

Earth's enduring thrones: the music of the hills

Small-scale music inspired by large-scale landscape.

John Ireland (1879-1962): The Hills

Frank Bridge (1879-1941): Noveletten

1. *Andante moderato*
2. *Presto-Allegretto-Moderato*
3. *Allegro vivo*

Nathan Waring: Three Songs of Innocence

Ireland: Two movements from *A Downland Suite*

1. *Elegy*
2. *Minuet*

Edward Elgar: Death on the Hills

INTERVAL

Herbert Howells (1892-1983): Piano quartet in A minor

1. *Allegro moderato, tranquillo*
2. *Lento, molto tranquillo*
3. *Allegro molto, energico*

Bridge: Sir Roger de Coverley

The verdant, understated gorgeousness of the English countryside has been the inspiration for countless creative artists over the centuries – English or otherwise – and of these, Sussex can lay claim to more than its fair share. Its proximity to, and yet distinctness from, London may account for this in part: would anywhere else, for example, have suited those Bloomsburghers quite so well? But it's really because, as we all know, Sussex just has it all: the sea, ancient woodland, picturesque towns and villages – and the Downs. These scenic showstoppers define the region unmistakably, soaring timeless and immutable above all our earthly desecrations. This concert is a celebration, in words and music, of this awe-inspiring and unceasingly fascinating range of hills.

Of our five composers, only two are indigenously Sussexian: Nathan Waring, a native of Ripe, and Frank Bridge, who was born and bred in Brighton. Bridge won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in 1899, where he studied under Stanford, and subsequently made a name for himself as a fine conductor and violist. He returned to Sussex in 1923 to build his dream house just over the Downs in Friston - 'Friston Field'. Bridge's style was progressive and very much in tune with developments on the continent; nowhere is this more visible than in his chamber music output, which spanned his composing career. The three delicious *Noveletten* are his first essays in the string quartet genre, dating from 1904. The choice of title, in its German form as coined by Schumann, betrays his European leanings even before you listen to a note; and when you do, the flavour is definitely Franco-German, with a touch of Bohemian thrown in for good measure. Thoroughly English *Sir Roger de Coverley* is rip-roaring fun, full of wit and vim: spot the tune Bridge naughtily gives to the viola towards the end, and feel free to get reeling down the nave!

Malvern dreamer Edward Elgar was of an acutely sensitive disposition and the horrors of the war, and of London life, had taken their toll on his health. In 1917, his wife Alice and daughter Carice found him the perfect recuperative haven: Brinkwells, at Fittleworth in the more amply wooded hills of western Sussex: "It's *divine*," he wrote to a friend, "simple thatched cottage...with wonderful view". Here he spent three of his most idyllic years, composing three chamber music marvels - the violin sonata, string quartet and piano quartet – as well as a sizeable chunk of the cello concerto. The chilling choral song *Death on the Hills* was, however, written in London in January 1914, just a few months before the war's outbreak. Elgar knowingly described it as "one of the biggest things I have done":

*Why o'er the dark'ning hill-slopes
Do dusky shadows creep?
Because the wind blows keenly there,
Or rainstorms lash and leap?*

*No wind blows chill upon them,
Nor are they lash'd by rain:
'Tis Death who rides across the hills
With all his shadowy train.*

*The old bring up the cortège,
In front the young folk ride,
And on Death's saddle in a row
The babes sit side by side.*

*The young folk lift their voices,
The old folk plead with Death:
"O let us take the village-road,
Or by the brook draw breath.*

*"There let the old drink water,
There let the young folk play,
And let the little children
Run and pluck the blossoms gay."*

*(Death speaks) "I must not pass the village
Nor halt beside the rill,
For there the wives and mothers all
Their buckets take to fill.*

*"The wife might see her husband,
The mother see her son;
So close they'd cling - their claspings
Could never be undone."*

(adapted from the Russian of Maikov by Rosa Newmarch)

John Ireland similarly found refuge from London's hurly-burly in the west of the county, dipping his toe in with lodgings first in Ashington, before, in 1953, finding his own dream home: a converted windmill known as 'Rock Mill', with views up to Chanctonbury Ring. Coronation year also brought with it a commission for a piece to be included in *A Garland for the Queen*, an anthology of choral works by the leading British composers of the day: *The Hills* was Ireland's noble contribution, a sensitive setting of James Kirkup's vivid poem.

*How calm, how constant are the hills,
How green and white and golden in the summer light.
Their lakes, their leaping wells are bright
With flower, leaf and rain.
And their profounder rivers run from rocks
That are the altars of the sun.*

*How calm, how constant are the hills.
Our time's dark gale of ice and fire
Thunders around them but removes them never.
No tempest overthrows their strong humility
They are both god and temple
And their stones are holy, the earth's enduring thrones.*

Hearing how natural and mellifluous Ireland's *Elegy* and *Minuet* sound on strings, it may be a surprise to learn that *A Downland Suite* was originally written for brass band! It was penned in 1932 for one of the great brass band competitions that had been held at the Crystal Palace: how sobering and sad to think that this one happened just four years before the Palace burnt to the ground. The composer arranged the middle two of the four movements for strings around ten years later.

Herbert Howells' Sussex credentials are limited to a Chichester service and a setting of the *Sussex Mummer's Carol*, but his inclination to hilliness is irrefutable. His hills are an equally quintessential English range, the Cotswolds, and his magnificent piano quartet of 1916 is inscribed 'To the Hill at Chosen and Ivor Gurney who knows it'. The hill in question rises above Churchdown, now a suburb of Gloucester, topped by the exquisite C12th church of St Andrew's and St Bartholomew's; the Ivor Gurney in question was a poet and composer, a contemporary and close friend of Howells'. They met first at Gloucester Cathedral as pupils of Dr Herbert Brewer, where they both revelled in the Gloucestershire countryside, before going up to the RCM together. Gurney enlisted in 1915, and although he survived the war physically, his mental health, already fragile, was wrecked, and he tragically died in an asylum. Owing to his own ill-health (a diagnosis of Graves Disease, from which he was not expected to recover), Howells escaped conscription, and in his convalescence produced this superb work, deemed to be the first of his full maturity. It is a bold and original work, with the English folk song renaissance at its core, and ear over the channel to France.

The Norse String Quartet

Iain Gibbs, violin 1

Toby Hawks, violin 2

Mark Gibbs, viola

Antero Manocchi, 'cello

George Chambers, tenor

Timothy Thornton, piano