

# **The Chairman's Concert**

## **A Celebration of Peace**

Hampshire County Youth Orchestra

Choir from the Liebigschule-Giessen, Germany

Massed choir from:

Henry Beaufort, Kings' and Perins Schools  
Wyvern and Barton Peveril Colleges

**Winchester Cathedral**

**Saturday 30 January 2016**  
**7.30pm**



**Giessen Choir with Hampshire County Youth Orchestra**  
Conducted by Carl Clausen

*The Lost Wand* – World Premiere

Francis Pott

When Carl Clausen approached me with the suggestion of a new work, it was soon apparent that its greatest challenge lay in the choice of text: the prescription was that it should use both English and German, and that it should encourage deep reflection within a very limited space. Furthermore, it would be helpful if the words respected the music's young exponents by evoking experience of war through the prism of childhood. No pressure, then..!

Armed with an extremely ancient A Level and the ability to 'get by' in German, I read, fruitlessly and for a long time, before finally remembering *Den Kindern* ('To Children'), a poem written at the end of 1914 by Hermann Hesse. Revered primarily as a novelist, Hesse as a poet is loved by many but sometimes disparaged in literary circles for a perceived tone of adolescence running through even his 'mature' work. That rather snooty view seems to me to miss the essential truth that he is concerned with the child as 'father to the man', in the same way as Tennyson wrote that '*I am a part of all that I have known*'.

Hesse became my starting point. I used only the first half of his poem, which subsequently indulges in some rather Kipling-esque moralising about growing up. The chosen portion offers a prayer that war should remain for children the source merely of innocent play, its sound and fury no more than distant 'noises off'. Using it begged the question what I could find that rebutted Hesse's plea. At this point I remembered Karen Gershon, who had been minding her own business on my bookshelves for decades.

Born as Käte Löwenthal in Germany, as a Jewish child Karen Gershon was sent to England as a refugee in 1938, expecting to continue her journey to Israel like her sister, Lise. Remaining in their homeland, her parents were deported to Riga in 1941 and became casualties of the Nazi regime, even though Karen's father had previously served in the German army. Karen was already writing poetry in German. In 1948, having been unable to complete her academic studies because she had to take a series of jobs in order to survive in this country, Karen married Val Tripp, a teacher, and began to express herself through poetry in English. The Tripps attempted a relocation to Israel in 1969, but returned to live in Cornwall in 1975.



Karen died in 1993, having outlived her husband. Three of her four children live in Israel; one, Stella Tripp, is an accomplished visual artist in England, and it was through her kindness that I received permission to use some lines by her mother.

Just as these bare facts already confound Hesse's prayer, telling a tale of deracination, separation and the loneliness of exile, Karen's verse expresses a profound need to reassert her Jewish and familial identity. One of her poems tells how

*Need to belong has made me come  
to help rebuild Jerusalem,  
where everyone is family.*

Whether or not the ironic echo of Blake's vision for a new Jerusalem is deliberate, these lines are enough to convey the unvarnished directness of Karen Gershon's writing. Much of it contains minimal punctuation and - whether by conscious design or owing to the marginally idiosyncratic idiom of the non-native speaker - communicates a fluidly restless stream of consciousness, almost as if delineating a life constantly hustled from pillar to post, denied any true abode of the spirit. The lines chosen for musical setting evoke a dreamlike return to the roots of an initially idyllic childhood cruelly snatched away.

Vernon Scannell served with distinction in North Africa during the Second World War, before deserting out of revulsion at the conduct of his fellow men in the field of conflict and the overwhelming futility of it all. He was arrested and placed in a grim penal institution in Egypt before being released on a suspended sentence, whereupon he took part in the Normandy landings, was wounded and sent to convalesce in Lancashire. Having always seen himself as a misfit in the army, after V.E. Day he deserted a second time. Although the war was effectively over, his legal commitment to the armed forces was not; therefore he spent two years as a fugitive in his own country, managing to survive through a bizarre range of employment which included teaching and professional boxing.

John Carey wrote how Scannell's work *'is drenched in humanity. It resounds with memories'*. Scannell never recovered internally from his war experience. His poem *Walking Wounded* (1965) confides how

*...In the heart's throat a sour sadness stirs;  
Imagination pauses and returns  
To see them walking still, but multiplied  
In thousands now. And when heroic corpses  
Turn slowly in their decorated sleep  
And every ambulance has disappeared,  
The walking wounded still trudge down that lane,  
And when recalled they must bear arms again.*

The extract chosen for setting to music is an entire poem. Referring to the harrowingly mindless impact of adult conflict on childhood innocence, its phrase *a lost wand* leapt from the page at me and instantly provided the title of my composition. The chosen poems or extracts seem to flow into one another logically, with structural coherence aided by a brief reprise of Hesse's German lines towards the end. Karen Gershon's lines provided an especially haunting couplet which I singled out and treated as a recurrent undertone or refrain, much like some fragment or snatch from a child's nursery rhyme, its poignancy perhaps the greater for a mismatch of manner and actual matter:

*I do not ask to be consoled  
Because this grief is all I hold...*

The three sections of *The Lost Wand* move from the everyday and intimate (Hesse) to the ghostly and inward (Gershon), and then to a more public expression of universal grief (Scannell, progressively), before turning finally inward again with an echo of the couplet directly above. For Hesse I was trying to conjure a harmonic 'language of innocence' as well as a kind of al fresco idyll of homeliness, broken intermittently by fleeting undertones of premonition; this section is dominated orchestrally by woodwinds and horns. The Gershon setting makes more prominent use of strings, harp and percussion, and of a disconsolate Cor Anglais solo line. The Scannell poem finally makes greater use of brass, building to a climax before subsiding again, its bleakness becoming ironically intertwined with echoes of Hesse's plea in the German tongue. A fleeting recurrence of the Gershon couplet is cut off by an anguished but fleeting further climax, as if a dam bursting were equally suddenly suppressed again, becoming a mere troubling undercurrent to our largely heedless everyday lives.



The contemporary individual spared terror and suffering at first hand can never turn away from poems such as these, which resonate still as our world attempts today and tomorrow to rise above the mortal tide of its own suffering. In my oratorio *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2005) I set to music a line by a First World War poet, René Arcos: 'The dead are all on the same side'. Coming together with our German friends on an occasion like today reasserts a common humanity, allowing us to reflect that thankfully there are times when the living, too, are united; but I am often asked whether there is something prophetic in the pieces I have written on this theme, and my answer is always the same: how can one be prophetic if nothing ever changes? While I was typesetting the title page of *The Lost Wand*, a photograph posted on Facebook appeared unbidden on my computer screen. It showed the lifeless body of the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, lying at the edge of the surf on a nameless foreign beach, soon to be carried away in the arms of a foreigner who could not have spoken his language and did not know his name. In 2016 that well-known casualty of war, Everyman, still has a human face, but he has retraced his steps and is three years old. To him, in his endless guises, *The Lost Wand* is dedicated.

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### Text for 'The Lost Wand':

#### **Karen Gershon - Monologue**

*I do not want to be consoled  
Because this grief is all I hold*

#### **Hermann Hesse - Den Kindern [Ende 1914]**

*Ihr wisst nichts von der Zeit,  
Wisst nur, dass irgendwo im Weiten  
Ein Krieg geschlagen wird,  
Ihr zimmert Holz zu Schwert und Schild und Speer  
Und kämpft im Garten selig euer Spiel,  
Schlagt Zelte auf,  
Tragt weisse Binden mit dem roten Kreuz.  
Und hat mein liebster Wunsch für euch Gewalt,  
So bleibt der Krieg  
Für euch nur dunkle Sage allezeit,  
So steht ihr nie im Feld  
Und tötet nie  
Und fliehet nie aus brandzerstörtem Haus.  
Ihr wisst nichts von der Zeit....*

#### **Karen Gershon - Monologue**

*I do not want to be consoled  
Because this grief is all I hold*

#### **Karen Gershon - Cain**

*No path is to be found  
the homestead is decayed  
there is no human sound  
where once the children played  
by jungle overgrown  
is the forsaken stone  
that sanctified the ground  
on which the people prayed*

#### **Karen Gershon - Monologue**

*I do not want to be consoled  
Because this grief is all I hold*

**Vernon Scannell - I Grieve for a Lost Land**

*I grieve for a lost land as the gulls swim  
Easily on air, parodying pain  
With their outrageous cries:  
I grieve for a lost land as the dark stain  
Of night spreads over the sad skies  
And the gulls drift into silence on a chill wind.*

*And later, when the sea's great engines roar  
Ceaselessly of death and exile, I recall  
Nights starred with promises  
Of a bright morning's golden madrigal  
And skies blue as the nursery boys  
Who blew their silver trumpets when the cows were in corn.*

*I grieve for a lost land which lies beyond  
This sea which tells its hunger to the night  
And shakes its rags of foam  
For the idiot moon's remote delight;  
I grieve for a dead child, a lost wand,  
A shore to which no exile will return.*

*Ihr wisst nichts von der Zeit,  
Wisst nur, dass irgendwo im Weiten  
Ein Krieg geschlagen wird...*

*I grieve for a lost land...*

*Und hat mein liebster Wunsch für euch Gewalt,  
So bleibt der Krieg  
Für euch nur dunkle Sage allezeit...*

*I grieve for a dead child, a lost wand...*

*I do not want to be consoled  
Because this grief is all I hold*