

Robin Milford was born in Oxford on 22nd January, 1903, to cultured parents, Humphrey and Martha Milford (Humphrey Milford was later knighted for his work with the Oxford University Press from 1900 to 1945, and founded the Music Department of the OUP in 1923). Having attended preparatory school at West Downs (near Winchester) and Rugby, Milford (a nervous and insecure young man) gained a place at the Royal College of Music in 1921 to study with R. O. Morris, Henry Ley, Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Milford's output suggests three distinct periods of style and influence (the 1920s; the 1930s; and the 1940s and 1950s). The 1920s can be viewed in terms of 'youthful expectation and apprenticeship' with the works of this period clearly demonstrating a keen sense of creativity, imagination and craftsmanship (employing a cross-style influenced by the Parry/Stanford school and English folk-song). The first of Milford's compositions date from the early years of this decade when, through the encouragement of Vaughan Williams, Milford directed two family concerts of his works (the second of which included the children's opera *The Shoemaker*, pre-1924). It was at these that Milford met Kirstie Newsom (governess to the grand-daughters of Sir John Stainer). Kirstie was an able viola player and singer with a fine voice and, along with Gerald Finzi, became an important musical mentor. Marriage in 1927 gave the composer much needed emotional stability.

The Shoemaker shows the composer's already developed ability and interest in writing serious works for children (involving distinctive recitative, aria, carols, two-part choruses with antiphonal answering, and dances), thus anticipating some of the ideas of Benjamin Britten (the earlier *Three Sea Pictures* and *A Fairy Revel* for piano,

both dating from 1924, were also written for children). A profound lover of English literature (particularly poetry), Milford composed his first well-known songs for solo voice and piano during the 1920s. These songs (including *The Moor*, pre-1924, *The Fiddler of Dooney*, pre-1925, *On His Mistress*, 1925 and *Old Age*, pre-1928,) show the composer struggling to find his own style, with these works showing a mixture of influences, including Parry, Stanford and Bach¹. *Suite in D minor* for oboe and strings (pre-1924) ingeniously combines the influence of this English folk-song with a format, itself, influenced by the Baroque composers. *My Lady's Pleasure* for piano (pre-1925), on the other hand, consists of three movements totally based upon features derived from English folk-song (repeating melodic and rhythmic motifs, repeating melodic phrases, and strong modal implications).

One of the final works of the 1920s (*The Darkling Thrush*, 1929) heralds the beginning of Milford's second compositional period. Here, the composer demonstrates the profound influence of Vaughan Williams and English folk-song. Based on Hardy's poem of the same name, this work reflects *A Lark Ascending* not only through its use of solo violin and orchestra but also through its melodic contours and modal harmony.

The 1930s can be viewed in terms of 'happy maturity' and represent Milford's second period of composition. A happy marriage to Kirstie, the birth of his son (Barnaby), successes in composition and publication, recognition amongst professional musicians, and a close professional and family friendship with Finzi, all allowed Milford to develop, both musically and personally. Musical development is keenly seen in Milford's compositions of the 1930s in terms of melody, harmony and textures.

¹ Discussed in 'Robin Milford (A composer illuminated by his songs), Animus Music Publications, 2009

The fine solo songs of the second period, such as the settings of Bridges, 1933, ('So sweet love seemed', 'Elegy' and 'Love on my heart') and Hardy, 1938, ('To Sincerity', 'The Colour', 'If it's ever spring again' and 'Tolerance') show the total ease with which Milford composed in a style profoundly influenced by English folk-song alongside his own developing personal language (involving gentle dissonance and chromatic harmonic 'side-steps' within a mainly tonal and modal canvas). Interestingly, the song 'Daybreak', 1930, derives from another influence, the ayre, through its melodic constructions, lute-like accompaniment and delicate melisma. The oratorio, *A Prophet in the Land* (first performed at the 1931 Three Choirs Festival), demonstrates the composer comfortably juxtaposing the influences of English folk-song, his contrapuntal training with Morris at the RCM, prominent Baroque features (as in Milford's first publically performed works, *Concerto for Strings Violin and Viols*, 1925, and *Double Fugue* for Orchestra, 1926 – both performed as part of the Patron's Fund Concerts at the RCM) and the 'classical' style of Parry, Stanford and Elgar.

The second period also shows Milford's developing maturity through his writing for larger genres and more varied forms, including orchestral works (such as the *First Symphony*, 1933, *Concerto Grosso*, 1936, and *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in G Minor*, 1937), a more profound oratorio entitled *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1931 (again, influenced by Vaughan Williams), chamber music (e.g. *Phantasy Quartet*, 1933 for clarinet and string quartet), cantatas for ladies' voices and strings (e.g. *Easter Morning 1*, 1933), a cantata for mixed voices with orchestra (*The Passing Year*,² 1935) and a *Christmas Cantata – Midwinter*, pre-1931, for baritone and soprano soli and full orchestra, including harp and organ. Milford continued to

² a developed form of *Rain, Wind and Sunshine*, 1930, for treble voices

write interesting and challenging works for children during this second period (e.g. the canata *Rain, Wind and Sunshine*, pre-1930, for treble voices, flute, strings and piano).

One of the final works of the second period to be influenced completely by English folk-song is *Idyll*, 1941. Written for violin and piano, this work employs wonderful undulating melodic contours, a strong sense of modality, and developed dialogue (including canon) between violin and piano.

By 1939, Milford had commenced a transition into a third, and final, period of composition. This period can be considered in terms of 'darkness descending'. War was declared, and Milford (instantly and quite inappropriately for his temperament) volunteered for the army, had a complete breakdown after a short spell in the army, subsequently suffered mercilessly at the hands of war officials before his release from duty, escaped from Guernsey with Kistie and Barnaby before the Nazi invasion, experienced the tragedy of Barnaby's death in a road accident during 1941, supported Kirstie in a breakdown after Barnaby's death, and spent the remainder of his life coping with his insecurities and developing depression (both in and out of hospital and with electric shock treatment.)

The third period of composition is one of greater musical experimentation with the composer openly admitting that it was time for him to approach a more challenging style. Examples include the song 'I will not let thee go', 1939, the song cycles *In Tenebris*, 1940-44, and *Swan Songs*, 1948-51, choral works (including *This Year, Next Year*, 1943-46, and *Days and Moments*, 1951, both for soprano solo, ladies' chorus and piano, and *Mass for Five Voices*, 1945-47), *Threne* for cello and piano, 1946-47), and orchestral works such as *Elegiac Meditation*, 1946-47, for solo viola and string orchestra and *Fishing By Moonlight*, 1952, for piano and string

orchestra. Throughout these works, Milford employs more angular melody and dense textures, fragmentary melodic construction, greater chromaticism, tonal ambiguity, dissonance, prominent falling contours, rejection of tonal unity and lack of tonal centres in works of more than one movement. Milford, however, never abandoned the influence of folk-song, often juxtaposing these two styles of writing within the larger works just mentioned.

Following the deaths of his two great friends, Finzi in 1956 and Vaughan Williams in 1958, and the deletion of many work from the catalogues of his publishers, Milford gave up on life and died on the 29th December, 1959.

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