

WALKING WITH GURNEY

'When we listen to music,' wrote the philosopher Ernest Bloch, 'we hear only ourselves.' I feel a special need to remind myself of that thought before writing about Ivor Gurney. There is so much about Gurney's music, and about the life that found form in it, that feels uncomfortably, even distressingly close - not (thank God) his war experience, nor (sadly) his searing genius, but plenty of other things: the uneasy, at times oppressive childhood home life, the repeated flight into manic walking and cycling, the half-enraptured, half-desperate love of landscape and nature. And if, as seems likely, Gurney suffered from bipolar disorder, that too is something big we share. After long experience of treatment, analysis and reflection, my own condition does seem to be reasonably well regulated. It is now unlikely (touch wood) that I will spend any of my last days in an asylum, but my mother did. Seeing her in her final tormented confusion was heart-rending, but I shuddered for myself too: 'There but for the grace of God...' There are times, listening to or reading Ivor Gurney, when that thought flashes into my mind again.

But here's the crucial issue. There's a world of difference between empathizing with a great creative mind - sensing the similarities while maintaining an objective awareness of one's own distinctness - and total, head-over-heels identification. I could go on at great length about how I too developed a passionate love for special places, landscape features, so much so that they almost became living beings for me - but what would that tell you that Gurney's own *Severn Meadows* or *In Flanders* couldn't say far more movingly than I could? Or think of that extraordinary hushed harmonic feint in 'Far in a Western Brookland', from *Ludlow and Teme*, where the singer remembers 'fields where I was known', contrasted so poignantly with the desolate present, 'Here I lie down in London And turn to rest alone.' I've read, or heard sung, the Housman poem often enough without drawing up sharply at the thought that the landscape not only consoles and refreshes the poet, it *knows* him. Gurney however, with that final twist up to a high F on 'known', touches the word with the point of a needle. For a tiny, exquisite moment, it's so true that it hurts.

Being known, beheld, understood by a landscape - this is not some English gentleman poet toying pleasantly with pantheism, or dreaming nostalgically of a serene classical Arcady: it's about survival. 'Do not forget me quite O Severn meadows', sings Gurney in one of the most heartbreakingly beautiful songs in the English repertoire. Written at a time when the composer feared he might never see the 'clear Familiar faces' (he doesn't seem to mean human faces) of his beloved Gloucestershire again. What is it above that he fears to lose? One of the issues I look at in my book about music and mental health, *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind* (Notting Hill Editions), is how, through 'mirroring' our feelings, especially our more painful feelings, music can actually perform something of the role of a mother in helping her child come to terms with its own potentially destabilising emotions. When the child is overwhelmed and terrified by the strength of its own feelings, the mother can 'reflect them back' to the child, showing the child that it is possible to feel such things and remain fundamentally stable: aware of emotion without being overwhelmed by it - which is what mothers mean when they say (often repeatedly) to a child convulsed with fear, rage or grief, 'It's all right'.

At such moments of intense connection a hormone called oxytocin is released. Sometimes known as the 'love hormone', oxytocin plays an important neurological role in mother-child bonding during childbirth and breastfeeding. What's fascinating is that music can also stimulate the production of oxytocin - and so too, it seems, can the experience of being in a beautiful landscape. When we talk of 'Mother Nature' there is more to this than a pretty figure of speech. And for those who have never experienced what the psychologist Donald Winnicott called the 'good enough mother', music and nature can to some extent fill the breach, if only temporarily. Accounts of Gurney's own mother vary, but there is strong evidence that she was, as Nicola Harrison puts it in her guide to Gurney's songs, a woman 'of sharp and unstable temperament who seemed incapable of showing love for her children.' If so, then *Severn Meadows* possibly reflects the pain and tender supplication of a man fearful of losing far more than his physical home.

Time and time again in Gurney's work we are reminded that, for this composer, the need for music is far more pressing than for the languidly epicurean Orsino in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: 'That strain again, it had a dying fall'. Going back to the sound of the chamber ensemble, weaving its supportive tendrils around the voice in 'Far in a Western Brookland' I'm reminded of Gurney's own words in his poem *Watching Music* (such a telling title!):

*'Strings should sound all man's heart ever found,
Or piano dearly touched tell truth's tale of pain
Or Beauty...'*

So often pain and beauty seem inextricably intertwined in Gurney, like the tightly woven hedgerows he worked on during one relatively happy summer and compared to the counterpoint of J.S. Bach. Expressing this, giving form to feeling, getting it 'into some new perspective' (as Sibelius put it, grappling with violent mood swings, as he worked on his Fourth Symphony) was clearly vital for Gurney, but why does it feel more fragile, more precarious than in the case of Sibelius - or of Shostakovich, whose music, however tormented, still manages to convey something of the inner strength that helped this hyper-sensitive composer survive the scarcely imaginable horrors of Stalin's dictatorship? Again, I need to take a deep breath - to remember Ernst Bloch. Can I put this more objectively?

I think so. Listening to Gurney's music I've often been struck by one feature that marks him out from any of his English contemporaries. It came home to me when I read of how Helen Thomas, widow of the poet Edward Thomas, visited Gurney long after his committal to a mental institution. In an act of rare compassionate insight, she brought along an old ordnance survey map of Gloucestershire. The sight of it brought about an immediate change in Gurney. Those intensely, hungrily loved places were suddenly real to him again: Thomas remembered him tracing his finger across the map, excitedly following the course of his old walks and rides. For Nicola Harrison, the physical sensation of walking is reproduced time and time again in the music: 'The recurrent quaver/semiquaver patterns that we see in countless songs and which are, indeed, a trademark of the composer, are brought into being by the physical movement of walking. This gives a sense of embodiment.' We can hear this in a very different way in Elgar, whose tunes are frequently based on repeated marching, striding or sauntering rhythms, and whose music so often settles around the 'resting

heart-rate' pulse of 76 beats per minute. Steady walking (and cycling) releases endorphins, which raise the mood - as neither Gurney nor the melancholic Elgar would have been surprised to discover. But in Gurney it also seems to have had a calming, soothing effect too. The manic, driven tempo of some of his long solitary walks and rides (especially those undertaken late at night) is rarely reproduced in his songs; instead there's often a contemplative, even contained quality. Nature, movement and music, landscape's 'clear Familiar faces' - together they 'held' Gurney, as the 'good enough mother' does, creating a spiritual safe space in which he could give form to his agitated, tormenting feelings and transform them creatively into 'a tale of pain / Or Beauty...'

If so, then Gurney's songs are like the primeval 'Songlines', described so beautifully by Bruce Chatwin in his book of the same name. Chatwin describes how Australian Aboriginal people 'sung themselves' into a landscape: the song becomes the route, a kind of geographical and spiritual map, providing ultimately an existential 'sense of direction' for the traveller. What is so remarkable, so unique about the sense of line in Gurney's music however is how beguilingly eccentric, erratic, fragile even it is - like Gurney himself. It's fascinating here to compare Gurney with Shostakovich. Take the latter's Eighth Symphony. After a brief introduction, violins begin a long melody that unfolds and unwinds, aspires and finally falls, over at least four minutes. It is asymmetrical, full of surprising turns, even dislocations, and expressive of a high degree of spiritual anguish, yet the sense of the line as a magnificent unified whole never falters. To put it very simply, we always 'know where we are' in this line: once it has come to rest and the 'second subject' has begun its long course, it is possible to look back over it in the memory and trace our journey. In this perhaps we sense something of that 'inner strength', without which Shostakovich would almost certainly have buckled under the pressures of his rollercoaster career. Or to bring us back to Gurney's home ground, take the wonderful rapt slow movement of the precociously brilliant Piano Quartet by Gurney's beloved friend Herbert Howells, dedicated 'to the hill at Chosen and Ivor Gurney who knew it'. The Howells is full of gorgeous harmonic surprises, the melodic line is long and asymmetrical as the Shostakovich, yet again the sense of the whole remains strong, as it usually does in Howells. We always 'know where we are' in terms of its steadily unfolding, slowly purposeful course.

With Gurney however, part of the music's fascination is that we don't always know where the songline is leading us. Gurney is a mesmerising guide, but does even he know where he is leading us? Compare his setting of 'On the Idle Hill of Summer', from *Ludlow and Teme*, with the much-loved version by George Butterworth. In terms of formal layout the Butterworth is all lucid clarity, its phrase patterns not always regular, yet each can be felt to stem from the rhythmic and motivic pattern of its opening phrase. Broadly speaking, the poem's simple strophic pattern still hovers in the background: however much Butterworth toys with it, stretches it, it never quite breaks. The Gurney however is restless, fluid, always pressing on to somewhere new, driven onwards - at first - by the cello's initially soft but increasingly urgent pizzicato tread. The poem's strophic structure has melted away: instead we have a vocal line which rhythmically and motivically captures the irregular, ever-shifting patterns of real speech. Look back over the song with the mind's eye and it's hard to draw a mental map: we seem to have passed through woods, thickets and mists, changing direction and perspective over and over again, as though searching for something

always elusive. T.S. Eliot famously defined the purpose of exploration as being 'to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time'. There is plenty of 'knowing the place for the first time' in Gurney: such moments can be magical or poignant, but as for 'arriving where we started' - such visionary clarity is rarely, if ever granted. It is one of the things that makes Gurney at once so compelling and so enigmatic, at times disturbing.

Turning to one of Gurney's outstanding masterpieces, the Masfield setting *By a Bierside*, the truth of that description 'disturbing' comes home to me again. How on earth would one describe the structure of this song? 'Structure' implies something fixed, or at the very least safely contained. *By a Bierside* however is like a fascinating but unsettling improvisation. The opening major chords seem secure enough, and the opening line is set to a sequentially repeated pattern that feels reassuring - we are in safe hands. Soon however Gurney begins to respond as a poet reciting the words freely rather than an inherited-form-conscious composer. 'Beauty was in that heart and in that eager hand' - the music comes to rest, on a slightly unexpected relative minor chord. Then comes the first fracture: a pause, a genuinely surprising harmony, and the first of the five lines beginning with 'Death' begins its dark probing. 'Death is so blind and dumb' introduces a chordal pattern that will now recur throughout the song, but the repetitions are sporadic, faltering. 'Death does not understand' culminates in a blank piano unison, fading like a briefly noticed tolling bell. 'Death drifts the brain with dust' - and so does Gurney's music. Has song morphed into recitative? If so it's a strangely erratic one: 'Death makes the lovely soul to wander under the sky'. Yet we're also hooked - we *must* follow this 'lovely soul' in its unpredictable wanderings. Eventually the climax emerges: 'It is most grand to die'. The chordal pattern from earlier regularises itself and builds in sonorous repetitions. But there's something alarming about this insistence - for once Gurney really does betray the mania from which he so often found relief in song. Finally the questioning, 'most grand...' - like someone who only half remembers what it was he just said.

For me, it really does get personal at this point. During one particularly frightening manic-depressive episode in my early twenties I experienced a horrible waking dream. I could see myself alone in empty space, kneeling on a sphere that was also a canvas, trying to draw a pattern of lines on its surface. But the sphere/canvas kept changing shape, slowly, like the blob of coloured material in a lava lamp, and as my lines failed to connect, to form any coherent shape, I felt a mounting sense of panic: this was my own mental coherence that was under threat, and I couldn't imagine anything more terrifying. *By a Bierside* takes me back to that experience, yet going with Gurney through this bizarre journey also reminds me of the composer tracing his Gloucestershire walks on that old Ordnance survey map. Something does seem to be brought into perspective: something previously vague and threatening has, through the alchemy of creative genius, been given (to adapt Shakespeare's phrase) a local habitation and a form.

Is this why the ending of Gurney's other great song cycle, *The Western Playland*, is so difficult even for many Gurney enthusiasts? The final song, *March*, seems to promise reconciliation, even joy, but then comes that strange instrumental postlude in which memory and form seem to disintegrate before our ears. The final resolution on a widely-spaced major chord is almost the biggest surprise of all: if the music had just broken off in mid-phrase, like Gurney's desolate Edward Thomas setting *Lights out*, it

wouldn't have been any stranger. It reminds me of a story by the acutely sensitive, highly unstable Swiss-German writer Robert Walser, *Kleist in Thun*. Walser portrays the increasingly dreamlike, insomniac wanderings of the romantic poet Heinrich von Kleist, intoxicated by nature, poised on a knife-edge between awareness of beauty and pain - a very plausible counterpart to Ivor Gurney in fact. Finally Kleist's beautiful-distressing dream-bubble bursts, and like Gurney, and like Walser himself, he is 'taken away', presumably to an asylum. Then, in the story's astonishing ending, Walser himself as narrator seems to lose the thread, as Kleist's coach vanishes:

'On and on, well well, what a journey it is. But finally one has to let it go, this stagecoach, and last of all one can permit oneself the observation that on the front of the villa where Kleist lived there hangs a marble plaque which indicates who lived and worked there. Travellers who intend to tour the Alps can read it... A Jew can read it, a Christian too, if he has the time and his train is not leaving that very instant, a Turk, a swallow, insofar as she is interested... I know the region a little perhaps, because I worked as a clerk in a brewery there... Thun had a trade fair, I cannot say exactly but I think four years ago.'

And that's that. Nothing in literature conveys the sense of a mind slowly unwinding, the fate of the ungrounded 'lovely soul' who wanders 'under the sky', with more devastating frankness than the ending of Walser's story. And nothing in music does that for me more tellingly than the instrumental postlude of *The Western Playland*. It throws everything else by Gurney into relief - we can now hear and feel what it was that this extraordinary mind was trying to fend off, perhaps all through its life. 'There but for the grace of God...' The miracle is that, in Gurney's case, this desperate, ultimately doomed struggle for survival produced so many truly incomparable masterpieces - masterpieces that may perhaps offer consolation and help to us in our own struggles to make sense 'of pain - Or Beauty'.

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