

# **Robin's Life and Temperament**

## INTRODUCTION

This is a sad story of a man with extreme sensitivity, wonderful musicianship, imagination, integrity and energy. Robin Milford was a meticulous individual, and a person of great kindness with a well-developed sense of humour.

A testimony to these personal qualities lies in the fact that Milford's friends were numerous and included many mainstream musician and composers, both professional and amateur. Members of this mainly London-based circle of friends included composers Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, R O Morris, Henry Ley, Balfour Gardiner, Peter Warlock and Gerald Finzi. There were well-known professionals in other music disciplines such as the conductor, Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Hugh Allen, the Director of the Royal College of Music, the organist Richard Latham, the viola player Jean Stewart, and singers including John Goss and Marion Milford. And there were musical friends such as the grandchildren of Sir John Stainer.

The influence of these people, especially Gerald Finzi, is evident in Milford's compositions and in his teaching. Their friendship was manifested through their financial aid to him, their encouragement of Milford's writing, their performances and publication of his compositions and their care for the composer during the difficult times in his life. Close friends also included Lawrence and Theresa Whistler, C S Lewis, Anne Ridler – the poet and Milford's cousin - and Charles Williams.

Whilst Milford was certainly a highly sensitive, insecure, somewhat depressive individual with a low level of self-esteem, these traits did not make up the complete man, as some people have asserted. This book hopes to suggest a more positive view of the artist, while acknowledging the influence which instability and depression had on his life and music.

## 1903 - 1928

Robert (Robin) Humphrey Milford was born in Oxford on 22nd January 1903, to Humphrey Sumner Milford and his wife, Martha. He was the oldest of three children, David being the second and Pippa, the youngest. The Milford family formed a typical upper-middle class household of the period and all three children had a happy and comfortable childhood.

Humphrey Milford was an out-going man of confidence. He was later knighted for his work with the Oxford University Press from 1900 to 1945. Unusually for the age, Sir Humphrey was not an austere head of the family. Rather, he was noted for his warmth and generosity which have been mentioned on many occasions.

Having founded the Music Department in the Oxford University Press in 1923, Milford's father was well positioned to oversee the publication of many of his son's compositions. The composer did not need any paternal influence for his works to be accepted for publication, and indeed, it is not known if Sir Humphrey tried to use his position in this way. Milford's music certainly earned independent acclaim during the composer's lifetime among composers and performers alike.

Robin Milford's mother was gentle and artistic. Her influence upon her eldest son was deep, but of a different nature to that of his father. Such influence involved literature as, for example, in her adaptation of the Beatrix Potter story *The Tailor of Gloucester* which Milford set as an opera for children entitled *The Shoemaker*, Opus 3, 1924.

In terms of a mother-son relationship, a powerful and lasting emotional bond existed between Milford and his mother. Anne Ridler, cousin of the composer, recalled Sir Humphrey speaking of the special relationship which existed between his wife and eldest son.

Just how much Milford ever disclosed of his inner-self and feelings to his mother, and how much his mother knew instinctively about her son, is unknown and probably now lost forever. Such a strong bond with one's mother was not, of course, peculiar to Milford. Many musicians and authors of the age had a similar closeness with their mother. Whether or not this is something particularly pervasive in Victorian/Edwardian/Georgian Britain is open to debate. It certainly seemed widespread in artistic circles, with Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, George Orwell and Rupert Brooke being literary examples, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ivor Gurney and Peter Warlock as musical examples. Such bonds were clearly to the advantage of Britain's art forms. Some men managed to live through such a relationship and progress to a balanced adult life. In the case of Vaughan Williams, it is open to debate whether or not the close bond with his mother, following his father's death, was a reason for the composer's necessary reliance on, and companionship with, his wives and his total absorption in work, or if his behaviour merely derived from the Victorian work/morality ethic.

Robin Milford was a gentle and insecure individual. He possessed a deep inferiority complex which caused many bouts of severe depression. Together these traits had a profound influence upon his life in terms of musical connections, periods of composition, musical syntax, genres and relationships with publishers. Throughout his life, he relied on, and greatly needed, the support and influence of his family and friends. Close family members included his parents, Kirstie – his wife, his cousin the poet Anne Ridler, and the renowned soprano Marion Milford, Robin's niece, who later became one of his closest confidants and musical mentors.

Not all family influence was, however, good. It is perhaps appropriate to state at this juncture that Marion Milford felt that Robin was depressive, with some of his mental trouble going back to childhood and the actions and reactions of his parents. Marion felt that the 'Victorian' attitude to life of Sir Humphrey and his wife had a disastrous effect on the sensitive and creative mind of Robin - which was, of course, the case for many other creative personalities in this era. In particular, Marion placed great emphasis on the fact that Robin's mother frequently threatened him, by claiming that he was becoming more and more like his uncle who ended his life as a result of mental illness. It is sad how prophetic this threat proved to be. Milford's particular

type of childhood background with cultured parents, a special bond with his mother in comparison to a more distant relationship with Sir Humphrey, a sense of inferiority beside his strong and competitive brother - in addition to an already-established sensitive and nervous disposition - created a temperament which led the composer to find solace in the arts, particularly music and English literature.

Little is known of the relationship between the three Milford children but the two brothers differed greatly. David was of quite a different nature and was a keen sportsman. He became an international hockey player and world champion in rackets. Robin must have seemed 'pale' beside his younger brother. None of this could have helped his already formed psychological insecurities.

Entering Rugby in 1916, Milford came under the influence of the then Director of Music, A H Peppin, though nothing is known of Milford's thoughts on his music master. The two figures must have had a productive relationship as Peppin was the first person to detect the young boy's musical talent and he set about giving him all the necessary encouragement and guidance in his music studies.

Despite the severe type of life which seems to have existed in English public schools during the early years of the twentieth century, Milford proved himself to be sufficiently strong and self-willed to survive the inevitable bullying which must have been a part of life at Rugby for those who did not display obvious talent on the games field but preferred music and the arts. Indeed, it is a credit to Milford that he possessed the determination to succeed in the Rugby music department in order to gain his scholarship to the Royal College of Music. The number of other promising musical pupils who might have floundered at Rugby had it not been for the oppressive atmosphere against artistic pupils at that time is open to question. Apart from the fostering given by Mr. Peppin, Milford was greatly assisted in his survival at Rugby by living with his House Master, H. C. Bradby (his uncle and father of Anne Ridler). It is obvious from letters that he spent weekends playing the piano in the Bradby house. This means that he was possibly spared some difficult experiences at the school. Music was, most certainly, even at this point, a close soul mate to Milford. As a boy, Milford would have been viewed at Rugby in 1916 as a 'different' type of pupil.

For the intelligent, sensitive and thinking child, the world of these years must have seemed a very confusing place with many possibilities. By the time Milford was born, not only were such children's stories as *The Water-Babies*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Golden Age*, and *Five Children and It* well established but so also were fairy stories such as those written by Andersen and Grimm. Similarly, by the time of Milford's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday such stories as *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *The Wind in the Willows* and *Peter Pan* had also appeared, not to mention the tales of Beatrix Potter. For a child such as Milford, this golden age of children's literature must have been a welcome and profound escape from the horrors of Victorian/Edwardian social conditions and rigidity.

The important point is that these stories for and about children (particularly of the middle and upper-middle classes) reacted with Milford's fertile imagination from his earliest days, resulting in many compositions written for children. Examples include such works as *Three Sea Pictures* (1924) for piano, *A Fairy Revel* (1924) for piano, the children's opera *The Shoemaker* (1924) and the cantata *Rain, Wind and Sunshine* (1929). Children were now allowed to escape into their own imaginations, unlike the Olympians in *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days*. Milford could not but have been acquainted with this children's literature, especially in view of his father's background with the Oxford University Press. Yet such freedom created difficulties for many fertile minds in distinguishing between imagination and fiction. Many people, including Milford himself, resented having to live in a harsher reality.

In later years Milford responded to the 'Arcadian' literary movement of his childhood by continuing to write numerous imaginative compositions for children, including the song-cycle *Joy and Memory* (1940-43) and the ballet *The Jackdaw of Rheims* (1945) written for the pupils of Downe House. He was well ahead of his time in writing such works.

Through Kirstie, it is known that under Peppin's guidance Milford studied piano and flute and that he reached the necessary standard in performance and paperwork for entrance to the Royal College of Music. Entry to the Royal College of Music in 1921 must have come as a profound relief to Milford. Here it was in order to follow one's emotions and develop, both personally and musically. However, the pervading

atmosphere of the College at this time must have been subdued due to the many students who did not return to their studies after service in the First World War. By this time, Vaughan Williams had returned from the war to resume his professorship in composition. Henry Ley was still teaching at the College and Ivor Gurney, having just about survived his war service, had returned for a second period of study. Such facts and atmosphere cannot have escaped Milford's notice and sensitive nature. However, other new composition students included Edmund Rubbra and Constant Lambert.

Milford's transfer from Rugby to the Royal College of Music emancipated him as a person and musician. This involved not only study but also an ability to form and sustain friendships. The more expansive musical environment, and personal encouragement, gave him the confidence to develop both musically and intellectually, resulting in him conducting performances of his own works and having compositions successfully published. Thus in terms of study, Milford made excellent progress with his teachers at the RCM, particularly in composition.

Milford's success in stimulating friendships is seen at its best in the interest and care taken by two of his professors - Vaughan Williams and Henry Ley. These friendships lasted throughout Milford's life, also demonstrating the regard in which Milford was held as a musician. Vaughan Williams exerted an influence on Milford not only in terms of composing but also in conducting and experiencing live performances of personal compositions. He encouraged a 'Composers' Club' in which performances of pupils' works were given informally in his own room or more formally at College Concerts.

Milford acted upon this encouragement and, as early as 1922, conducted an ambitious concert which included some of his own works in which those closest to him participated, especially those who were to play prominent roles in the composer's later years, when life was so difficult and distressing. In that concert, the composer's mother and father could be found singing soprano and bass respectively, while Miss Kirstie Newsom - later to become Robin's wife - played the viola in parts of the concert and in others sang soprano. Two years later, Milford gathered together a group of young and amateur musicians - including his brother, sister, members of the

Stainer family and friends - at his home in Epsom. This group began giving public concerts and it was at one of these that the first performance of *The Shoemaker* (a children's opera) took place in 1924. Evidence of the regard in which Milford was held at the RCM, even in this early stage of his career, is demonstrated by the fact that Sir Hugh Allen, Director of the College, travelled down to Epsom for the premiere.

This type of music making must surely have had a profound influence on Milford in terms of practical experience and in his subsequent composing of works for the young. At an unknown later date, the composer was involved in a performance of a cantata, *The Moon*. Once again members of the Stainer family and other friends took part. Pippa Milford, the composer's sister, sang. Nora Ford, a life-long friend from Lyme Regis, was the Chorus Mistress and played the violin. 'Peep', the composer's personal name for his wife, played the viola.

Milford's success in his studies at the Royal College of Music can be measured in terms of his extended period of study (1921-26); the warm affection in which he spoke of his teachers; the obvious high regard in which he was viewed by his teachers; Vaughan Williams' encouragement in composition throughout the latter years; performances of compositions for the Patron's Fund, including *Concerto for Strings, Violin and Viola* in 1925 and the *Double Fugue* in 1926; and the successful concerts of works composed at the RCM, given at home by members of the family and friends

During his early years as a conductor in the 1920s Milford frequently met Kirstie Newsom, companion to the grand daughters of Sir John Stainer. Along with the Stainer girls she had joined Milford's music ensemble, variously playing the viola and singing soprano. Their engagement, lasting seven years, in 1920 led to a loving and dedicated marriage in which Kirstie's affection for, and devotion to, her husband were exemplary. Marion Milford has related how it was Kirstie who shouldered the burdens and responsibilities of Robin's mental and domestic stability throughout their years of marriage. Finance was always a concern, despite the financial security of the composer's upbringing. Life was never easy for them due to Milford's emotional disposition. He had a constant need for security and to submerge himself in composition.

Correspondence during Milford's long engagement to Kirstie demonstrates the composer's need for acceptance and security and to have people in his life who believed in him both as a human being and as a composer. It was through such recognition from others that Milford found the environment in which to compose. Kirstie, herself no mean musician, was clearly able to create this environment, along with an abundance of encouragement and inspiration.

Having become engaged to Kirstie, Milford found he could not bear to be apart from his fiancée for long periods or not be writing to her. He became totally reliant on her. She understood his thoughts and was prepared to accept his idiosyncrasies. Thus, it is the letters to Kirstie, written during their engagement, which first truly illuminate Milford's real temperament. Here, the need for total absorption in a relationship, ideal or task is manifested as an essential trait in Milford's nature. The correspondence served as a focus for security and an outlet for emotional energy in a man who was insecure, highly sensitive and of a nervous disposition.

These traits became an all-important influence on Milford's music – seen not only in his extensive output but also in his intensity of composition during difficult times and in its successful powers of communication (programmatic and non-programmatic). In Kirstie's case, it was not only their loving relationship which was a focus but their shared interest in music and, in particular, song. Following the solace which Milford's childhood provided this sensitive musician from the realities of a harsh world, the period of engagement to Kirstie served as a second stage of security during which Milford composed such joyous works as those written for family performance, children, and also the early songs.

It is interesting that much of the correspondence during the engagement is from Robin to Kirstie, often showing two sides of many conversations i.e. what Robin is actually saying to Kirstie but also what Kirstie has to say (no letters from Kirstie seem to have survived). Furthermore, much of the correspondence is child-like in nature, suggesting one of an unsettled, sensitive and unsure temperament. They are never quite of the same nature as those between Kenneth Grahame and Elspeth in terms of childish language but some of the sentiments are similar in terms of already having handed one's self over to a partner. Furthermore, Milford's feelings during these



years can be compared to those of Gurney who, like Milford, wanted to be in London but, on the other hand, did not wish to be there. Finally, after their long engagement, Robin and Kirstie were married in July, 1927. After a brief spell in London, they went to live in Epsom.

Similar to many of his contemporaries, Milford had to supplement his income by part-time school teaching. He commenced his first teaching at Ludgrove Boys' Preparatory School, Cockfosters, Middlesex in 1927, aged 24. Aware of the financial security of such friends as Vaughan Williams and Balfour Gardiner, Milford must have resented such work, realising that it would detract from the time he wished to give for composition. It was during the early 1920s that Milford was introduced to Balfour Gardiner, a musician who took an interest in a number of young composers. He arranged performances of their work, gave financial assistance and offered advice. Balfour Gardiner was also one of Milford's predecessors at Ludgrove.

The experiences which Milford derived from his family life, school, RCM, friendships and musical development gave him the confidence and skills to commence his career as a composer. He quickly developed from being an unknown student at the RCM to being a published composer with one of the most famous publishers. As early as 1924, Milford was asked to contribute to a new hymnbook under the editorship of Percy Dearmer, Martin Shaw and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Clearly Milford's compositional skills had been recognised even at this early stage as, writing of this book, Vaughan Williams claimed that there was not a single tune included of which he was ashamed.

The 1920s proved to be a period of joy due to his marriage and successes in recognition and publication. By the time he was married Milford already had compositions in print. Both *Three Sea Pictures, Op. 1*, for piano, and *A Fairy Revel in a Forest, Op. 2*, were published by Forsyth Brothers in 1924. From 1925 onwards Milford received wide recognition in terms of both publication and performance. In 1925 alone, his *Concerto for Strings, Solo Violin and Viola* was performed at the Royal College of Music Patron's Fund Orchestral Rehearsal on March 13<sup>th</sup> and *The Shoemaker, Op. 3, Three Songs of the Moors, Op. 4*, for voice and piano, and *Suite for*

*Chamber Orchestra*, Op. 5, were all published by the Oxford University Press in 1925.

The *Double Fugue for Orchestra*, Op. 10, received much attention and acclaim from London musicians when it was first performed by the London Symphony Orchestra in December 1926, not at a Queen's Hall Concert, as stated by Copley, but at one of the RCM Orchestral Rehearsals under the Patron's Fund. The conductor was Adrian Boult. This work was included in a programme at the Royal College of Music with works by other aspiring composers, including Elizabeth Maconchy. The following year the Carnegie Trust gave the *Double Fugue* a Music Publication Award. Vaughan Williams subsequently conducted the *Double Fugue for Orchestra* at a Bach Choir Concert on 21st February, 1928. This performance took place in the Queen's Hall. Milford also referred to another performance which took place on 29th March, 1927, at the Leith Hill Festival, Dorking, conducted by Vaughan Williams.

Other performances during the late 1920s included the premiere of *The Darkling Thrush* for solo violin and small orchestra (subsequently transcribed for solo violin and piano), Op. 17, at the Royal College of Music Patron's Fund Concert in March 1929, (conductor, Malcolm Sargent); the *Benedicite* for male voices, Op. 19, also in 1929; and the oratorio *A Prophet in the Land*, which was performed in Gloucester Cathedral at the 1931 Three Choirs Festival. To have this work accepted for performance at this prestigious Festival must surely have been a great morale-booster for Milford.

### 1929-1939

In 1929 Milford met two men who were to exert profound influences on him for the remainder of his life and who held him in high regard - Charles Williams and Gerald Finzi. Charles Williams (1886 - 1945) was born in London and educated at St Alban's School and University College, London. He was a poet, reviewer, editor, novelist and theological writer who worked for many years with the Oxford University Press. His book of verse in the early Yeats style, *The Silver Stair*, was published in 1912. He became a member of the T S Eliot circle and later poems reflect changing contemporary ideals and tendencies. In his writings Williams

displayed an originality which inclined towards eccentricity, creating a style and meaning which many found obscure. He described his novels as being ‘metaphysical thrillers’. In part, these works display his wide-ranging preoccupations with religion, mysticism, sin, and the occult. Milford was clearly attracted to the philosophies of Williams.

Charles Williams was a member of the C S Lewis group, the ‘Inklings’, a circle of friends who gathered round Lewis at Oxford from the 1930s to the 1960s and read aloud their works. Anne Ridler explained that Milford attended at least one or two meetings of the group during the war when the Oxford University Press had been evacuated. Williams, the thinker and writer, clearly had an important influence on Milford in terms of philosophy, often with spiritual/psychological overtones. Whereas Vaughan Williams’ nature was very different to that of Milford, Charles Williams and Milford shared a similar temperament, with Milford feeling an affinity with him.

The influence of Finzi on Milford, both musically and personally, cannot be overestimated. They had a great deal in common. Finzi, born in 1901, received his general education privately, studying with Bairstow at York and, like Milford, with R O Morris. He also composed music for orchestra, small instrumental ensembles, chorus and orchestra, and, of course, songs. Both men had a deep appreciation of English literature, produced works which placed them firmly within the ‘English’ tradition, were essentially miniaturists (though they both contributed some larger forms) and found themselves having similar views on life and music, resulting in a sincere and mutual understanding between the two men.

When Milford and Finzi first met in 1929, they were both aspiring young composers beginning to win recognition. The friendship between them was rather similar to that of Herbert Howells and Ivor Gurney except that the friendship between Milford and Finzi did not extend back to childhood. Finzi’s interest in Milford’s music can, in fact, be traced back to the 1926 LSO performance of *Double Fugue for Orchestra* conducted by Adrian Boult. His influence on Milford’s life, temperament and music from this point onwards was profound. It encompassed such aspects as Milford’s development of musicianship, criticism, encouragement to continue with composition,

encouragement to compose in genre other than song, performances of Milford's works, publication of works, inclusion of Milford in the larger musical arena, conducting, lecturing, and interest in poetry.

Aside from Milford's professional life, this period also saw the happy arrival of Robin's and Kirstie's only child, Barnaby, in 1935. A happy marriage, Barnaby's birth and profound friendships created a third period of anchorage during which Milford composed the bulk of his main published songs. These years did not, of course, alter his temperament; they simply served as a buffer for his nervous state.

### 1939 – 1944

On the declaration of war, Milford immediately volunteered for the army, showing the ideal of service and duty which was indicative of his social background. He did not entertain the idea of a commission and was, unsuitably, posted to the Pioneer Corps. His service was short-lived as he suffered a complete nervous breakdown after only one week of active service when the Army gave him leave to see a Dr Waters, a psychologist in London.

It is remarkable that even before the introduction of conscription, Milford volunteered for army service. Clearly this highly sensitive man volunteered for and submitted himself to intense pressure. His action was perhaps due to his memories of the days at the RCM following the loss of so many composers after World War 1, a desire to serve his country, protect his family, show his manliness, follow his conscience or satisfy the expectations of his social background. Either he did not understand his own temperament or simply placed himself last. Whatever the reasons, Robin Milford displayed a strong and determined part of his character, not the one painted to Kirstie in the engagement letters or ever challenged in later years by his family and friends

Ironically, then, Milford's short army service revealed a strong, hitherto unknown, part of his temperament – one involving self-sacrifice and a determination to do that which is correct – in contrast to his better known, gentle, sensitive and unsure traits. The war years witnessed not only the composer's short but stressful army experience but also his determination to survive war-time and his feelings of inadequacy. Such

traits would continue to be shown in the further trauma which would ensue - Barnaby's death and his first major breakdown.

A substantial quantity of the composer's thoughts and experiences of this time has survived in the form of a diary begun on the 8th November 1939, specifically recording the unhappy events of his military experience. It demonstrates Milford's reactions and emotional responses to this experience and also reveals his level of sensitivity and feelings of insecurity. It confirms that he should neither have enlisted for, nor been accepted into, the army. The diary also shows the confused state of Milford's mind at the time. One day seems to follow into the next, a feature so foreign to the rest of his writings. We know that he arrived at Oxford on 17th November 1939 and that he completed the diary on the 29th of the same month, but the timing of the other events is obscure.

Milford's war diary is a most moving document. His descriptions of being with rougher men, hearing bawdy jokes, being shown vulgar postcards, feeling seasick, meeting different types of men, and, above all, the kindness shown to him by his fellow privates, are all striking. Milford was particularly struck by the fact that these men, very different from him, were capable of recognising him as he truly appeared. They did not mock or abuse him, they simply displayed compassion for one who was clearly different from them.

In contrast, Milford's description of army treatment on his arrival back in England makes one realise just how cruel our British war machine was. The country seems to have shown little compassion to those who were, emotionally, unsuited to army service. It must be remembered, however, that Milford did volunteer and probably was seen as one letting down the side. It seems incredible that Milford ever thought himself suited to service - Finzi did warn him and, indeed, predicted that he would never be accepted.

Kirstie also kept a diary in which she gave practical details of their lives, Robin's continued depressed and highly sensitive state of mind, and his determination to continue composing. This period was, without doubt, a psychological nightmare for

Milford whose thoughts on daily life, music and composition from then on became inseparable.

Kirstie explained that when Robin joined up she decided to go on a short holiday with Barnaby to Guernsey. With the outbreak of war she decided to stay on in Guernsey and was eventually joined there by her husband when his discharge came through on medical grounds. They both managed to find jobs on the island, he in the greenhouse of a market gardener, and she delivering milk, both working on a voluntary basis as part of the war-effort. Kirstie wrote of his delight in Barnaby and that he was working hard. Composition recommenced, perhaps as a purely artistic activity or as an emotional release.

Milford's relief when he arrived in Guernsey to join evacuated Kirstie and Barnaby can only be imagined. The composer certainly did not shirk from his duty but quite happily settled down to life as a farm-hand. The realisation, however, that even this stability was not to last must have added greatly to Milford's nervous state as rumours and warnings soon commenced regarding a German invasion. The conversations which must have taken place in the Milford house regarding this situation are left to the imagination. Like many people, they decided not to remain.

1940 was an unbearable year for the composer. Two attempts at suicide were made but on both occasions he was rescued, the first time by Kirstie herself and the second by hospital staff. Recovery gradually came to Milford through hospital treatment and, especially, the love, kindness and care of Kirstie and their friends.

The Milford/Finzi friendship, which began in 1929, generated much correspondence both during the war (and also the post-war) period. It is particularly revealing in the range of topics discussed, from serious matters to lighter subjects. By 1940, the friendship between Finzi and Milford was firmly established. Finzi, now a widely-published composer, understood Milford's musicianship and craftsmanship well, and had acknowledged him as a composer on many occasions. The two men not only discussed music, but also such topics as philosophy and religion (Milford became an Anglo-Catholic in 1940). Finzi clearly recognised in his friend a man who needed

guidance, and who desired to be strong and forceful in his opinions, but lived in constant self-doubt and was totally inhibited by fear of causing offence.

Ironically, the middle and final years of Milford's life were a mixture of despair and musical fruitfulness. The years 1939 to 1942, in particular, formed one of the darkest periods of Milford's life. Of all periods in the composer's life, these years show that Milford's life fell into distinct emotional periods; that each period displays clear facets of the composer's temperament; and that these periods affected the composer in a distinct manner, both personally and musically

Finzi's encouragement from 1940 to his death in 1956 was of paramount importance in relation to Milford's mental stability. Finzi, by this time, knew Milford well enough to realise that he needed music and composition in order to survive the experiences of life and his innermost thoughts. In short, Finzi recognised that composition was Milford's therapy for survival. This was a fact that Kirstie herself knew. Through his musical advice and encouragement, Finzi became Milford's foundation for stability.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1941, just a week before his sixth birthday, Barnaby, Milford's only son, was killed in a traffic accident. This tragic event had an even greater effect upon his father than anyone might have predicted. Barnaby had been asked by Milford to fetch manuscript paper from the music hut in Anthony Scott's garden and was knocked off his bicycle by a tradesman's van.

Just as Barnaby's birth and life had been great sources of joy, comfort and inspiration to the composer, the child's accident and death were sources of deep grief. Many works had been dedicated "To Barnaby" and also jointly to "Kirstie and Barnaby" during the boy's life.

Throughout 1941 Milford and Finzi discussed their health problems. Finzi was, indeed, prophetically concerned about time running out for him, though the cancer, to which he eventually succumbed, would not be diagnosed until some ten years later. Discussions between the two about Milford's health had begun about 1938 and continued until Finzi's death in 1956. Milford had now started to take life at an

altogether slower pace, though his mental and physical health would continue to decline.

Correspondence between the Milford and Finzi families altered greatly, however, during 1941, the year of Barnaby's death. Following this dreadful event, it was Kirstie and Joy who corresponded and, during Milford's hospitalization, little communication was made between the two composers. In her letters to Joy, Kirstie reveals that, although Robin had often been ill before (and was already suffering from quite severe ill health), it was Robin who had been the strong one at the time of Barnaby's death while she was overwhelmed by grief.

This confession shows a complete misinterpretation of Milford's temperament throughout the years since his death. Clearly, it was Kirstie who could not cope and had driven Robin to a nervous breakdown, resulting in hospitalisation. He, in fact, had supported her during this difficult time and not vice versa.

Until now, it has been assumed that during these difficult years, and throughout most of his life, Milford was a weak figure and sustained totally by Kirstie. Even Howard Ferguson, another close friend, spoke of this impression in his correspondence. Similarly, Ursula Vaughan Williams, in a letter to the present writer, made the same point in relation to Barnaby's death.

It is somewhat maddening to think that Milford's friends and acquaintances simply thought negatively of him. They all saw him as weak and incapable of surviving the experiences of these years. Perhaps, in fact, their reactions made Milford all the more determined to survive these difficult times.

The question whether or not the Milford family might have been better remaining in Guernsey is open to debate. Perhaps terrible tragedy might not ever have happened, saving Barnaby's life. Did Robin ever ask himself these questions? Tragedy, however, did strike. How cruel life was to this couple. How was this sensitive and deep-thinking father to survive and accept his son's death? A nervous breakdown and possible suicide attempt were both highly probable. Later composers (for example, Herbert Howells) experienced a similar loss but were clearly more capable of coping.



The striking fact is that these years and events show the profound psychological effect which music can exert on people. This is clearly exemplified by Milford's life. No matter how poorly he felt, or how disastrous the event, Milford (similar to Herbert Howells and, more recently, John Rutter) turned to music and, in particular, composition.

Alongside bouts of depression and nervous disorder, Milford experienced stretches of great perseverance and strength. Such times resulted in Milford's long and continuous periods of composition.

### 1945 – 1959

1945 saw Milford in much better health. Although dark psychological clouds lay in the background, he was altogether much more humorous, active in composition and confident in criticism. By the end of the war Milford's health had improved sufficiently for him to start composing for organ, a medium for which he had, hitherto, written comparatively little. He had now turned completely to Anglo-Catholicism, was organist of Butreme Parish Church and was desperately needing the comfort and support of the Church which he found within the High Wing of the Anglican Communion.

With the war ending in May, 1945, Finzi was able to return from life in London at the War Office to his home at Ashampstead. He devoted a substantial amount of time throughout the years 1945-1956 dedicated to the encouragement and development of Milford, the man and musician. His profound influence on Milford included such areas as politics and society, world events, philosophy and religion. He exerted influence on Milford's sympathies, his confidence and self-esteem, his sensitivities and, of course, his health.

Throughout the rest of 1945 Milford was feeling well enough to take an interest in all types of contemporary English music. Earlier he had suggested the formation of a contemporary English music society to Finzi. Humble, as ever, he did not include

himself in this society. Pressure of work does not appear to trouble him unduly just now either, although it always took its toll on his health.

After feeling obliged to contribute something to the post-war effort by canvassing for the 1945 Election, Milford started to show, once again, not only danger signs regarding his psychological state. This included his reactions to the absence from his life of his contemporaries, still on war service. This aspect was ever-present in his mind from 1939, especially in view of his own early discharge. He began to feel inadequate, even with Finzi, because of his wartime experiences, and current reactions to the closure of the war. The end of hostilities with so much loss of life and destruction created severe psychological reactions in someone who had not been able to survive army life due to his high level of sensitivity. Thus great sympathy can be felt for Milford and it can be imagined just how difficult he found it to come to terms with everything that happened between 1939 and 1945, including Barnaby's death and his own spells in hospital.

The Milfords spent the latter part of August and early September of 1945 in a cottage at Lyme Regis, a place which became special to them both. It was here that the present writer discovered the first batch of Milford's letters in a tin box.

1946 dawned with vibrancy and energy for music. Finzi continued to put himself at the disposal of Milford, either out of a sense of duty to his friend or because he truly believed in Milford's musical abilities. All correspondence points to the latter theory. There is little doubt that had Finzi not recognised a profound level of compositional ability in Milford, he would have been unwilling to give his friend such time, as he had already expressed his concern about time running out for his own compositions.

The Milfords moved to Butcombe, near Bristol, during 1946. Possessing a questioning and philosophical mind, Milford embarked upon a new aspect of his career during 1946: analysis and criticism. However, he continued to display signs of loneliness, isolation, pensiveness and even despair with the changes which the passing years brought. The composer was reluctant to advertise or promote any of his works, even to Finzi, always assuming that his work wasn't worth spending time over and that other people's work was of greater importance. Despite successes in

composition, publication, performance and general public recognition during 1948, Milford's self-esteem did not increase. During succeeding months, signs of weariness manifested themselves in Milford's overall tone.

The ill-health, which had plagued Milford throughout the 1940s, persisted at the start of the 1950s. Indeed, at the start of 1951 Milford was, once again, unwell with severe headaches. Nerves confined him to bed and he was not allowed to work. Apparent financial difficulties now resulted in Kirstie taking a short-term job in Downe House and Milford being left alone during the second half of 1951. Despite the continued successes with his compositions since Barnaby's death, expressions of doubt and despondency about his music and life continued during 1952 in his correspondence, especially in relation to broadcasting. From 1952 onwards, Milford's correspondence highlights the continuing problems with his mental health. Not only did he dislike his various hospitalisations, surgery and treatment, he resented the loss of time to composition.

By mid-June 1954, however, Milford has so greatly recovered from ill health that he and Kirstie are able to tour the continent. Also in June the Milfords bought 'The Meadows' in Lyme Regis and the move, which was to be their last, took place in October.

On hearing of Finzi's death in 1956, Milford was devastated. Apparently he had known nothing of Finzi's terminal illness which had been diagnosed as early as 1951. Banfield (1997) discloses that Gerald and Joy Finzi had made the joint decision not to tell anyone outside their immediate family of the seriousness of Gerald's illness. So for years they seem to have shielded Milford, with his unstable temperament and history of failed suicide attempts, from news of his closest friend's cancer and the deteriorating state of his health.

Considering the music circle to which Milford belonged, it seems remarkable that he could have been totally ignorant of Finzi's illness. Certainly, no correspondence between Milford and Finzi has been discovered in which the two composer's discuss Finzi's illness – it was always Milford's health which was considered. This, alone, exemplifies the differences in temperament between the two men.

Life had to go on and Milford continued, not only looking ahead to a new generation of musicians assuming their place in twentieth-century English music, but also frequently commenting on the contemporary state of professional and amateur orchestras. However, the deaths of Finzi in 1956 and Vaughan Williams in 1958 struck heavy blows on Milford and had the inevitable consequences on his mental and physical health which began to seriously deteriorate resulting in frequent hospital treatment.

Milford's main friendships were, of course, with Vaughan Williams and Finzi - each having a profound influence on him. These friendships, in fact, can be viewed in terms of the highest accolades which could ever have been bestowed on Milford, both musically and personally. The fact that Vaughan Williams and Finzi held Milford in high esteem serves as one of the first prominent examples of Milford's musical successes. It was Vaughan Williams who said 'If I wanted to show the intelligent foreigner something worth doing which could only possibly come out of England I think I would show him some of the work of Milford'.<sup>1</sup> Finzi demonstrated his regard for Milford, the man and musician, through his devotion to Milford's welfare and professional life.

The friendships with Vaughan Williams and Finzi also served as anchors of stability for Milford throughout the traumatic times of his later life and were also responsible for a foundation which allowed him to compose throughout his experiences. Vaughan Williams' importance and influence can be identified in terms of his gentle and careful guidance throughout Milford's student years; recognition of Milford's musicianship and compositional skills; recognition of Milford's retiring and nervous nature and his need for patronage from one who was already very much part of the musical establishment; guidance in terms of performance and compositions; and constant contact throughout the years.

The influence of Finzi was on an altogether different plane as shown by the vast correspondence which exists between the two composers over the years. The most

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Sir Adrian Boult, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1936 (?)

important aspect of Finzi's influence on Milford, however, involved musical language, output and professional life, resulting in the intertwining of their artistic lives. It was Finzi who first wrote to Milford in admiration of the latter's initial folk-song style; from the early 1930s onwards Finzi was consulted by Milford regarding every composition and from the mid-1930's onwards Milford sent Finzi a copy of every composition for consultation; Finzi, more often than not, approved Milford's compositions (examples include the 1930 Hardy and Bridges songs); Finzi frequently highlighted bars in Milford's music which he felt required revision; Finzi counselled Milford through every stage of his difficult life, including his suicidal thoughts; Finzi realized the strength which Milford gained from composition and encouraged him to compose in each dark stage of his life; and Finzi advised and encouraged Milford in every aspect of his professional life – not only in composition but also in relation to conducting, festivals and musicology. Conversely, from the 1930s onwards it was Milford who advised Finzi regarding the poems of Hardy and from this point onwards Finzi consulted Milford regarding his compositions, frequently sending him copies for his comments. Similarly, it was Milford who introduced the poetry of Bridges to Finzi.

Missing the friendships of both Finzi and Vaughan Williams, Milford committed suicide on 29 December, 1959, by taking a lethal dose of aspirin. His funeral service took place in Uplyme Church and a Memorial Concert was given in the Temple Church, London, on 21 July the following year. The programme for this concert reflects the esteem in which Milford was held, the performers including such eminent musicians as Christopher Finzi, Marion Milford and George Thalben-Ball.

Writing after Robin's death, Bayliss (1960) summed up the composer's musical style and achievement, "He was at his best, perhaps, in works designed on a small scale, but his as a whole is carefully wrought: it is, moreover, direct in style and markedly English in character, and it has freshness and charm".<sup>2</sup> Similarly, describing Robin's Memorial Service, Cockshott (1960) wrote of the composer's "delicate art".<sup>3</sup> He continued, "Whatever style may be fashionable at any given time, one feels there will

---

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Bayliss, Obituary, *Musical Times*, 1960, Vol. 101, NO. 1404, p. 572

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Cockshott, *Musical Times*, 1960, Vol. 101, No. 1404, p. 572

always be a place for the best of Milford's output, with its quiet charm and fresh diatonic melody".<sup>4</sup>

© COPYRIGHT 2009 Peter Hunter

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid