SIR HUBERT PARRY — Blest Pair of Sirens; Jerusalem

The story of classical music in England is often told with a two-hundred-year gap in the middle. After the early modern excesses of English masters like Thomas Tallis and William Byrd give way to the Baroque stateliness of Henry Purcell, one often finds oneself talking of composers at the turn of the 20th century like Elgar, Vaughan Williams, or Holst without much consideration for how one might have followed from the other. At least one figure who might fill in some of those gaps is Hubert Parry, who not only composed some very fine English music during the 19th century, but also served as mentor and model for many of the composers who carried the English tradition into the 20th. Born into a wealthy family in Bournemouth, Parry showed extraordinary musical promise from an early age that was encouraged by several organists and teachers he encountered in his teenage years at the aristocratic preparatory schools he attended. At age 17, he became the youngest person ever to pass the Bachelor of Music examination at Oxford University and his examination exercise, a cantata titled “O Lord, Thou hast cast us out” so impressed the music faculty that several arranged for it to be publicly performed and eventually published the following school year.

Despite his musical prowess, Parry studied law and history at Oxford and took a job as an underwriter at a prestigious London insurance firm upon graduation. Parry continued his musical studies on the side and just as he was ready to abandon his underwriting job all together, he received an opportunity to work alongside music scholar George Grove on his now famous Dictionary of Music and Musicians, contributing articles and providing editorial assistance. When Grove was appointed head of the newly-created Royal College of Music in 1883, he appointed Parry to a professorship in composition and music history. In the years that followed, Parry placed increasing focus on his compositions and achieved his first unqualified success with Blest Pair of Sirens in 1887. At George Grove’s behest, the piece is a setting of John Milton’s ode “At a Solemn Musick” and premiered in London as part of a concert to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

Today Parry is unquestionably remembered best for the simple hymn tune “Jerusalem” that he wrote to accompany William Blake’s enigmatic poem. Parry found inspiration in the Fight for Right Movement, which sought to build support for British involvement in the First World War, but he was quickly taken up by a host of other causes including the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, the Labour Party, and the British Liberal Assembly. Upon hearing the orchestral version for the first time, King George V even remarked that he preferred Parry’s “Jerusalem” over the British national anthem and numerous efforts over the years have attempted to give the song official status as the anthem of England. In addition to use at myriad sporting and civic events, Parry’s “Jerusalem” is sung every year by an audience of thousands at the end of The Proms summer concert series in the Royal Albert Hall.
The premiere of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in the fall of 1901 might literally have saved Rachmaninoff’s life and career. The premiere of his Symphony No. 1 in 1897 had been an unqualified disaster thanks to an under-rehearsed ensemble under the unreliable baton of his friend, composer Alexander Glazunov. Critics were absolutely brutal, with fellow composer César Cui going so far as to say that the piece sounded like the work of a star pupil at a “conservatory in Hell” and that the Glazunov conducted performance would undoubtedly “delight the inhabitants of Hell” with its parade of horrible sounds. The unrelentingly negative reception of the piece along with a broken marriage engagement the following year crushed Rachmaninoff, who fell into a multi-year depression that severely impacted his productivity. Only through a comprehensive course of physical and psychological treatment from a family friend and physician Dr. Nikolai Dahl did Rachmaninoff begin to recover and regain his desire to compose. This concerto is the first piece he completed after his treatment and is lovingly dedicated to Dahl. The piece premiered with the composer at the keyboard in November 1901 and was universally acclaimed, earning Rachmaninoff his first prestigious Glinka Award for Russian Music and restoring his national reputation as a skilled composer and performer.

Like so much of Rachmaninoff’s music, Piano Concerto No. 2 strikes a balance between lush romanticism, lyrical melodies, and a fiercely technical approach to the piano. From the dramatic tolling bells in the opening chords of the first movement, it is tempting to imagine the maestro himself seated at the keyboard and triumphantly announcing his return after several years in the wilderness. And by the furious flourishes of the final movement, his vindication is complete. Throughout this piece, Rachmaninoff is at his melodic best and songwriters over the years have definitely taken notice. No less than three different popular songs from the past 75 years have their roots in melodies directly adapted from this concerto. “Full Moon and Empty Arms,” made popular by the 1945 Frank Sinatra recording, takes its melody from the second theme of the final movement while Sinatra’s 1941 hit “I Think of You” is taken from a theme in the middle of the first movement. But perhaps the most famous example comes several decades later with the use of the middle movement’s main theme in Eric Carmen’s 1975 ballad “All by Myself.” In an interview in 1991, Carmen was asked why he borrowed Rachmaninoff and he replied simply “[it’s] my favorite music.” After tonight’s performance, we hope you will see why.

Gabriel Fauré was appointed to his first church organist position at the Church of Saint-Sauveur at the age of twenty. By the time he started composing his Requiem at the age of forty-one, one can safely assume that he had played a lot of funerals. When asked by an interviewer about his unconventional approach to the ancient text, Faure joked: “As to my Requiem, perhaps I have also instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper, after all the years of
accompanying burial services on the organ! I know it all by heart. I wanted to write something different.” Fauré made unusual changes to the text, replacing the wrathful Dies Irae with the compassionate Pie Jesu and supplementing the end of the mass with the In Paradisum antiphon typically reserved for the burial service. The Pie Jesu is a particular highlight with the child-like soprano voice over the whispered strains of the organ and strings beseeching Jesus to grant his peace on those who have died. Fellow composer Camille Saint-Saëns, who also served as one of Fauré’s teachers in his late adolescence, famously remarked: “Just as Mozart’s is the only ‘Ave verum corpus,’ this is the only ‘Pie Jesu.’”

But whatever unconventional choices Fauré may have made, there are also many clear nods to tradition. The instrumentation and structure of the work, cast in seven movements with a baritone and a soprano soloist, are clear homages to Brahms’s German Requiem. And the dramatic opening in D minor clearly evokes the beginning of Mozart’s Requiem. Musically, the most striking feature is the use of Fauré’s own instrument, the organ, which often seems to supplant the orchestra by serving variously as soloist, accompanist, or reinforcement of the choir. The organ allows Fauré the ability to marshal extraordinary color without sacrificing the serene, even austere, quality of the harmonies that seem just as indebted to Debussy as to Mozart.

Several of Fauré’s contemporaries criticized his Requiem as overly tender and sentimental, an assessment that he forcefully rebutted in an interview: “It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience.” Fauré returned to the Requiem frequently in the decade after its premiere revising and enlarging the orchestration until the publication of the final version in 1901. It should come as no surprise that Fauré requested the piece be performed at his own funeral in the fall of 1924. The quiet dignity of the final strains of Requiem Aeternam pushed the composer forward into his own eternity.