

27th January 2017

Walking Into The Piece

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I finally have time to submerge myself in the composition of a new piece for choir and cello, 'Roads Shining Like River Uphill After Rain'. For once I have some uninterrupted time at home. Just me, the piano, and lots of bits of paper.

As is so often the case, the piece has been a long time coming. Its journey began nearly two years ago when, having started to re-read the poetry of Edward Thomas, I became fascinated by his last four years and his descent into a kind of self-fulfilling death. The later chapters of Robert Macfarlane's book 'The Old Ways' (2012) were the impetus for this in which he outlines a fascinating portrait of the poet and his motivations; an intense and ghostly journey. Further reading followed in the form of 'Now All Roads Lead To France' (2011) by Matthew Hollis. This provided a less poetic, but extremely factual account of Thomas's last years.

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I had previously set Thomas's poem 'Snow' for choir and found that the images and sense of place in his words evoke strong musical responses. Writing more pieces for choir was high up on my hit list of things to do, so ideas for this piece came to me in all shapes and sizes over the last year. These have been hurriedly written down and squirrelled away in notebooks for a later date. That time is now.

The guiding shape for the piece fermented away and it became clear that the music had to include something about the act of walking. I sensed that some kind of accompaniment would help this, but felt that a piano was not right. Suddenly hitting on the idea of a solo 'cello made lots of things fit into place. Here was a voice that could be wordless; it could lead *into* and *away from* the singing; it could accompany the choir; it could represent the poet's footsteps; and it could most-importantly weave in and out of all the registers of every voice in the choir due to its huge range.

Edward Thomas was killed on 9th April (Easter Monday) 1917 in Arras on the Western Front when a German shell passed so close to his body that the air was sucked out of his lungs and he died without a mark on him. The contents of his pockets, sent home to his wife, contained his diary, a photograph, and a letter on the back of which were scribbled some fragments of incomplete poetry including the lines:

*'Where any turn may lead to Heaven
Or any corner may hide Hell
Roads shining like river up hill after rain.'*

I knew that I had to set this fragment to music. It then led me to think that perhaps I could compile my own favourite fragments from Thomas's complete output. Here was a wonderful excuse to read his complete works and an annotated version was quickly ordered from the bookshop. After an immersion in his verse I came up with a broad range of fragments of his verse. The question was now what to do with this.

Following a quick email to Robert Macfarlane with an explanation about my project I found myself sipping coffee in his study in Cambridge and we hatched a plot. *He* would fashion a kind of poetic journey using these fragments, which he beautifully termed 'ghost-shards', and this would provide a guiding shape for the piece. This structure was a journey towards death; from Thomas's home in the South Downs to the battlefields of Arras on the western Front. Before long (and after some further discussion) I had 'version 3' of this mini libretto printed off my computer and I was poised to start. Unfortunately for me several other projects had to be completed before I could begin work on this. I knew also, that this wasn't the sort of piece I could do in amongst other things. Eight months passed before I was able to release my ideas.



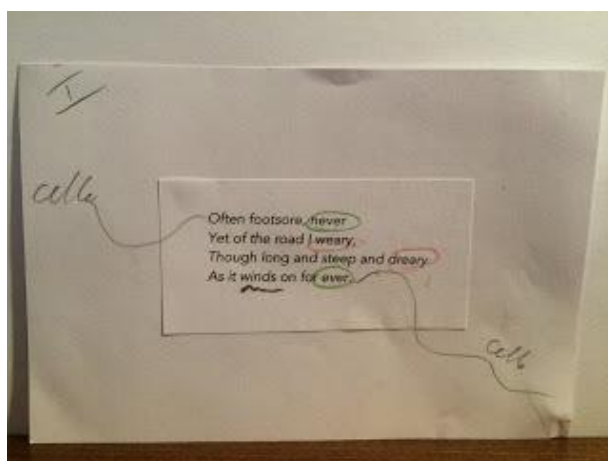
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So last week I finally pulled Robert's libretto from the drawer, collected together all my scribbles and iPhone voice-recordings, and sat down to begin composing. I also had a plan.

For me the first stage of the creative process was about how to bring together cohesively all the things I need to include in the piece. The plans made at this point were also a guide to the procedure of composition.

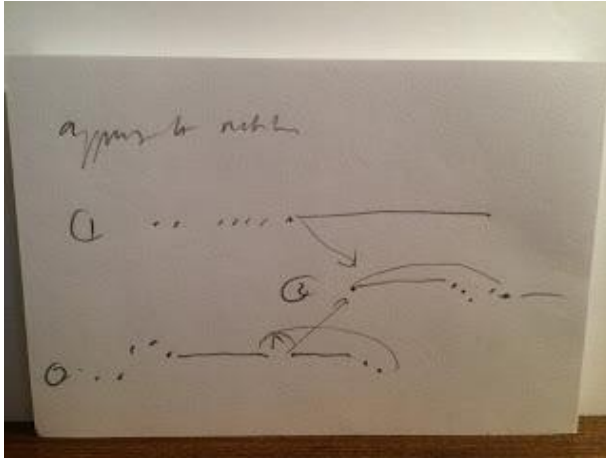
Firstly I cut the pages of the libretto into small fragments; the 'ghost shards' of which Robert had spoken. I could now tangibly hold these in my hands and this felt extremely important. Just for the purpose of playing with the material I tried laying them out in different ways on the table. Next I glued them onto blank postcards. I shuffled and began re-reading them at random and overlaying penciled-in ideas about any musical response to the text on each card in turn. These became my 'fragment cards'.



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On *another* set of blank cards I wrote simple statements collected from my previous thoughts. These ranged from ideas like 'the cello provides a sense of a walking motion' to 'create passages of 5-part harmony with the cello as the fifth voice'. These were my 'ideas cards'.

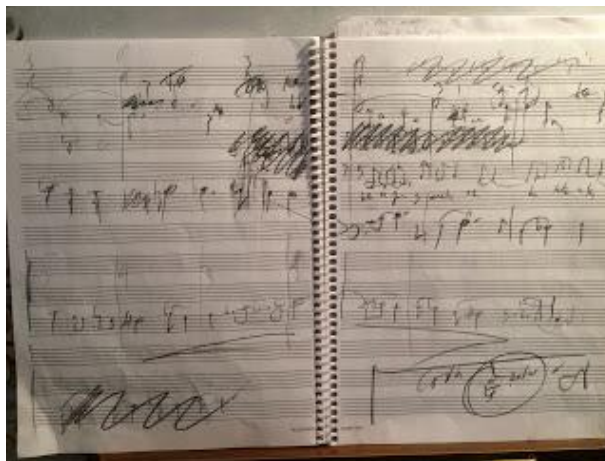


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So I had some material now committed to paper in the form of two small piles of postcards, many with my scribbings overlaid. A good start I thought.

I've found it rarely pays to create what you imagine might be the start of the piece first. I prefer to compose something in the middle and work outwards. In fact it doesn't really matter where you start. You just have to make that commitment and keep an eye on whether the material, as you work it, is right to serve the overall idea of the piece.

The next commitment to paper was tossing notes, chords and phrases around and as quickly as possible filling my manuscript book with sketches. These sketches were rough, very messy and contain words, arrows, diagrams, and several overlaid sets of ideas in different coloured pencil. My procedure was a simple one. Pick up one of my 'ideas cards' and simply try and fulfill in sketch form what was written on the card. Take another card and move on. Gradually more of the cards got used up and before long I had many pages of manuscript full. For me it doesn't matter if it's good material or not at this stage. It's a satisfying and galvanizing feeling to have got something out of my head and onto the page. I left some time after that allowing myself almost to forget the material I'd created and then I played through and re-imagined these initial sketches. I threw out what *wasn't* working and carried on with what *was* working.



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I knew that I had to balance what I perceived to be the freshness and instinctive nature of the card system with something more architectural. I also knew that these fragments all had to hang together and form a musical pathway to mirror the text which was all about roads. Robert had very sensitively formed the libretto into five sections, each with a distinctive colour and atmosphere. He ended each by returning to one of the verses from Thomas's poem 'Roads'. In this way the idea that the listener is on a journey themselves is never far away. I wanted to be able to use this to create my own set of poised moments, like viewpoints on a walk, in the music. I also wanted the music to feel as if decisions were being made about which way to go, which path to follow. So the next stage of composition was attempting to compose instinctively but with one eye on the structures of the piece. What a listener will eventually hear and the way the music has been composed can (and often are) very different things.

So I began setting each of the five stanzas from 'Roads' first. My idea was that I would be completely instinctive, but would do this with two rules. These rules would mirror something of the text's internal workings.



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Rule 1 was that the ABBA rhyming structure would be coloured in my melodies by a 2-note melisma, the A-melisma might fall by a certain interval for example, and the B-melisma might rise by a certain interval. In this way there is a kind of implied emphasis. The poetry does this, cutting across the rhyming scheme with its flow of meaning.

Rule 2 was that the 5 stanzas set to music would form a kind of piece in themselves; a long, winding line of music as a kind of pathway. This pathway would also be extended with an added melodic line connecting each stanza on the cello. In this way the cello is woven into the fabric of the long, endless 'road-theme'. The aim was that in the finished piece it acts as a touchstone for the listener; a sense of continuing on the journey despite everything. My plan was that the cello could carry on its 'walking' by overlapping with 'viewpoint music' of the choir.

".. and I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey" (Light and Twilight)

Next I set the poetry fragments as separate 'dreams' with melting and shifting material which was deliberately contrasting to the 'Roads' material. It became clear in doing this that each of the five sections would also utilize particular compositional techniques and so aim to be distinctive. The five sections would then resemble five landscapes or five states of mind even.

The piece isn't finished yet. I have created the music for all the stanzas from 'Roads' and for three of the five main sections. I'm at the point where I can see what material is working well and what might be needed for the sections I have yet to compose. I like this stage of any composition. I feel as if I'm looking down on the piece from a vantage point. I can see where I come *from* and where I might be going *to*.



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With the ideas still hot and creative juices flowing I felt able to share in some of the detail of the compositional process in a way which I hope explains some of the ways I work as a composer. This act of writing the blog has, as it often does, provided me with some clarity.

On with the walk ...

‘Roads Shining Like River Up Hill After Rain’ will be premiered on Easter Saturday at 3.15pm (15th April) at New College Chapel, Oxford. It is performed by the Oxford Bach Soloists and cellist Gabriella Swallow conducted by Tom Hammond-Davies. This will be (almost) 100 years to the day when Edward Thomas died in Arras; a meditation on his wonderful words.

Posted 27th January 2017 by [Colin Riley](#)



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