

## VOICES

I'm finding that one of the few advantages of getting to a certain age is the pleasure of waking early, even before first light.... Listening to the silence; and then the first sounds of life: the orchestra gradually taking their places. It's great for composing music, of course: luxuriously ruminating, cogitating, before the awful slog of finding actual notes.

Maybe more profitably, during these quiet hours, between sleep and waking, I can enjoy long Proustian reveries. What the writer calls 'involuntary memory' kicks in, and I can run the film at leisure: when memory and time – elastic, capricious, kaleidoscopic – can at last play their tricks unhindered without my even having to try, drawing from what appears to be a limitless reservoir of images and sounds. The whole symphony: laughter; the sound of children; 'other voices, other rooms'. I am sure that there are many here who regularly have the same experience.

These voices carry with them the image of the person: indeed our voices may be one of our most personal characteristics. Yet, unless it has been fixed, recorded on tape, it is – along with smell - the most ephemeral, and might seem lost for ever. But not quite irretrievable: in letters – especially those written spontaneously, by hand – voices can be inferred: the hesitancy, the warmth, the urgency – 'in haste'. One can pick up a kind of colour, 'registration'; and I want to try to pass some of that on to you today.

Through my friendship as a young man with Kiffer I had the extraordinary luck to be introduced to a remarkable set of people, several of them already known to me indirectly through my godmother, Diana Oldridge, who used to run a music festival at Stinchcombe between the wars, modelled on VW's Leith Hill. (She knew everybody!) And in time some of these became close friends: it is impossible for me to testify adequately as to what I owe them. I have a little horde of letters, which it has been a joy to return to in preparing this talk: like taking up the conversation all over again. I have tried to select passages which convey the person most vividly, as well as something of their 'tone'.

First, and most precious, those few letters from Gerald – actually typed by Joy, but annotated by Gerald: written to me while I was doing my national service in Cyprus. (This was 1955: amazing that at that moment he should take so much trouble to listen to what a young man was up to). I'd sent to him the text of what I called an 'oratorio', based on Langland's 'Piers Plowman' – mercifully, never completed! Howard Ferguson had previously sent me the huge two-volume Skeat edition, as well as a whole lot of postcards from the Luttrell Psalter: this was just the time that he was working on *Amore Languet*).

'I ought to have written to you long ago, even though you will have had a letter from Joy in between. Your Mother sent me the 'Piers Ploughman' text, and though I told her I thought it was much too long, I had meant to write and tell you direct. Blame we Ancients for not being able to get through all the things to be done. Now I see that Howard has done all that needs to be done, though I fancy that even his three and a half hours was a generous estimate on his part. Even Mahler and Bruckner get a bit exhausting after the first hour and a half! But I think it was brave of you to tackle such an enormous job, and I hope something comes out of the smaller conception.

I'll put your letter to Kiffer on one side till we visit him. I'm afraid it can't be forwarded as he is only allowed one letter in and out a fortnight. He was first at Oxford for a week or so, and then via Brixton and Wormwood Scrubbs he got to Lewes Jail. Lewes is the prison for under twenty-ones, as it is supposed to be bad for young people to be with old offenders, though why it should be supposed that the under twenty-ones are less corrupting I can't imagine. However, Kiffer's strong character will stand up to all that, though he is finding it pretty horrifying, and you mustn't think he has chosen an easy way out.

Even though he is like to to be left alone after his three months, the months of suspense beforehand, the courts, the publicity, the enforced living with some of the lowest scum you can find, is not an easy thing to go through. And then, when he is out he'll have to face a good deal of veiled disapproval – mostly, I suspect, from women who have never had to be conscripted! But it's curious what a lot of support he has had from old soldiers, scientists, etc., and of course the Quakers would see him through anything. One of them, seeing Kiffer's case reported in the paper, with his speech from the dock, insisted on sending a cheque towards his fine. And, oh, the numbers who say I wish I had had the courage to do the same thing.

Well, I suppose it's difficult to fight the State, and though I don't go with Kiff the whole way, I do admire him for choosing prison in preference to two years in an army band, playing for dances and officer's messes, and pretending that that is national service!

I can't quite understand about Jonathan's Grand Tour. I suppose this is when he is out of the army. Anyhow he is a lucky chap to be started off (at 21) with a cellar. I once took V.W. out to dinner at Layton's; and Layton (whose Father had been V.W.'s O.C. in the R.A.M.C. during the First World War) was so impressed (by V.W., of course, not me!) that he opened a bottle of port from Disraeli's cellar. What will Jonathan open on such an occasion?

It was sweet of your Mother to have offered the caravan, and I hope all will be well and that we can go, as I shall certainly need a break between Cheltenham and Hereford.

Yours, - Gerald

There is so much of Gerald revealed in this letter: I don't need to tease it out. And what is so nice, is that I can hear in it his chuckle, his measured light bantering tone, as well as the earnestness. Here's another passage, written on New Year's Eve 1956 – always a hallowed time for him:

'Jonathan is coming for a night or two next week, when I expect we shall hear more news of you. Meanwhile, your nice long letter was very welcome; and you must imagine a nice family group, typical of an R.A. picture of about 1899 – called, of course – News from the Front – as gnarled and respectable Grandad, fragile white-haired Grandmother, two offspring and a cat or two, gather round to read it!'

It was only after Gerald's death that I began to get to know Joy better. I used to go down to Ashmansworth quite frequently for weekends: there seemed to be still so much going on – a kind of momentum, even with the master gone: chasing after Gurney material; sorting out the Parry collection in the attic – and most importantly preparing Gerald's uncompleted work for publication. But still, with more time on her hands, she was doing quite a lot of drawing; and in the summer of '59, over several weekends, she made my portrait – rigged out in an Arran sweater, which was the uniform of the tribe. We passed the time chatting and reading: Vita Sackville West's long poem *The Land*, from cover to cover, and on to passages from Vergil's *Georgics* in Cecil Day Lewis's translation: an apposite choice in that house still so rich in harvest. She was always passing on books: for instance the formidable Christian palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* came my way - but remained largely unread, alas. I reciprocated with the poetry of the Nobel Prize winner Saint John Perse, and we spent a long time on an abortive translation of his *Chronique*, which was properly shot down in flames when Sylvia Townsend Warner came to read it, pointing out howler after howler. But wonderfully rewarding for both of us, getting to grips with that visionary mind.

As usual, distance and separation are essential spurs to serious letter writing. After I graduated I sort of 'dropped out' and went out to Africa – the Cameroons – and saw and experienced many extraordinary things, which I described in long letters home written in the purplest prose imaginable. (I was trying to be accurate...). They were just beginning the extensions to Ashmansworth.

Ashmansworth. Sunday afternoon – June ended

(1962 ?)

overcast soft grey – warmth under the cloud

Dearest Jeremy – I have so often started writing to you & never the actual pencil to paper – or really the openhearted leisure in which to reply to your lovely letter – (I can't trace a date on it, but I know that spring has slipped away, but I have not forgotten the pleasure it gave me. The impulse to write & the opportunities to write in such a way don't often occur – you had to go to Africa for it !) Time is such to me that I don't notice gaps and the glinting hay fork is still bright – 'tho change has altered the scene and banished its use.

Here the summer is full of bloom – mays burdened as never before remembered. A S.(amuel) Palmer burgeoning and woods of them on the plain almost in flight with lightness –

Foundations are dug & building will begin as money makes it possible. The house is woven in with house martins, our cars are covered with their mess, but they make our summer – and at the moment the 70 odd nests are mostly filled with fledglings & in the dusk & into the night they endlessly twitter with expectation –

This is pure Joy: the words as characteristic as the fluid, well-formed hand-writing; a kind of gentle haste in the replacement of fullstops with dashes, the use of ampersands; the occasional dropping of the auxiliary verb. Her husky, slightly breathless, asthmatic voice skimming on seamlessly.

Ashmansworth saw – and nurtured - the beginning of my marriage. Paulette was Hilary's *au pair*: and it was the usual classic story – I first saw her standing by the aga, and the rest was history.

Ashmansworth

10.10.66

Dearest Jeremy,

How lovely it is to have you and Paulette moving in and out of this house during this exquisite time of your new beginning.

One sees it through a timeless arch of repetition.

For you, as with anyone inevitably deeply committed to a prime fidelity, it is not without deep misgiving.

I remember G telling me about the misgivings that assailed Herbert Lambert (a great friend of his) – that assailed himself. He asked Fergie whether he thought that he should not ever marry as the conditions that he needed demanded too much solitude – he was fearful of asking me to share it. He was also very conscious of how one shrivels in an ivory tower isolation and that the undertaking of responsibility adds to one.

His unwavering fidelity to his music forced him out of his solitude to seek a companionship which could feed him. This desert in which one does isolated combat – this precious solitude – can only be truly cherished by a relationship which generates life, paring off the crust of personal idiosyncrasy and deepening the powers of anguish and joy.

For me it has been such a delight to witness because I knew the future of your work depended on finding the home – the harbour – without (which) there can be no further voyaging.

Paulette will give you what you ask of her – and there is no limit to that which love can give.

However difficult, it is a rare and marvellous experience to live with an involved creative person and she will find new vistas open to her. The only failure can be the only one of not always working to the common focus of your work.

One walks together into that mysterious wood, miraculously blind.

In haste to catch this afternoon's post and much love – I meant to tell you that I've been reading the Perse book you gave me at night. How grateful I am for it and for your introduction – let us hope we can continue to complete Chronique – when these eddies die down a bit !

Blessings

Joy

I have one other marvellous letter from Joy, written much later, not so much after an estrangement, as a period of adjustment, during which I felt I had to distance myself from a

good deal of my background in order to grow up a little. I was asked to give a talk on Gerald Finzi's music to the University of London Diploma Society.

'I was pleased to get your letter and to know that preparing this lecture had meant so much to you. It is always a necessary thing to turn aside from what has just immediately fostered and generated. Like leaves of a branch, and it is only after the passage of time that one can full appraise what has gone before.

It is lovely that undertaking this job has meant so much to you in researching for it, and I shall be fascinated to see your lecture & thank you for thinking of sending it. I am all the more glad to feel that you now have a personal interest in things of the Trust and I like to think of you being in it when I am gone.

What interests me so much is the degree of involvement your generation feels in the music. I can only suppose this to be the result of such deeply felt and hardly come-by work. Similar to shadows emphasising the light. The sense of never being able to have enough time to do what he felt he could, and that it was running out, and this was accentuated by the eventual illness, though felt long before its emergence.

Only the other day after seeing the two television plays 'the Oppenheimers' that the Germans put out to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Hitler and to give the present generations some idea of what it meant to the persecuted of the regime. Like grass over ruts, soothing (sic) it over, one can only live by partially forgetting, and seeing those films erupted the anguish of the early days which co-incided with our marriage in 1933. G. was acutely aware of this and had to take bromide to be able to sleep : this became un-necessary with marriage and the warmth shared before sleep. I was immediately involved with getting Jews out of Germany and our dear Becky who was working in Nuremburg was the last to leave before the frontier was closed. She took her sewing machine and they smashed it to pieces at the frontier. I had got her daughter out before and placed her in a school in the midlands & though we would have loved Becky to stay with us we could not prevent her joining her daughter. She wrote to me every year until she died ; she was a lovely person, Jewish entirely on both sides and utterly Bavarian-looking like our Jack – not in the least Jewish in appearance. For this reason I strongly disputed the fact that you can always tell a Jew & when asked by Prof ? who was the chief organiser in Reading why I worked so much for their liberation I said 'Can't you see that I am Jewish !'

Being so much taken under their wing as I was by the Finzis', it was inevitable that I would be brought into contact with all sorts of remarkable people. Howard I might anyway have met as a student of composition at the Academy. He became a close friend and mentor, especially generous and stalwart when I was high and dry in Cyprus. I have a packet of letters – some typed, some in his favourite green ink - (was that the Irish, I wonder?): full of gossip, always concerned, always encouraging. Here is just a flavour – I wish I could give you more: he is irresistible:

'Last night I saw Felix Aprahamian, who was asking after you. We were at a rather frightful I.C.A. concert in the Fest. Hall Recital Room. (Horrid place!) It began with what must have been on of the worst performances of anything I have ever heard in London. The work was the Schoenberg 2<sup>nd</sup> Quartet, and the

performers the Allegri Quartet and Miss Myra Verney. The quartet itself might have been just passable; but when they were joined for the last two movements by Miss V., dressed in dun-yellow with large black spots, to match her cow-like voice, the rot really set in. They were all over the place. For Miss V. seems to be one of those people who come, in the words of Ernest Walker, from the Bank where the Wild Thyme Grows. Crotchets and quavers are all the same to her. So not unnaturally she and the quartet were rarely in the same bar. As far as the work itself is concerned, I personally felt it didn't make a great deal of difference, as it seems to me an utterly dreary piece of stodge. But I can understand what must have been the feelings of those who happen to think differently about it. They must have found it hard not to rush up and slit the lady's gullet.

And what, you may ask, am I up to? Well, to tell you the truth, dear Jeremy, about a month ago I started a work for Tenor, Chorus and Orchestra on a medieval English poem! But it's alright: it's not by Langland. It's by our dear old friend Anon, and it's been buzzing about my head (and even in my notebooks) for more than 20 years. Why it should suddenly decide to deliver itself now, when I'm meant to be in the middle of a String 4tet, I can't tell you. But who should look a gift-horse in the mouth...'

Dear Howard: his voice, with its just perceptible light Dublin burr, always reminded me of caramel. (Perhaps it was the cigars?). The voice of a genial *bon viveur*.

How different Robin Milford: I think I first met him at a Newbury Strings concert, when they played *Fishing by Moonlight*. Later, at 3 Choirs or Cheltenham, I came almost to dread seeing his stricken, willowy figure – his haunted face so unforgettably caught by Joy in her drawing. He was a bit of an Ancient Mariner, he would buttonhole one rather; talking out of the corner of his twisted mouth, endlessly blinking, he unmistakably gave off the smell of failure and tragedy: a creature entirely without a shell. Vaughan Williams had organized a concert at the Wigmore, which had been mercilessly trashed by the critics. I wrote to him, and I got a typically garrulous reply – like the letters of Queen Victoria, full of underlinings and explanation marks.

'Thank you so much for your charming and appreciative letter about my concert. I have had a surprising number of letters (well, it has certainly surprised me!), but I was particularly glad to receive one from (if I may say so) 'the younger generation', for this has a heartening effect and makes me feel I may not be so 'played out' as at times I feel I am, and that perhaps I can still contribute something to music. Not, I hasten to add, that I want to write much now, for I've written a lot in the past (too much probably, except that one does learn by one's mistakes and failures), and I have, thank heaven!, at last become more self-critical; but I should be sad nonetheless to dry up altogether. So I hope you see that your letter has really done me good!'

Tony Scott was another composer with whom I corresponded occasionally - like Robin often afflicted with self-doubt. But for some reason I never kept his letters, which I am sorry for: he was a delightfully droll and kindly character. One letter from a composer I could never have thrown away, was that from Vaughan Williams, after the premiere of his 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. I have

described elsewhere the circumstance of my first proper encounter with VW, when he and Ursula were staying at Ashmansworth while he was working on the piece. I was sleeping in the kitchen among the aga and the cats and the huge carboys of mead bubbling away; and VW was in Kiffer's room above. Every morning, around 4.00 am, I would be wakened by the sound of the piano trickling down through sleep; then pad-pad-pad, as he'd go back to his desk. When it came to the performance, I like others was somewhat non-plussed by a first hearing of the music, and evidently said so in my letter to him afterwards. He replied, rather drily –

‘Thank you so much for writing: I am so glad you liked it – as far as you did: as the man said about Brahms – it ought never to be heard for the first time.

I hope you are doing some fine composition yourself. Ursula sends her love’.

The greatest blessing that came out of that encounter was my long friendship with Ursula, in whose house I was eventually to live for a number of years. She is what one might call a ‘born’ letter-writer; and like Joy, her handwriting – indeed, her voice - expresses an extraordinary, bounteous largesse of generosity and enthusiasm. I see her quite regularly; and it has been moving for me to read aloud to her what she wrote to me forty or fifty years ago. This, from a long letter written when I was out in Cameroon, April 1962. She was already working on her biography of her husband.

‘It is a very cold day, gusty winds, & the trees still wintery, though I have many deep blue hyacinths out. I think equally my favourite flowers with roses.

I've promised my book for October, which is alarming, but will probably work. In a sense, I don't want to finish it, but to keep it as a companion, but that's no good really. One can recognise one's falsities, but still half cling to them. And re-living through Ralph's life I delay our meeting, & yet wait for it, go towards it, & dread the ending as I never did in living it – because I know it now & did not then.

I saw Joy last week. A little happier I think – but I wish she could shed Ashmansworth now, & travel and adventure. She has still so much to have, & if only it could come to her it would be lovely. Kiffer and Hilary are rather lyrical together. It's made him grow, & he shows tenderness to her, which I like to see. Happiness makes people so much nicer, it ought to be distributed, & valued & cherished in every form, to every one – to keep as long as they could nourish it and give it.

Mecca – how wonderful. Probably one ought to go on a pilgrimage once – to whom? I put wild cyclamen on Ronsard's grave – and picked a blue anemone from Keats's – but now? Perhaps to see the wild creatures left – the free Dolphins, or the eagles, or the lions? Meanwhile I must feed the domestic cats – all beautiful, trusting, curious, & oddly, loving’.

How lucky I am to have this sheaf of letters about me; and thank you for giving me the pretext for unfurling it and letting me share a little of it with you. I would like to end with Cavafy's words.

Ideal and dearly beloved voices of  
those who are dead, or of those who  
are lost to us like the dead.

Sometimes they speak to us in our dreams;  
sometimes in thought the mind hears them.

and for a moment with their echo other echoes  
return from the first poetry of our lives -  
like music far off vanishing in the night.

JEREMY DALE ROBERTS

June 2007

(Talk given to Finzi Friends at Gloucester Three Choirs Festival)

I had not yet 'found my voice':

'The Mourner'

Cavafy.

Then there is what has become known as 'The Composer's Voice', unique – though a number of inflexions may well have been picked up from other composers. 'His music has a distinctive voice', the critic will say; and in the music of a real composer this will be true: his music fully embodying his mind, character and soul. Finzi's music 'speaks to us': speaks to



the poet in every one of us, grasping us by the hand. And of course each one of us listens to it alone: uniquely.

When I first started finding my feet as a composer, immersed as I was in this milieu which I have just described, I could not fail to pick up a fairly broad 'English' dialect. As a very young man I had not yet 'found my voice'. The music we are going to hear illustrates this very clearly. First a little motet, with words taken from the Funeral Service: 'I heard a voice from heaven'. You will hear these same words set by Herbert Howells in his Hymnus Paradisi in this evening's concert; you will hear almost the same music! – at all events, an unmistakable reflection of that luminosity that had thrilled us all so much at Gloucester.

DISC: 'I heard a voice from heaven'.

And lastly a little song. It is part of a set of three entitled 'Beautiful lie the dead', each of which was dedicated to one of my mentors: William Alwyn, my first teacher at the Academy; Gerald and Howard. I sent it to Gerald from Cyprus, where I was doing my national service, and he wrote back: 'I like the song very much and thought it very nice of you to have sent it – one of your best, I thought – and the texture gaining in clarity through not being too elaborate. The vocal line is good too, and I shall look forward to seeing the others, perhaps when you are home. It's good to know that you have some time for getting on with music, and that the two years won't be such a waste of time for you as they are for so many'.

The little piece is a salute to Gerald: indeed you can't fail to hear that it carries his tone of voice. But it must have carried an ambiguous message: how was I to know that he had so few more months to run? It is a setting of a poem by a minor Georgian, Wilfred Gibson: 'The Mourner.'