



CHRIST CHURCH  
B I R K E N H E A D

# Music of the Great War



**Saturday 15 September 2018 at 2pm**

*Played on the historic Father Willis organ  
by Paul Broadhurst*



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

# Introduction

*The centenary of the end of the First World War inevitably directs our minds here at Christ Church to Wilfred Owen, the famous war poet who was once a member of our church congregation. But Wilfred was only one of an estimated 17 million fatalities in that war. Those losses included many writers, artists, musicians and composers who sadly never lived to fulfil their artistic potential. Our world is all the poorer for that loss.*

*Today's recital both commemorates and celebrates the talents of some of those lost composers, alongside Elgar, Holst and Fährmann who survived the war and knew many of the lost composers personally. The music is drawn primarily from Great Britain but also from France and Germany – recognising the shared humanity of all soldiers so perfectly captured in Wilfred Owen's famous line "I am the enemy you killed, my friend". This quotation appears on the plaque in memory of Wilfred, installed just this week under our newly-restored First World War Memorial.*

*Although the theme of this recital is inevitably a sombre one, the music encompasses many more varied emotions: solemnity, joy, love, trepidation, mystery. In the spirit of the first piece in today's programme we should indeed "rejoice" at the tremendous talent of each of the lost composers represented today. Their music demands to be heard and deserves to be much better known.*

# Programme

Gaudeamus	❖ <i>F. Maurice Jephson</i>
Sospiri	<i>Edward Elgar</i>
Two songs from 'A Shropshire Lad'	❖ <i>George Butterworth</i>
Wedding Song	❖ <i>Ernest Farrar</i>
Cortège	❖ <i>Cecil Coles</i>
In the Style of a Sarabande	❖ <i>Joseph Boulnois</i>
Songs of Departure & Peace, No. 4	<i>Hans Fährmann</i>
Over the Treetops I Float Thee a Song	<i>Gustav Holst</i>
Postlude	❖ <i>F. Maurice Jephson</i>

❖ *Denotes that the composer was  
killed in the First World War*

# The music

**F. Maurice Jephson** (1886-1917) was born in Derby and worked in London for a firm which sold self-playing pianos. He was an accomplished organist and two of his organ compositions frame today's recital. The first, *Gaudeamus* ("Let us rejoice"), is a splendid Edwardian romp. After a suitably joyous start the piece goes through a variety of reed and flue tones before building up once again and culminating in a final burst on Full Organ. Jephson was killed aged 31 and is buried at Étapes Military Cemetery in northern France.

**Edward Elgar** (1857-1934) composed his famous *Sospiri* ("Sighs") in 1914, just as the storm clouds of the First World War were gathering. It was first performed in London on 14 August 1914, just 10 days after Britain joined the conflict. This masterful, profound work evokes an almost tangible sense of sadness and regret.

**George Butterworth** (1885-1916) was a composer of immense potential who would surely have become a towering voice in British music had he survived the war. Like his close friend, Ralph Vaughan Williams, he was an avid collector of English folk songs and the spirit of those timeless pastoral melodies infuses many of his compositions. This is certainly the case with his song settings of eleven of A. E. Housman's collection of 63 poems entitled 'A Shropshire Lad' which was published in 1896. The tone of the music perfectly captures Housman's recurring themes of rural nostalgia and the premature death of young men in war, themes which helped make the poems hugely popular in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in Oswestry, Wilfred Owen was himself quite literally a "Shropshire Lad" and he was one of very many servicemen who took a copy of Housman's book with them to The Front. Today's piece brings together Butterworth's settings of "Is my team ploughing?" and "Loveliest of Trees". A dreamy introduction evokes a morning country mist, then comes the singing of the men starting work on the land, just as their

predecessors have done through the generations. A pensive solo on the Great Flute takes us through a delightful transition to the second song which features the beautiful *Corno di Bassetto* stop. The nostalgia of the folk tunes becomes increasingly tinged with sadness. The mist motif returns to conclude the piece but, right at the end, it plunges into the mournful key of C Minor on an achingly pensive final chord. Butterworth was killed by a sniper aged 31 at Pozieres on The Somme. His name appears amongst over 72,000 others on the famous Thiepval Memorial dedicated to those whose resting places are unknown.

**Ernest Farrar** (1885-1918) was another composer with a very promising future. His light-hearted *Wedding Song* is beautifully crafted. Perhaps evoking wedding nerves, the piece has a constantly shifting, ambivalent air throughout which evaporates only at the point of the delicious, *pianissimo* conclusion. Farrar was killed by machine gun fire at the Battle of Épehy Ronssoy in the Somme Valley, just two days after he arrived at The Front, and is buried at Ronssoy Cemetery. A significant part of his musical legacy was his early encouragement of the young Gerald Finzi whose music continues to have wide public appeal.

**Cecil Coles** (1888-1918) was just 29 when he was killed by a sniper whilst on stretcher duty at The Somme. His *Cortège* is part of a suite of four pieces entitled *Behind the Lines*. The manuscripts of two of these pieces survived the war, stained by the mud and blood of The Somme. The other two pieces were lost when Coles was killed. The *Cortège* evokes a military funeral procession, a scene Coles would often have witnessed. His proud Scottish heritage is clearly evident in the off-beat rhythm of the plaintive main melody. He is buried at the small town of Crouy in northern France.

**Joseph Boulnois** (1884-1918) studied the organ with Louis Vierne, the renowned organist of Notre Dame in Paris. Boulnois dedicated today's *Sarabande* to his father with "affectueux hommage" and the warmth of the dedication is reflected in the tone of the music. Today's rendition faithfully recreates the typical sound of French organs through the use of the Hautbois and Vox Humana stops. Boulnois, a military nurse in the French Army, was one of an estimated 75 million people across the world who died in the 1918 flu pandemic. His son Michel (born in 1907) went on to become an organist/composer like his father and died relatively recently at the ripe old age of 101.

**Hans Fährmann** (1860-1940) was a very high-profile German composer, performer and teacher based in Dresden. By 1916 he had written three very triumphalist "Victory Compositions" looking forward to Germany winning the war. But his music became much more restrained and reflective after several of his friends and pupils were killed. Today's piece brings to mind a scene mentioned by Wilfred Owen and others: the menacing sound of the guns in the distance as the soldiers approached The Front. That distant thunder is recreated at the start of this piece in the heavy bass underpinning a sombre melody charged with foreboding. A tranquil, hymn-like interlude then suggests how soldiers may have found consolation by thinking of loved ones, or by recalling their religious faith, before facing the onslaught of The Front. An urgent development of the initial theme pushes us closer to the fighting, and then a frantic burst of Full Organ takes us right up to the front line. We quickly descend into the pangs and ultimate tranquillity of death, a scene so movingly depicted on the pulpit here at Christ Church, itself a war memorial. The Allied bombing of Dresden on 4 December 1943 destroyed the printing plates of Fährmann's music and killed the publisher and all his family. As a consequence, Fährmann's music has become virtually unknown, but the sheer quality of today's piece speaks for itself.

**Gustav Holst** (1874-1934) dedicated his choral piece *Ode to Death*, written in 1919, to “Cecil Coles and the Others”. He was close friends with Coles and - after the end of the War – he taught Coles’s daughter, Catherine, at St Paul’s School in Hammersmith. Today’s piece is the final movement of *Ode to Death* in an arrangement especially worked out for today’s recital. The unearthly melody and harmonies have a timeless authority as the piece leads us to contemplate the harrowing scene of a battlefield from a mysteriously elevated vantage point. Towards the end we hear the ominous chime of a clock dissolving into oblivion, as if even time itself has been engulfed by the horror of the conflict. The final chord is, unusually, a second inversion of A major: the omission of a tonal foundation leaves the listener unnervingly suspended above the treetops of the title.

We return to **F. Maurice Jephson** for the final item. His *Postlude* was written to send people out from church services with a spring in their step. Its confident tone, whilst rooted in the solemn key of C Minor, seems fitting for the conclusion of today’s recital.

*Programme notes © Paul Broadhurst*

### ***The organ***

This instrument of some 42 stops was built in 1888 by the Victorian genius, “Father” Henry Willis who built many of this country’s major organs including those in the cathedrals of Salisbury, Hereford and Truro. Comprised of some 2,284 individual pipes, our instrument is very special in remaining exactly as conceived by Father Willis and retaining all its original Victorian mechanisms. Earlier this year it was awarded a Grade 1 listing by the British Institute of Organ Studies (one of only 200 such listings nationally), formally recognising its exceptional heritage status. The quality, colour and coherence of the pipework are what make this instrument really stand out in musical terms and we will hear many of those tone colours in today’s recital.

## ***The player***

Paul studied the organ with Noel Rawsthorne and has been organist of Christ Church for the past 22 years.

## ***Acknowledgements***

*We gratefully acknowledge support from:*

- *The Heritage Lottery Fund in sponsoring today's recital*
- *The family of the late David Hillhouse for their kind permission to use the image taken from his Wilfred Owen memorial window in Birkenhead Library*
- *www.organrecitals.com for publicising the recital.*

## ***Forthcoming events***

### ***Thursday 18 October 2018***

*Recording of BBC "Songs of Praise" focusing on Wilfred Owen. Do come along and bring your family and friends to what should be a thought-provoking evening with a selection of well-known hymns. The BBC ask that people are seated by 5.45pm and remain for the whole duration of the recording from 6.30pm until 9.30pm.*

### ***Sunday 4 November 2018***

*This date is the exact centenary of Wilfred Owen's death. At the Morning Prayer service here at Christ Church the new memorial stone will be dedicated in Owen's memory. All are welcome to this service, after which one of the community rooms under the church will be re-named after Owen. The BBC "Songs of Praise" programme focusing on Owen will be broadcast later the same day.*

***Future organ recitals at Christ Church will be publicised on  
www.organrecitals.com***