

Rosina Buckman's press-cuttings and the first complete performance of Elgar's *The Spirit of England*.

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The Blenheim-born soprano Rosina Buckman (1881-1948) had a distinguished career as an opera singer, and as a concert artist and teacher. One of the greatest Isoldees of her age, an outstanding Aida and Butterfly and a touching Mimi, she sang with Melba and Martinelli at Covent Garden and during the years of the First World War became principal dramatic soprano of the Beecham Opera Company.

Most of Buckman's collections of press-cuttings are already known and their contents have been disseminated by biographers and historians (Simpson 105-119). However, another volume of these has recently come to light in a Wellington basement.¹ Among the clippings it contains, those of particular interest here are the reviews of the first complete performance of Edward Elgar's *The Spirit of England* on 4 October 1917 in Birmingham with Rosina Buckman as soloist.

The Spirit of England is a three part song cycle, comprising settings of three war poems by Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) taken from his *The Winnowing-Fan*, which had been published in 1914 with considerable success. Elgar began work on the cycle in 1915 at the suggestion of a mutual friend, Sydney Colvin. Knowing of Elgar's extreme distress at the slaughter of the war, Colvin had written to him on 10 January 1915: 'Why don't you do a wonderful Requiem for the slain -- something in the spirit of Binyon's For the Fallen . . .' (Moore 288).

Elgar chose three of Binyon's poems, adding 'The Fourth of August' and 'To the Women' to Colvin's suggestion of 'For the Fallen', but as he began work on them he learned that a Cambridge composer, Cyril Rootham, had already set 'For the Fallen' and his manuscript was with the publisher Novello. Elgar felt he must withdraw. Binyon wrote, urging him to proceed. 'Think of the thousands who will be craving to have their grief glorified & lifted up & transformed by an art like yours . . . Surely it would be wrong to let them lose this help & consolation' (Moore 288-89). He pointed out that Rootham had purposely planned his work 'on simple lines so as to be within the compass of small local choral societies: so I cannot see why his should clash, or why both settings should not be published'.

Further letters followed until in the end it was decided that Novello would indeed follow this course: Rootham's version would appear first. 'But Rootham and his friends raised a howl of protest', wrote Jerrold Northrop Moore (289). Elgar was again ready to abandon the project. Colvin wrote him a highly emotional and persuasive *cri de coeur* which convinced the composer. He resumed work, but made slow progress.

Parts 2 and 3 ('To Women' and 'For the Fallen') were completed first and had already been performed to immediate and emotional acclaim (Moore 288-97), but the Birmingham concert on 4 October 1917 included the première of Part 1, 'The Fourth of August' which Elgar had completed last and on which he had expended considerable labour (Kennedy 353-54).² It was this Birmingham concert which was the first complete performance of the cycle.

The most penetrating review of that notable occasion is by Ernest Newman: it sums up the mood of the times, the anguish of the war, besides assessing Elgar's achievement perceptively:³

Elgar and his publishers paid Birmingham and Mr Appleby Matthews a great compliment in allowing the one to have and the other to give the first performance in England of 'The Fourth of August' -- the first in order of the three works that together make up *The Spirit of England*, but the last to be published. As 'The Carillon' was also given at last night's concert, we had Elgar's full contribution to the emotional history of these tense and mournful times. Now that *The Spirit of England* is complete, the composer's good judgment in making the work a triptych is apparent. The first and third movements have a good deal in common, with just enough difference to throw the main weight of feeling at the end -- the climax of 'For the Fallen' indeed, is still more overwhelming now -- while the subtlety of the quite different mood of 'To Women', with which all previous performances have had to begin, becomes infinitely more telling after the towering glories of and solemnities of 'The Fourth of August' and is in turn a *reculer pour mieux sauter* for the great finale. The whole work, one ventures to think, will long outlive the occasion that gave it birth, moving as it is in one's own home, each public performance of it makes it clearer that its proper place is the concert room; that is to say, more than one passage that on the piano sounds almost dangerously familiar proves, in performance, to be familiar in just the right way. This was especially noticeable last night in 'The Fourth of August'; in the orchestra and the chorus some of the passages that seem in the piano score to [have] not quite the same distinction as the rest had a blinding dramatic vividness. Elgar's confidence in Mr Matthews was not displaced. Those of us with a knowledge of all the musical centres can say that nowhere else in England could last night's performance have been bettered. Mr Matthews, who had shown his unique gifts as a choral trainer by an almost flawlessly beautiful performance of three of Elgar's best part songs, and his relative inexperience with the

orchestra by a safe but hardly inspired reading of the Mozart Serenade, found, in the great work of the evening, that the sheer poetry of the music endowed him not only with a choral but with an orchestral technique that enabled him to get all the effects he wanted. The work has never before reached such heights of pride and pathos. Miss Buckman was seemingly moved rather too deeply to have complete command of her voice, but she made a noble centre figure for the music. If we could be sure of getting -- and it ought to be possible by plenty of rehearsal -- the same fine nuancing of chorus and orchestra on a large scale as on that of last night, the ideal performance of the work, after the war, would be an open-air one, with a thousand or more of singers and players, and with the solo part sung by some twenty or fifty sopranos. Under these conditions the people would realise that Elgar has expressed the enduring emotions of the war better than anyone else has done or can hope to do either in music or in poetry. The general idiom of *The Spirit of England* is just that idealised common speech of the feelings that a truly national work demands. The simplest soul would find itself at home in it; and there would be no better celebration of peace than a performance of it on a truly communal scale.

The judgements of this informed panegyric (apart from the plea for a massed performance and the slightly reproving account of Rosina Buckman, surprising in its context) were echoed elsewhere. The *Yorkshire Post* wrote on 5 October 1917: 'If "To Women" is characterised by intense sympathy, "For the Fallen" by solemnity, the "Fourth of August" has for its leading characteristic great ardour ... If its newest part seems not to reach the heights attained in the other two, it is always vigorous and expressive, and, of course, effective. The solo part in all three was dramatically sung by Miss Rosina Buckman, and in his direction of the performance Mr [Appleby] Matthews showed himself an exceptionally able conductor, while his choir gave ample evidence of his power as a trainer'. The *Morning Post* of 5 October 1917, however, had reservations about the composition itself: 'As a whole the work, though not to be classed among Elgar's highest achievements, is well worthy of its subject. Some of the most expressive parts of the work are those for solo voice, which were well sung by Miss Rosina Buckman'. In the *Birmingham Gazette* of 5 October 1917 R.J.B. responded more positively: 'The music ... has a certain modern freedom, without a touch of the ultra-modern ... as ever, the composer handles his orchestra magistally [sic], obtaining great effects from band and voices, without the laboriousness which distracts attention from the inner reality to the skill of the artificer. All is effective, and readily understood without being so easily seen through as to evoke the demon of tedium ... Miss Rosina Buckman, the soloist, sang with

great power and brilliancy, and the New Birmingham Orchestra likewise did well'.⁴

Rosina Buckman gave a later performance on 7 December 1917 in Aberdeen when she was described in the *Free Press* of 8 December as having 'great power and emotional force ... She is a really attractive singer. The physical power and abandon of the singing are perhaps the things that charm most the majority of her audiences -- those and her fascinating personality. But Miss Buckman has in addition a voice of great purity and a delivery of perfect ease. Moreover, she sings the King's English as if she is speaking it'. The following year, a performance with the Coventry Choral Society led the reviewer in the *Midland Telegraph* of 27 March 1918 to write enthusiastically: 'The whole is a fitting requiem for England's dead heroes'. Rosina Buckman had sung the soprano solo part 'exquisitely'.

Since then *The Spirit of England* has not often been performed, a substantial loss to listeners as the trilogy contains some of Elgar's most poignant and heartfelt music, especially the concluding 'For the Fallen'.⁵ Interest in the work was rekindled by Benjamin Britten who wrote of the latter in the 1969 Aldeburgh Festival programme book: '[It] has always seemed to me to have in its opening bars a personal tenderness and grief, in the grotesque march an agony of distortion, and in the final sequences a ring of genuine splendour' (Kennedy 181).

The press-cutting book also includes reviews of a variety of orchestral and charity concerts. As a coda here is Ernest Newman's response in the *Birmingham Post* of 1 October to a concert by the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Sir Henry Wood on 30 September 1917: 'Miss Buckman sang the *Aida* aria ["Ritorna Vincitor"] as brilliantly as we expected her to do', he wrote. 'Her other solo set one meditating on the strange ways of those who arrange our concert programmes for us. Here is one of the finest of Isolde, kicking her heels or engaged in other devotional exercises, in the artist's room while the orchestra plays the "Liebestod" which she sings so superbly. The moment this is over she comes forward and sings a shoddy piece of Italian operism that is only fit for the barrel-organ or the Albert Hall ["Nedda's Song" from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*]'.

Altogether this collection of press cuttings not only illuminates a hitherto obscure side of Rosina Buckman's own career, but also highlights and gives depth to an event of national importance in the history of English music in which one of New Zealand's most distinguished artists played an impressive part.

WORKS CITED

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Moore, Jerrold Northrop. *Edward Elgar: Letters of a Lifetime*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Simpson, Adrienne, ed. *Opera in New Zealand: Aspects of History and Performance*. Wellington: Witham Press, 1990.

¹ This volume was probably loaned to the author by Alzie Calvert, Rosina Buckman's sister, then living in Oriental Bay, Wellington, some time in the late 1950s, but for reasons unknown was not returned to her with the other material. Alzie was hoping I would write a biography of Rosina, but at that time I was preparing *A Distant Music: The Life and Times of Alfred Hill* (Auckland, 1980). The press-cutting book remained in a flat in Wadestown, Wellington, belonging to William Renwick and was eventually stored in the basement of his house, also in Wadestown. When he moved in early 1998 to another part of the city, the volume was re-discovered.

² For details of performances of *The Spirit of England*, see Kennedy 353-54. The first complete one is, however, attributed to London on 24 November 1917 instead of Birmingham.

³ Ernest Newman (1868-1959) was a distinguished critic and an ardent Elgarian. 'Elgar's letters to him through more than thirty years are some of the finest he ever wrote', concluded Jerrold Northrop Moore (495).

⁴ Robert J. Buckley was an organist and music critic in Birmingham and one of Elgar's earliest advocates. He had published several important interviews with Elgar from 1896 onwards and wrote the first biography, *Sir Edward Elgar*, in 1904.

⁵ For a sensitive analysis of the work see Kennedy (180). 'From the poem's most often quoted verse "They shall not grow old...", Elgar's music is most restrained, sad beyond all words to describe, and with a wonderful falling cadence at "At the going down of the sun...". Binyon actually wrote 'They shall grow not old'. See also Moore (674-82). *The Spirit of England* has been recently recorded by the Scottish National Orchestra with Teresa Cahill (soprano) and Sir Alexander Gibson (conductor).