

Sentinel was commissioned jointly in 2013 by Winchester College and the Oxford-based chamber choir Sospiri* (whose name confers a certain aptness upon tonight's pairing of the new work with *The Dream of Gerontius*, since it is the title also of a hauntingly nostalgic short work for string orchestra by Elgar). The commission formed part of a project commemorating the fallen of The Great War, with Winchester College furnishing the first public performance and Sospiri presenting the work on CD (they made their recording last August and released it last month).

Sentinel merges text by the poets Edward Thomas (killed at Arras in 1917) and Isaac Rosenberg (a fatality exactly a year later, a few miles to the north-east). This conflation embraces various tensions. First, the Thomas lines are prose, while Rosenberg's come from three separate poems. Secondly, those by Thomas date from 1913 and owe their premonitory intensity partly to an innate existential anguish from which he suffered throughout his adult life (unending night rain is a recurrent metaphorical reflection of this in both his prose and his verse), whereas Rosenberg's agony springs from the ghastly immediacy of the trenches, his sanity seemingly imperilled by a constant circumstantial denial of the sanctity of individual life. An autodidact from a relatively humble background in Bristol and London's East End, Rosenberg arguably exceeded all his public school contemporaries in the outwardly Classical formality of his poetry, yet frequently conjured grievously memorable effect from its brutal collision with nightmare images of the Western Front.

Like Chopin in 1839, composing his 'raindrop' Prelude in the wintry Mallorcan monastery at Valdemossa, I imagined rain as a sombre continuum, spread here among divided choral parts and implicitly present beneath more agitated music, always re-emerging with stealthy persistence. At the end, where this seems to pass beyond hearing rather than fall truly silent, I was responding to a line about rain in November, a poem by John Burnside, which I had recently set: It won't stop until you listen. This aptly reflected also the death wish of Thomas, for whom only extinction in the field of battle could ever bring about the peace which he craved.

Conceiving a work suitable for both large and small choral ensembles presents its own particular challenges. In trying to rise to them, I hope that I may also have found a suitable reflection of such a contrast in texts which bring together bleak individual introspection (specific to its own time and place) and a more universal tone of passionate outcry against the perennial futility of all human conflict.

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