

Reflections on Robin and his songs

Earlier writings considered in terms of biography (the composer as a man and musician as revealed in his correspondence) and context (the composer and his songs within an early twentieth century context). The composer's main solo songs have been considered in terms of critical analysis. This has considered the songs within three biographical periods (early, middle and late), the interaction between the musical features and texts of the songs, and the songs in terms of Robin's immediate contemporaries. It is, therefore, useful for the conclusion to give some consideration to the knowledge presented in the previous chapters.

Robin's life in the 1920s can be viewed in terms of 'youthful expectation' when, following his comfortable upbringing and education, the composer embarked upon his professional career with enthusiasm and expectation. Born of parents who were both passionate about English literature, having successfully studied at the Royal College of Music and then become engaged (and later married) to someone who shared similar artistic tastes and was a singer, Robin was ready for the composition of a series of songs – his first published songs.

Robin's life in the 1930s can be viewed in terms of 'happy maturity'. Happily married to Kirstie, the birth of Barnaby, his successes in composition and publication, recognition amongst professional musicians, and his special friendship with Finzi brought Robin the security he required in order to develop, both musically and as a person. Indeed, a number of the songs are dedicated to Kirstie (for example, *Daybreak*) and Kirstie and Barnaby (for example *Cradle Song*). *The Colour* is dedicated to Finzi.

Because of the experiences which Robin endured during the 1940s and 1950s, these years can be considered in terms of 'darkness descending'. Due to the declaration of war, his unfortunate army experience, Barnaby's tragic death, his breakdown, first attempt

at suicide, eventual recovery, further nervous problems, second attempt at suicide, and the deaths of Vaughan Williams and Finzi, Robin's final, unpublished, songs alter vastly in character from those of the previous decades. They are darker in character, with increased chromaticism, thicker textures and falling melodic contours. Not only is the music more sombre in character during these years but also the poetry which Robin selected to set is darker in character when compared to the brightness of the 1930s texts.

It is astounding that Robin continued to compose solo songs after *I will not let thee go* (1939) and never had them published. Unlike his other post-1939 compositions, there is no evidence of Robin attempting to have the later songs published. It is equally surprising that, despite their close correspondence up until 1956, Robin never discussed these works with Finzi. Indeed it is obvious from their correspondence that Finzi knew nothing of these songs. There is no doubt that the friendship with Finzi was probably one of the most influential musical aspects in Robin's life¹.

From Robin's correspondence it is known that Robin greatly admired Finzi and his songs. The reverse is true of Finzi in relation to Robin:

The Book of Songs [a collection of Robin's song, published in 1942] arrived in time for Christmas & was very welcome. I had heard you run through 'I will not let thee go', but three of the others were quite new to me. 'On his Mistress' which I like a lot, 'Daybreak' not quite so much, & 'The Pink Frock' which is really brilliant. Brilliant is hardly a word you would like used in connection with your work, & I don't mean it in the flashy sense, but it's a perfect setting of a cruel little poem, which somehow or other you've made beautiful & yet retained all the psychological implications. The rest of the songs I already know & love ... 'The Moor', about your earliest, & 'Tolerance' about your latest, ought to show you that, although you may have changed, you haven't gone backwards.²

During the 1940s a distance is evident in the correspondence between Robin and Finzi. It first arises during Robin's breakdown and stay in hospital when, indeed, the correspondence between the two wives becomes stronger. This distance becomes more

¹ Chapter Three

² Finzi letter to Robin, 28 December, 1939

evident during 1945 after Robin's attempt at obtaining access to the organ at Enborne for Finzi's forthcoming performance of his friend's *Te Deum*. Finzi clearly derides Robin's knowledge of the organ.³ Having studied organ with Henry Ley at the Royal College of Music, Robin could not have been anything else but offended with Finzi. He was, however, too much of a gentleman to comment or, at any rate, to leave any record of his personal reaction.

The correspondence between Robin and Finzi, of course, continued for many years after 1945 but was perhaps never quite as warm as the discussions which took place during the 1930s on their lives, philosophy and poetry. However, it is open to debate why Robin did not correspond with Finzi about his late songs because he, or perhaps even Kirstie, felt that some of his ideas were being deployed elsewhere. Perhaps they even recognised certain Robin passages in Finzi's later songs. Robin may even have been concerned, if not annoyed, that Finzi did not approve of his developing style in the late 1930s, employed in *I Will Not Let Thee Go*. Finzi certainly is explicit in his reactions to this song on receipt of the 1942 Robin *Book of Songs*, "The only one I don't yet feel certain about is 'I will not let thee go'. It's the biggest of all in emotional scope, but doesn't seem absolutely certain & sure in the way it's carried out, but this is only a first impression & I didn't feel it when you ran through it."⁴

Considering Finzi's determination to arrange publication⁵ and performance⁶ of Robin's later works employing a more advanced style, his reaction to 'I will not let thee go' seems somewhat confusing. Perhaps Robin recognised some sort of resentment on Finzi's part towards his developing songs. He clearly appreciated Finzi's guidance and support but he perhaps started to feel vulnerable during the 1940s and 1950s while sharing

³ Chapter Two, p45

⁴ Finzi letter to Robin, 28 December, 1939

⁵ *Fishing By Moonlight*, 1956

⁶ *Mass for Christmas Morning* and *The Forsaken Merman*, 1943

and discussing his ideas. Robin may even have realised that his musical language in his songs was influencing Finzi. Robin's only course of action was to go into silence with reference to his late unpublished songs and, indeed, other works. In fact, apart from *The Forsaken Merman*⁷ and *Fishing By moonlight*⁸, there is little discussion between the two composers on larger works such as *The Summer Stars*⁹ or, indeed, *The Scarlet Letter*¹⁰ admittedly published after Finzi's death but, presumably, formulating in Robin's mind before 1956. Robin, did, of course, respect and appreciate Finzi enormously but such feeling could account for Robin's calm and distanced reaction to his friend's illness and death.

Just as Robin's temperament was misinterpreted during the 1940s¹¹, it may well be that the strength of Robin's musical ideas, development and compositional skills were also misconstrued by all except Robin and Finzi. This could well be the reason for Finzi relating the following story after a performance of Robin's *Mass for Christmas Morning*, "By the way, when I was leaving, a dear old lady seized my hand and said 'Congratulations'. I've never felt more complimented, but I had to tell the truth and say 'Alas, I'm not Robin Robin'"¹².

A review of the correspondence of some of Robin's contemporaries is, indeed, revealing in the light of the general dismissive opinions of the current age regarding Robin. Edmund Rubbra writes, "I was glad to know of your researches into the life and work of Robin Robin, for at his best he had original talent"¹³. Bryan Hesford writes, "In 1958 when I was Organist at Prescott Parish Church in Lancashire I asked him [Robin] if he would write an organ work for me in connection with the re-opening of my re-built organ

⁷ a work for children's voices, Ludgrove School

⁸ originally written for two harpsichord, later transcribed for small orchestra, see Chapter Five, p7

⁹ Masque

¹⁰ 4-act Opera, published 1958

¹¹ Chapter One

¹² Finzi letter to Robin, 14 March, 1943

¹³ Edmund Rubbra letter to Reg Pocock, 26 November, 1974

in the Church – a recital which I, myself, was to play. He very kindly agreed to do so and produced a “Prelude in the form of a Passacaglia” – a rather fine work and though very English in its sound – it was – by using Classical techniques quite a landmark in English Organ music at that time”.¹⁴ Gordon Jacob writes of such aspects of Robin’s character, music, and contemporary setting “... I always greatly respected his [Robin’s] musical feeling and the independence of his style in spite of the debt it owed to our old Elizabethan composers and to the then rather overwhelming influences of Vaughan Williams and Holst and the English ‘Pastoral’ school ... He was a man of great integrity both in his life and his art and he never made any attempt to court popularity for his music, which had always an austere – though innocent and almost child-like at times – effect”.¹⁵ Jacob continues to shed further light on the contemporary setting and the parallels between Robin and Finzi which were perhaps responsible for both composers being viewed as ‘small-scale’ composers, “... he was friendly with Gerald Finzi, with whose music his has a good deal of affinity. Both were indebted to the influence of the teaching of R. O . Morris, who, though nothing much of a composer himself, was a good critic and an authority on counterpoint based on the practice of the 16th century rather than text-books of the later date. Finzi, like Robin, felt his music deeply and poetically but shared his tendency to shy away from ‘effective’ writing and anything that savoured of technical display. The influence of Vaughan Williams was shown in his attitude though VW’s ideas later veered greatly in favour of a much more intellectual and calculated approach to composition than had been shown in works since the ‘Sea Symphony’ and ‘London Symphony’ (in which craftsmanship and organisation were admirable)”.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bryan Hesford letter to Reg Pocock, 9 January, 1975

¹⁵ Gordon Jacob letter to Reg Pocock, , undated but at some point during the mid-1970s

¹⁶ Gordon Jacob letter to Reg Pocock, undated but at some point during the mid-1970s

Robin has been explored in two dimensions, namely, in terms of his writings and then his songs. A third dimension also becomes apparent, namely, that Robin's songs, themselves, illuminate the composer in terms of biography and temperament. In short, it becomes evident that the biggest sense of bringing Robin to life is through a study of his songs and that the composer clearly transcended his personal difficulties by composing these works which served as a catharsis. The composer's experiences and emotions clearly merged with his musical style to produce his songs.

Having arrived at this realisation, it now seems appropriate to consider two additional areas. The first is the possible influence of commercialisation on Robin's early death and the second is Robin's place in the twenty-first century.

Towards the end of the composer's life, OUP commenced the first of large-scale deletion of Robin's published works. It has been suggested that the effects of such deletions pushed the composer to his successful suicide. To date, no firm evidence has been found relating to this theory. However, having revealed the composer's sensitivity and vulnerability, the theory does appear to be quite possible if not probable. Indeed, for some years after Robin's death Kirstie constantly received letters of deletion which are known to have caused Mrs. Robin some considerable degree of distress.

The correspondence of Gordon Jacob inspires the final, though perhaps not so strictly 'academic', part of this conclusion, Robin's place in the twenty-first century. This section has important personal implications for the writer in terms of his belief in Robin's music and resolve in bringing about a positive revival of interest in the composer and his music. Jacob writes, "The question remains ... as to whether it [Robin's music] will ever come in for a revival. One just can't tell, but its 'native wood-notes wild' are not at all compatible with the horrors of today's avant garde, and there is always the hope that the taste of the art-pundits who govern trends may seek to shake its jaded palate with still

waters and cool streams. If and when that day returns Robin's music may come into its own".¹⁷

Possible reasons for the neglect of Robin as a musician and song composer (both during his lifetime and since) can be viewed in terms of the composer's temperamental traits, highlighted during the biographical study in chapter one. Such traits include a retiring nature and lack of self-confidence in his own work; a lack of promotion of his own compositions; a hesitance to socialize with fellow-composers and musicians; a non-acceptance of professional activities such as conducting, adjudicating and lecturing; and reluctance to permit and encourage other musicians, apart from Finzi, to promote his compositions. Beyond Robin's personal traits, other contextual and historical factors (apart from commercialism, discussed above), which may have had a bearing on the composer's neglect, include changes in public taste (a turning away from the English pastoral style during the 1930s); the legacy of neglect lingering from during his lifetime into later generations; the blinkered view that, as all music belonging to the pastoral school appears to be similar, Robin was not worthy of individual exploration; the simple failure of succeeding generations to realize Robin's potential; the misapprehension that Robin was either a totally colourless person or a manic depressive; and the view that a great amount of music from the pastoral school had already been written and promoted by 'mainstream' composers worthy of note.

In comparison to Robin's contemporary song composers, in particular Warlock, Finzi, Gibbs and Turnbull, it is evident that Robin and his songs have suffered from underestimation and neglect. The musical value of Robin's life, songs and musical style have been considered¹⁸ and it is concluded that, even though the last century largely ignored Robin, this composer and his songs are now due recognition during this century.

¹⁷ Gordon Jacob letter to Reg Pocock, undated but at some point during the mid-1970s

¹⁸ Chapters two, three and four

It is therefore suggested that this aim might be achieved not only by bringing Robin to the attention of the public through published scholarly writings but also through an increase in performances, broadcasts, recordings and published compositions.

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