



for Elgar to break new ground with *The Dream of Gerontius*, which is a landmark in our musical history on several counts. As far as oratorio was concerned, it gave it hopes of new life in the new century then beginning.

Twentieth-century composers, however, did not after all concentrate on oratorio writing, and it is significant that Vaughan Williams, who is so far a traditionalist where vocal writing is concerned, has never written an oratorio. It began to look in fact as though the oratorio was once more in decline, when Walton burst upon the scene with *Belshazzar's Feast*, in 1931. Formally, this powerful work is certainly an oratorio, but the feeling and treatment are secular, not sacred. It embraces in its short course the setting of two Psalms, but the rest of the text is a transcript of the Bible by Osbert Sitwell. It is laid out for chorus, semi-chorus, very large orchestra, and baritone soloist. The choir is the protagonist and, though there is nothing reflective in it, the final paean of thanksgiving drives home forcibly enough the moral lesson of arrogance brought to nought. It might almost have been written as a prophetic reminder of what we are going to see again at this late stage in the world's history.

When Parry wrote *Judith*, the comment was made that his Jews were all recognisable Gloucestershire types. Walton's Jews are fanatical orientals, and the whole episode of *Belshazzar's* blasphemous use of the Temple vessels is pictured entirely from a Jewish and a contemporary point of view.

"Electric Discharge"

The fanaticism of outraged nationalism and mocked faith is conveyed by the extreme violence of the music. I remember the shock I got from the printed page of the proof copy that was sent me for the purpose of writing a programme note for the first performance at the Leeds Festival of 1931. And when the full score arrived my fingers tingled with the electric discharge that came off it as I fumbled about on the piano with it. Richard Strauss was still the holder of the world's record at this time for sheer violence in musical horsepower, but Strauss is a product of the steam age; Walton belongs to the century of electricity. There could be no doubt that the work would make a huge impression when Dr. Sargent and the Leeds Festival Chorus revealed it to the world. It did. And it has since gone the rounds of all the crack choral societies in England.

At the time of the production of *Belshazzar's Feast* its composer had

shown in the *Viola Concerto* (1929) that he was not merely a product of the heartless 'twenties. The impression left by the wit and parody of that curious but delightful entertainment, *Facade*, which was neither the fish of music, the flesh of poetry, nor the good red herring of drama, had been confirmed by the coruscations of the "Portsmouth Point" Overture. The *Viola Concerto*, however, corrected this view that Walton was merely a wag among the intelligentsia.

Choirboy Into Composer

Belshazzar's Feast was the first work for voices, apart from a few songs, that Walton had composed since he was a choir boy at Christ Church, Oxford, where he bewildered his pastors and masters with elaborate motets for double choir that bore none of the marks of orthodoxy. The opening of the oratorio, and especially the setting of Psalm 137, showed that the ability to write for voices had been absorbed during his cathedral training. The lamentation of the Jews called forth the same kind of brooding melancholy as the viola's opening tune in the *Concerto*.

The march tune of the Babylonian priesthood provides an instance of his practice of varying the spelling of his themes. Here the device is used with dramatic and descriptive point. As the priests offer their hymns of praise to all the gods of gold, silver, iron, wood, stone, and brass they use a melismatic phrase made out of the swaying figure of this tune, either with or without the appendage of dotted notes. The scoring enhances the effect: the silver god is praised with female voices, flutes and glockenspiel; the iron by male voices and trumpets; the wood by violins playing *col legno* (with the stick of the bow instead of the hair) and xylophone; and the brazen gods by the brass bands which Walton directs should be placed to the right and left of the main body of the orchestra in the manner prescribed by Berlioz for his *Requiem Mass*.

The Most Spectacular Moment

The Babylonian march is the most spectacular moment in the oratorio and stands out as the representative of the forces of paganism between the singing of the two Psalms which open and close the work. It in its turn is enclosed by two unusual solo passages for baritone, the first of which narrates the splendour of the king's establishment and the second the dramatic episode of the king's death, following upon the writing on the wall. There is no accompaniment to the first, and not much but percussion for the second; the word "slain" is shouted, not sung. This ingenious treatment saves the composer from the need to try to outdo by the direct method the sheer mass of sound which he has already employed and will want again for his final song of praise. Economy could hardly be more cleverly placed.

The recording listeners will hear was made by the Huddersfield Choral Society with Dennis Noble, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the composer conducting.



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