

Carillon, Op 75

Une Voix Dans Le Désert, Op 77

Le Drapeau Belge, Op 79

Three recitations of poems by Emile Cammaerts with orchestral accompaniments.

Carillon

Approximate Length: 5 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 7 December 1914

Venue: Queen's Hall, London

Conductor: the composer

Une Voix dans le Desert

Approximate Length: 12 minutes

First Performance:

Date: 29 January 1916

Venue: Shaftesbury Theatre, London

Conductor: the composer

Le Drapeau Belge

Approximate Length: 3 minutes 30 seconds

First Performance:

Date: 14 April 1917

Venue: Queen's Hall, London

Conductor: the composer

It is now well known that the First World War changed Elgar irrevocably. The chamber works and Cello Concerto that soon followed the war have an air of introspection and wistful longing for a world that had gone forever, shattered by the brutality of four years of conflict. But the changes that the war was to bring were not apparent from the outset. The war was not expected to last for more than six months and began in an atmosphere of patriotic fervour intent on settling old scores. And since this was a world war, the mood of patriotism extended to embrace other countries suffering at the hands of the Germans.

The mood unsettled Elgar. He counted a number of Germans among his close friends and, after all, it was the Germans who had rescued The Dream of Gerontius from potential early oblivion following its disastrous premiere in Birmingham. But Elgar nevertheless responded to the needs of the hour by writing within the first year of the war two pieces whose proceeds went to support war charities in countries overrun by the Germans.

Carillon

The first piece composed by Elgar for the war effort came about when he was asked to nominate something for an anthology, to be called King Albert's Book, which was to be published to raise money for Belgian charities. After initial hesitation, Elgar's search for a suitable contribution led him back to a poem entitled *Carillon* by the Belgian poet Emile Cammaerts that he had read in *The Observer*. Elgar determined to set the poem to music. Rather than setting it as a choral work, however, he decided (allegedly at the suggestion of Rosa Burley) to provide an orchestral accompaniment over which the poem is recited.

Written for narrator and huge orchestra in November 1914, the work was first performed at the Queen's Hall, London in December 1914, with the poem translated and read by Tita Brand, Cammaerts' wife and, coincidentally, the daughter of Marie Brema who sang the role of the Angel in the disastrous first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* fourteen years earlier.

Miss Burley was present at the première and related how it had to be arranged for Tita Brand's pregnant state to be hidden from the audience: "...unfortunately Mme Brand-Cammaerts was enceinte and in order to conceal this fact an enormous bank of roses was built on the platform over which her head and shoulders appeared rather in the manner of a Punch and Judy show. Mme Brand put such energy into the performance that both Edward, who was conducting the orchestra, and I, who was sitting in the audience, trembled for the effect on her, but patriotic fervour won the day, and *Carillon* was performed without mishap."

Not only was the performance without mishap but its success was immediate and immense, capturing as it did the heated fervour of the time: the *Christian Science Monitor* opined "Perhaps only an Elgar could achieve such a startling result."

The acclaim of the first performance was followed by an equally rapturously triumphant and extensive provincial tour of Britain, with Elgar conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and a variety of distinguished reciters, including Henry Ainley (captured on CD), the great French actress Réjane and occasionally Cammaerts himself, performing the work in most major towns throughout Britain. Elgar made nothing from this success, the monies all going to Belgian war charities.

The work is a rousing, even exuberant, piece whose title conjures up the ruined bell-towers of Belgium. A descending four note bell-like passage recurs over and over against the prevailing triple-time dynamic and thrusting main themes but with some touchingly lyrical passages to reflect the more sombre aspects of the poem. It is not a great piece, but it met the needs of the moment. Now that moment has passed, it is difficult to imagine the tumultuous reception afforded the work in 1914, and the publisher, Elkin, rushed out several arrangements as soon as possible that same year. It was revived during the Second World War to new words by Laurence Binyon, but today it is probably better known in the unnarrated recording of the orchestral part alone made by Sir Adrian Boult.

Barry Collett supplemented by Steven Halls

Carillon

Translation by Tita Brand Cammaerts

*Sing, Belgians, Sing!
Although our wounds may bleed,
Although our voices break,
Louder than the storm, louder than the guns,
Sing of the pride of our defeats
'Neath this bright Autumn sun,
And sing of the joy of honour
When cowardice might be so sweet.*

*To the sound of the bugle, the sound of the drum,
On the ruins of Aerschot, of Dinant, and Termonde,
Dance, Belgians, dance,
(alone)
And our glory sing,
Although our eyes may burn,
Although our brain may turn,
Join in the ring!*

*With branches of beech, of flaming beech,
To the sound of the drum,
We'll cover the graves of our children.*

*We'll choose a day like this
When the poplars tremble softly
In the breeze,
And all the woods are scented
With the smell of dying leaves,
That they may bear with them beyond
The perfume of our land.*

*We'll ask the earth they loved so well,
To rock them in her great arms,
To warm them on her mighty breast,
And send them dreams of other fights,
Retaking Liège, Malines,
Brussels, Louvain, and Namur,
And of their triumphant entry, at last,
In Berlin!*

*Sing, Belgians, Sing!
Although our wounds may bleed, although our voices break,
Louder than the storm, louder than the guns,
Although our wounds may bleed, although our hearts may break,
Sing of hope and fiercest hate,*

*'Neath this bright Autumn sun.
Sing of the pride of charity
When vengeance would be so sweet.*

Une Voix dans le Désert, op. 77

Following the remarkable success of *Carillon* in 1914, it was inevitable that Elgar should be approached to compose further works in a similar patriotic and compassionate vein. The first of these was *Polonia*, Elgar's response to a plea by the Polish conductor Emil Mlynarski. Straight after *Polonia*, Elgar set this further work by Cammaerts. It was finished in July 1915 but, as Elgar was busy with performances of *Carillon*, it was not produced until January 1916 in a staged setting at London's Shaftesbury Theatre as part of a triple bill that included *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*. In its review of *Une voix dans le désert*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* described the scene on stage: 'It is night when the curtain rises, showing the battered dwelling, standing alone in the desolate land, with the twinkling of camp fires along the Yser in the distance, and in the foreground the cloaked figure of a man, who soliloquises on the spectacle to Elgar's music. Then he ceases, and the voice of a peasant girl is heard coming from the cottage, singing a song of hope and trust in anticipation of the day the war shall be ended ["Quand nos bourgeois se rouvriront" ("When the spring comes round again")] ... The wayfarer stands transfixed as he listens to the girl's brave song, and then, as he comments again on her splendid courage and unconquerable soul, the curtain slowly falls.'

It is the most complex and in some ways the most moving of the war works - hollow drum beats and spare string harmonies establish a sombre, chill mood for the narrator. But the music blossoms to rich, Elgarian, elegiac melody at the entrance of the peasant girl (soprano), whose song is the voice of innocence in the desert of war and death, in marked contrast to the soulful passages of recitation that surround it. After this the music sinks back to the scattered phrases and drumbeats of the opening, and dies to silence.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* commented that: 'It is a somewhat novel idea to combine music, speech, and song in this fashion, in conjunction with a staged setting; and if the whole thing is less effective than might have been anticipated, this is due chiefly perhaps to the excessive restraint which has been exercised by the composer ... and this is, of course, a pity, since it is only the music which affords any justification for the production at all.'

The publisher, Elkin, clearly believed he would not do as well as he did with *Carillon*: after not profiting greatly with *Polonia*, for he would publish just a piano reduction of *Une Voix dans le Désert* and any serious royalties were to come only from performances. Justified or not, the work was never revised as a stage production once it completed its run at the Shaftesbury Theatre.

Barry Collett supplemented by Steven Halls

***Une Voix dans le Désert (A Voice in the Desert)*
Translation by Tita Brand Cammaerts**

*A hundred yards from the trenches,
Close to the battle-front,
There stands a little house,
Lonely and desolate.
Not a man, not a bird, not a dog, not a cat,
Only a flight of crows along the railway line,
The sound of our boots on the muddy road
And, along the Yser, the twinkling fires.
A low thatched cottage
With doors and shutters closed,
The roof torn by a shell,
Standing out of the floods alone ...
Not a cry, not a sound, not a life, not a mouse,
Only the stillness of the great graveyards,
Only the crosses - the crooked wooden crosses -
On the wide lonely plain.
A cottage showing grey
Against a cold black sky,
Blind and deaf in the breeze
Of the dying day,
And the sound of our footsteps slipping
On the stones as we go by ...
Suddenly, on the silent air,
Warm and clear, pure and sweet,
As sunshine on the golden moss,
Strong and tender, loud and clear,
As a prayer,
Through the roof a girl's voice rang,
And the cottage sang!*

*[The girl's voice sings - soprano solo]
When the spring comes round again,
Willows red and tassels grey
When the spring comes round again,
Our cows will greet the day,
They'll sound their horn triumphant,
White sap and greening spear
Sound it so loud and long,
Until the dead once more shall hear.
We shall hear our anvils,
Strong arm and naked breast
And in our peaceful meadows,
The scythe will never rest.
Ev'ry church will ope its door,
Antwerp, Ypres and Nieupoort,
The bells will then be ringing,
The foe's death knell be ringing.*

*Then shall sound spade and shovel,
Dixmude and Ramscapelle
And gaily gleam the trowel,
While through the air the pick is swinging.
From the ports our boats will glide.
Anchor up and mooring slipt
The lark on high will be soaring
Above our rivers wide.
And then our graves will flower,
Heart'sease and golden rod
And then our graves will flower
Beneath the peace of God.*

*Not a breath, not a sound, not a soul,
Only the crosses, the crooked wooden crosses ...
"Come, it is getting late
'Tis but a peasant girl
With her father living there
They will not go away, nothing will make them yield,
They will die, they say,
Sooner than leave their field."
Not a breath, not a life, not a soul,
Only a flight of crows along the railway line,
The sound of our boots on the muddy road ...
And along the Yser the twinkling of the fires.*

Le Drapeau Belge, op. 79

For this, Elgar's setting of a third poem by the Belgian writer Emile Cammaerts following *Carillon* and *Une Voix dans le Désert*, the publisher's contract was signed in January 1916 (along with that for *Une Voix dans le Désert*). It was probably also written in 1916, a fallow time for Elgar's composition, yielding only the part-song *Fight for Right*, at the request of the singer, Gervase Elwes and *Le Drapeau Belge*, a short hymn to the colours of the Belgian flag. Elkin published a piano version, but there was no immediate performance as both Elgar and the London Symphony Orchestra were busy with other projects. It was finally performed in April 1917, in a birthday concert for the Belgian King Albert.

This is the shortest of the wartime works with narrator. It captures the mix of martial spirit and resigned melancholy of *Carillon* and shares with *The Spirit of England*, the greatest of Elgar's wartime works, the feeling of the tragic inevitability of war. But by the time Elgar wrote it, the war had moved on: the horrors of trench warfare had become more widely realised, and the atrocities in Belgium were being replaced in the public's conscience by the horrors of the Somme and Verdun. The first performance on 14 April 1917 at the Queen's Hall was conducted by the composer in a programme otherwise conducted by Hamilton Harty, and recited by Carlo Liten, the distinguished theatre actor who was well known in both Europe and America and who had previously performed in Elgar's *Carillon* and *Une voix*

dans le désert. But it is rarely possible to recapture success: the piece failed to make the impact of *Carillon* and was soon forgotten.

Barry Collett supplemented by Steven Halls

Le Drapeau Belge (The Belgian Flag)

English translation by Lord Curzon of Kedleston

*Red for the blood of soldiers,
- Black, yellow and red -
Black for the tears of mothers,
- Black, yellow and red -
And yellow for the light and flame
Of the fields where the blood is shed!
To the glorious flag, my children,
Hark! the call your country gives,
To the flag in serried order!
He who dies for Belgium lives!*

*Red for the purple of heroes,
- Black, yellow and red -
Black for the veils of widows,
- Black, yellow and red -
Yellow for the shining crown
Of the victors who have bled!
To the flag, the flag, my children,
Hearken to your country's cry!
Never has it shone so splendid,
Never has it flown so high!*

*Red for the flames in fury,
- Black, yellow and red -
Black for the mourning ashes,
- Black, yellow and red -
And yellow of gold, as we proudly hail
The spirits of the dead!
To the flag, my sons!
Your country with her blessing "Forward" cries!
Has it shrunken? No, when smallest,
Larger, statelier it flies!
Is it tattered? No, 'tis stoutest
When destruction it defies!*