

SPOKEN TO A BRONZE HEAD (2009)

for mezzo soprano and piano

(Ursula Vaughan Williams)

In all the long years that I knew her – and it was a matter of regret between us – I never set a word of Ursula’s poetry. It was only after her death, when I was asked to contribute a setting of one of her poems to a celebratory concert held at the Royal College of Music that I ‘jumped’: I knew immediately which one I wanted to do – lines ‘Spoken to a Bronze Head’. This was the portrait bust of RVW made by David McFall: not the Jacob Epstein which neither of them liked very much. It stood always in her sitting room, a benign presence, a ‘virtual’ companion in her long widowhood.

My setting is in an ‘arioso’ style, quite simple and austere – maybe to match the rather ‘Augustan’ style of the verse. It is of course a memorial, also a salute: and I wanted to enshrine in it the two of them, Ralph and Ursula. So at the heart of it is a clangorous, bronze-like chord, lifted from the last movement of VW’s 6th Symphony, from which I quote a passage just before the conclusion.

Bronze, where my curious fingers run
matching each muscle and each metal feature
with life’s austerer structure of the bone,
each living plane and contour so well known,
you will endure beyond the span of nature,
be as you are now when our lives are done.

On unborn generations you will stare
with the same hollow eyes I touch and see,
look on a world in which no memories share
the living likeness of the face you wear,
keep, in unchanged serenity
all that time gave him in your guardian care.

His name is yours to keep, so will his glory be,
who are his only, his inheriting son :
and when the hand that writes so ardently
the sound of unknown sound reaches finality,
the music captured, all the work well done,
stand in his place and bravely wear his immortality.

Jeremy Dale Roberts