

English Composers for Amateurs No. 3 THOMAS DUNHILL, by P L Scowcroft

Of all the composers in this series of ten, Thomas Frederick Dunhill was surely the most ambitious. Apart from Markham Lee and Scott-Gatty, he was the oldest of them, being born in Hampstead on 1st February, 1877 (he died in Scunthorpe on 13th March, 1946).

He studied at the RCM 1893-7 with Stanford for composition and Franklin Taylor for piano. He spent the years 1899-1908 as Assistant Music Master at Eton, concurrently teaching harmony and counterpoint at the RCM (he returned there as a professor near the end of his life in 1942). In this pre-1914 period he twice visited Australasia as an Associated Board Examiner (1906 and 1908) and founded a series of concerts in London to promote chamber works by younger British composers. This ran from 1907-1919, and it is not surprising that Cobbett speaks so highly of him, nor that he was the first recipient of the Cobbett Chamber Music Medal in 1924.

Dunhill married twice, his first wife being a great-grand-daughter of Dr Arnold of Rugby, but for the most part the story of his life is the story of his compositions. The most striking non-musical event in his life was surviving a nasty accident in a London taxicab in April 1935.

Much more than Rowley and Thiman, Dunhill was a composer for the stage. There were the ballets *Dick Whittington* (1935) and *Gallimaufry* - premiered in Hamburg under the title *Das Eiskönigin* in December 1937, the Guildford Pageant Play of 1925, entitled *The Town of the Ford* and three light operas. Of these *The Enchanted Garden* (1925) was produced at the RAM in 1928, and *Happy Families* was written for Guildford in 1933.

Best known of the three, and finally enjoying considerable success, was *Tantivy Towers*, produced at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, on 16 January 1931 and later transferring to the New Theatre. The words were by A. P. Herbert, a noted wit who later achieved great success in musical comedy with Vivian Ellis, but Herbert and Dunhill did not, as had been hoped, become a new Gilbert & Sullivan, possibly due to Herbert's over-writing (*Tantivy* has no prose dialogue), but partly also to Dunhill's not having quite Sullivan's musical stature. Nor did the combination of Herbert and Alfred Reynolds with *Derby Day* the following year, also staged at the Lyric (Reynolds in fact was first given the book of *Tantivy Towers* and did some work on it until Dunhill was preferred).

The opera involves a 'horsey' set visiting Bohemian Chelsea and then returning to the country for a hunt ball. Such songs as I have heard from it display a pleasing lyricism; there was an unaccompanied quartet in the first act, recalling Sullivan, whose operettas were well-known to Dunhill, who had written a book about them, and a setting of *John Peel* appeared later in the opera - but he should perhaps have made a nod towards the jazz idiom for the Chelsea scenes.

A number of Dunhill's orchestral scores enjoyed considerable prestige. Unlike Rowley and Thiman he composed a *Symphony in A Major* (subtitled *Belgrade*) during the 1st World War. It was first performed successfully in Belgrade. At least five works were premiered at the Henry Wood Proms: *Prelude, The King's Threshold* (1913), *Dance Suite* for strings (1919), then a big gap to *Triptych: Three Impressions* for viola and orchestra (1942), *Waltz Suite* (1943) and the Overture, *May-Time* (1945). The BBCSO obliged for the latter three and gave first performances in the studio of the *Dick Whittington Suite* (1935) and a *Divertimento* (1942). The *Elegiac Variations* (in memory of Parry) were played at the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival in 1922, and Dunhill conducted his own music at Bournemouth on the platform generously provided by Dan Godfrey. *The Guildford Suite* (Opus 66A) clearly derives from his music for the Pageant Play mentioned earlier.

Dunhill made many attractive contributions to the genre of the light suite. Some like the *Chiddingfold Suite, In Rural England*, (Opus 72), *Vectis* (Opus 82) and the (four) *Dances in Miniature* (Opus 80) (1935) were for strings only. Others - *Pastime and Good Company* (Opus 70), the *Three Pieces* (Opus 67), the *Suite of Four Pieces* (Opus 83) and the *Fairy Suite, The Pixies* (Opus 25) - were scored for full orchestra. Several of these, plus

such effusions as *White Peacocks*, *Tambourine Dance* and the two sketches *Land* and *Sea*, were suitable for amateur orchestras.

Some of Dunhill's chamber music was similarly suitable, though other works were more ambitious and were written for unusual instrumental combinations. His *Quintet in E flat* (Opus 3) for horn, clarinet, violin, cello and piano, was composed when he was still a student at the RCM. This charmingly lyrical piece opens with a set of variations and includes also a graceful *Allegretto* and a finale combining a scherzo-like idea with a gigue. The *Piano Quartet in B minor* (Opus 16) (1903) is still Brahmsian in influence and full of good tunes. The *Phantasy Trio in E flat* (Opus 36), for piano, violin and viola, was a Cobbett commission; other unusual combinations were the *Pleasantries*, in four movements, for two violins and viola, and a *Quintet in F minor* for horn and string quartet. Both *Pleasantries* and the folk-influenced *Phantasy String Quartet* are of only moderate difficulty.

Marion Scott felt Dunhill's violin sonatas to be among his finest works. The first, in D minor (Opus 27) is characteristically English in invention, the second, in F major (Opus 50), has heroic qualities suggested perhaps by The Great War, as it was written in 1916-17.

Dunhill wrote several single-movement works for violin and piano, and also for cello and piano; the most important being *Variations on an Original Theme* (Opus 18) (1905), notably performed at a Doncaster Chamber Music Society concert in March 1926, and which displays a genuine concertante style, the *Two Pieces (Alla Menuetto and Alla Bourree)* of Opus 33, and the *Capricious Variations on an Old English Tune (ie: Sally in Our Alley)* (Opus 32), conceived for cello and orchestra but more often heard, even in its own day, for cello and piano. Nor did he forget the wind instruments as, in 1941, he published a significant corpus of music for solo wind instruments and piano: for flute *Suite in Five Movements* (Opus 93) and *Valse Fantasia*; for oboe *Three Short Pieces* (Opus 81) and *Friendship's Garland* (Opus 97), a suite of five miniatures; for clarinet *Phantasy Suite* (Opus 91), for bassoon *Lyric Suite*, (Opus 96); and for horn *Cornucopia* (Opus 95).

I know the *Phantasy Suite* and *Cornucopia* - which have been most pleasantly recorded in recent years, by John Denman and Ifor James respectively. Neither outstays its welcome and indeed, particularly in the *Phantasy Suite*, one finds oneself wishing its movements were a little longer and developed their attractive ideas more. For Dunhill's chamber music generally is delightful, pure in style and excellently written for the various instruments. Its lyrical idiom may be reckoned as typically English and it frequently draws on folk-song and 18th century popular tunes. It should be performed more often.

Dunhill's piano music was a fruitful source for Associated Board set pieces, especially in the lower grades. The titles of the suites themselves show their intended appeal to younger players: *In the Cowslip Meadow*, *Pamela's Garden*, *The Pied Piper*, *A Story Book*, *When Leaves Are Green*, *In Varying Moods* and *Lyric Thoughts*. His books of graded studies, *The Wheel of Progress*, became well known to generations of young players - I myself recall them vividly. His piano duets, like the pieces *Alla Pavana* and *Romanesca* from Opus 87, were also designed for amateurs.

He produced less organ music than either Rowley or Thiman, but such as there is again appealed to the student and the average organist rather than the recitalist - most ambitious are the *Four Original Pieces* (Opus 101), published in the year of his death.

Dunhill's solo songs, like his piano music, were to a large degree aimed at young performers to sing - whether in class or at festivals. One thinks of *Beauty and Beauty*, *A Child's Song of Praise*, *Countryside Ditties*, *The Dandelion* (though I found mention of this being sung by a professional singer at a Doncaster concert in 1937), *Snowdrops*, *If a Mouse Could Fly*, *Three Fine Ships* and *The Happy Man*. Items more specifically designed for adults included *Comrades*, for baritone and orchestra, and the cycle *The Wind Among The Reeds* (Opus 30) (1912), premiered by Gervase Elwes - the third of whose four songs is the perennially popular *The Cloths of Heaven*, to words by W B Yeats - though I have never heard this sung by a tenor, for whom the cycle was envisaged.

There is a similar proportion of music for amateurs in his choral output. Many items are arrangements of traditional material, others are short part-songs for mixed voices like *Memory*, *A Sunny Shaft*, *The Gift* and

To *Gloriana*, for two-part voices, like *A Wet Sheet and Flowing Sea*, sung in a Doncaster Grammar School concert in 1911, conducted by Wilfred Sanderson, for ladies' voices (*Hie Away, Oh What Comes Over The Sea, Bethlehem Bells* and *The Summer Night* and, most notably, male voices: *Crossing the Bar, Full Fathom Five, Chieftains O'Mine, It Was a Lover and His Lass, Let Us Be Merry, Puck's Song, Quiet Sleep, Song of the King's Men, The Wind and The Rain* and *You Gentlemen of England*. Longer works included *Tubal Cain*, a ballad for mixed chorus and orchestra, written in 1903, and *Song of the Rover*, a cycle of four songs for vocal quartet (1916).

But even in Dunhill's cantatas the emphasis is on music for children: *Sea Fairies*, a cantata for treble voices, appeared in 1912 and the *Masque of the Shoe*, also for children's voices, in 1917. Dunhill's *John Gilpin* also achieved publication. For use at Christmas the *Cantata of the Nativity (The Christmas Rose)* for unison or two-part treble voices, was published in 1936. Two of these works figured in successive years at Doncaster Schools' (non-competitive) Music Festivals in the 1930s. In 1936, *The Masque of the Shoe* was described by the press as a 'tuneful cantata of nursery rhymes' (its finale is based on *Oranges and Lemons*). It was sung with a 'pure, bright tone, exquisite top notes and clear, well-pointed words' by a massed choir of fourth-year junior schoolchildren, conducted by Cyril Winn and accompanied by the professional Northern Philharmonic Orchestra and - as it is a masque after all - a ballet danced by children (though the dancing suffered from lack of space). It was broadcast in the BBC's Northern Region and received further performances in Doncaster during the 1940s. *Sea Fairies* was the climax of the 1937 Doncaster Schools' concert.

Dunhill's books were fewer but more substantial than those of either Rowley or Thiman. *Chamber Music: a Treatise for Students* appeared in 1911 - chamber music was a subject, as we have seen, close to his heart. He put the spotlight on one particular part of the subject in 1927 with his *Mozart's String Quartets*. What a contrast it was when the next year brought *Sullivan's Comic Operas - a Critical Appreciation* - but Dunhill after all wrote comic operas, even if they have proved to be less durable than Sullivan's. Finally there was *Sir Edward Elgar* (1938) - excellent in its day, even if it has now been overshadowed by subsequent studies by Percy Young, Diana McVeagh, Michael Kennedy and Jerrold Northrop Moore.

Dunhill's works as a teacher and administrator we are happy to acknowledge, but I would be sorry if our knowledge of him as a composer who brimmed over with lyricism were to be limited to *The Cloths of Heaven* and perhaps the *Phantasy Suite* for clarinet. Will not some enterprising impresario revive *Tantivy Towers*, some of the orchestral music and, perhaps most urgent and least expensive, the violin sonatas, the quintets and the Piano Quartet?

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Note: since this article was written, Dunhill's Symphony, Violin Sonata No. 2, Quintet in E flat, and the Piano Quartet have all been recorded on CD - as have other works.