides the musical fabric of the piece.

Finzi, perhaps more than most, must have been aware of the terrible irony of Bridges' reassuring *Pax hominibus* being swiftly followed by the outbreak of World War I, yet despite this, and despite his own terminal decline, *In Terra Pax* is a radiant, optimistic work of great beauty and sincerity; a miniature masterpiece that unites emotions, images and the familiar events of the Christmas story into a compelling musical narrative that is at once personal yet universal.

John Bawden