

Programme of Concert of WWI Words and Music Part I

Section 1: Reactions to the outbreak of war

1. Albert 'Smiler' Marshall: Sophie

My whole life changed when Lord Kitchener and the world heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, came to Colchester in 1915. They appealed for the young fellas to join up into a fighting unit called 'Kitchener's Army'. Kitchener was on all these placards – YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU. My brother – my only brother – was the first one to join from the village...

I wanted to join the Essex Yeomanry so in Christmas week I went to their office in Colchester to join up. I knocked on the door and the sergeant major said, 'Come in.' He asked, 'Well, what is your name, and how old are you?' I told him I was seventeen. He said, I think you've made a mistake. What year were you born?' I told him 1897, so he said, 'Look, go outside that door and think it over.' When I got outside, a fellow came up and said, 'Hello! You going to join up?' I said, 'Yes. I want to go where there's horses.' He said, 'Well, I'm going to join the Royal Horse Artillery – why don't you come with me?' I said, 'I've been in there once, and the old sergeant major told me to go outside and think it over.' 'You don't want much thinking over. You can't get in until you're eighteen.' So, I knocked again. 'Come in,' said the sergeant major, 'what can I do for you?' I said, 'I'd like to join the Essex Yeomanry.' He said, 'Right, how old are you?' I said, 'Eighteen.' He said, 'What year were you born?' I said, '1896.' He didn't query it at all. He just said, 'Fair enough.'¹

2. Private William Chapman: David

Next morning the new draft – 15 or 20 of us – had to parade with a sergeant-major and a sergeant in command. Their purpose was quite a noble one – to find out what we had been in civil life so that we'd be suitably placed in the Army. So they started:

‘And what were you in Civvy Street?’

‘Oh, I was a butcher, Sergeant-Major.’

‘Sergeant, send him to the quartermaster’s stores.’

‘What were you in Civvy Street?’

‘Well, I was a clerk, Sergeant-Major.’

‘Send him to the orderly room.’

Then he came to me. ‘And what were you in Civvy Street?’

‘I was a theological student, Sergeant-Major.’

‘What?’

I said, ‘I was a theological student.’

He said, ‘What’s that?’

I said, ‘Well, just, I was a theological student.’

‘Sergeant’, he said, ‘come and ask this fellow what he was.’

So the sergeant came and I was beginning to enjoy it then.

‘What were you in Civvy Street?’

I said, ‘I was a theological student, Sergeant.’

They then walked away and had a little conference. Right, Chapman, Royal Army Medical Corps. They didn’t know the difference between theological and biological!²

3. Fusilier Victor Packer: Heather

I had heard about the previous battles but I couldn’t get there fast enough. We had been brought up on the history of the Boer War and patriotism and heroics and everything, and we thought the war was going to be over before we could get there. However, in about half a minute all that had gone. I

wondered what the devil I'd got into because it was nothing but mud and filth and all the chaps who were already there, well, they looked like tramps, all plastered with filth and dirt, and unshaven.³

4. Sergeant Charles Lippett: Juliet

We arrived at Béthune, where we stayed the night. We went off on the line of march headed by our band, moving up to attack Hill 70. We hadn't the faintest idea where we were going, but we sang the usual soldiers' songs – 'Tipperary', and all those sort of things – we were thoroughly enjoying ourselves ...

Our first shock was when we met the walking wounded. They said when we were laughing and talking, with an eager to get at 'em sort of attitude, they said, 'You'll laugh on the other side of your ruddy faces when you get up there.'⁴

Section 2: Fraternising with the enemy

1. Sergeant Stefan Westmann: Juliet

All of a sudden the enemy fire ceased. Complete silence came over the battlefield. Then one of the chaps in my shell-hole said, 'I wonder what they are up to,' and another answered, 'Perhaps they are getting tea.' A third one said, 'Don't be a fool, do you see what I see?' And we looked over the brim of our shell-hole and there, between the brick-heaps, out had come a British soldier with a Red Cross flag that he waved at us. And he was followed by stretcher-bearers who came slowly towards us and collected *our* wounded. We got up, still completely dumb from fear of death, and helped them to bring our wounded into our trenches.⁵

2. Private Frank Sumpter: Heather

It was a terrible winter, everything was covered in snow, everything was white. The devastated landscape looked terrible in its true colours – clay and mud and broken brick – but when it was covered in snow, it was beautiful. Then we heard the Germans singing ‘Silent night, Holy Night’, and they put up a notice saying ‘Merry Christmas’, so we put one up too. While they were singing our boys said, ‘Let’s join in’, so we joined in and when we started singing, they stopped. And when we stopped, they started again. So we were easing the way. Then one German took a chance and jumped up on top of the trench and shouted out, ‘Happy Christmas, Tommy!’ So of course our boys said, ‘If he can do it, we can do it,’ and we all jumped up. A sergeant-major shouted ‘Get down!’ But we said, ‘Shut up Sergeant, it’s Christmas time!’ and we all went forward to the barbed wire....

And so we just shook hands and I had the experience of talking to one German who said to me, ‘Do you know where the Essex Road in London is?’ I replied, ‘Yes, my uncles had a shoe-repairing shop there.’ He said, ‘That’s funny. There’s a barber shop on the other side where I used to work.’... We never said a word about the war to the Germans. We spoke about our families, about how old we were, how long we thought it would last, and things like that....

There were no shots fired and some people enjoyed the curiosity of walking around in no man’s land. It was good to walk around.

As a sign of their friendliness the Germans put up a sign saying ‘Gott mit uns’, which means ‘God is with us’, and so we put a sign in English saying ‘We got mittens too!’ I don’t know if they enjoyed that joke!⁶

3. Private Clifford Lane: David

We’d all got these long, thick woollen underpants and vests on and we were soaked right through. When we got back to the trench it was dark, and we tried to get around this little brazier fire, but of course only two or three men could get near anyway, so we didn’t really get dry. And then they brought us ‘Princess Mary’s gift box’. And in this box was cigarettes, tobacco and a bar of chocolate, which was very much appreciated. And then we had what the

English newspapers called Christmas Dinner. This consisted of cold bully beef and a cold lump of Christmas pudding, that was our Christmas dinner. The English newspapers said the British troops in the front line '*enjoyed*' their Christmas dinner! ⁷

4. Private Ernest Todd: Sophie

On a nice summer's day you could think there wasn't a war on really. Looking through the periscope out to no man's land you would see the sandbags of the Germans' front line; you would see the grass and the flowers out front; the birds might start singing if the sun was up...

There was a man we used to call Cornet Joe over in the German front line. He used to blow his cornet and play British songs to us. When he played we would shout out, 'Damn good, Jerry!' and, 'Give us another one, Joe!' As the lines weren't too far away he would ask us what we wanted to hear and we would say, 'Give us the old Bull and Bush.' So he would play that and we would sing it, and sometimes that session would last half an hour...

Yes, during those summer months of 1915 you could forget that there was a war on, you really could. It did happen sometimes – people *would* forget and get careless, and before you knew where you were they had got a bullet through their head while sitting on the latrine or something...⁸

Section 3: Life and death in the trenches

1. Patrick MacGill. Juliet

When stand-to hour is over we leave the parapet,
 And scamper to our dug-out to smoke a cigarette;
 The post has brought in parcels and letters for us all,
 And now we'll light a candle, a little penny candle,
 A tiny tallow candle, and stick it to the wall....

The post comes trenchward nightly; we hail the post with glee,
Though now we're not as many as once we used to be,
For some have done their fighting, packed up and gone away,
And many boys are sleeping, no sound will break their sleeping,
Brave lusty comrades sleeping in little homes of clay.

We all have read our letters, but one's un-touched so far,
An English maiden's letter to her sweetheart at the War,
And when we write in answer to tell her how he fell,
What can we say to cheer her ? Oh, what is now to cheer her ?
There's nothing left to cheer her except the news to tell.

We'll write to her to-morrow and this is what we'll say,
He breathed her name in dying; in peace he passed away --
No words about his moaning, his anguish and his pain,
When slowly, slowly dying. God! Fifteen hours in dying
He lay a maimed thing dying, alone upon the plain.

We often write to mothers, to sweethearts and to wives,
And tell how those who loved them have given up their lives;
If we're not always truthful, our lies are always kind,
Our letters lie to cheer them, to solace and to cheer them,
Oh: anything to cheer them, -- the women left behind.⁹

2. Major S Evers David

The Germans must have sensed that we were coming over, because they put down a barrage of machine-guns which were hitting the back of our trench with terrific thuds. It was a dreadful sound, and made more frightening because we knew that we'd have to get up and charge into it in a few minutes.

We'd advanced too far, so that the artillery did not know where our front line was: we wouldn't have any artillery to protect us when we launched our attack. I felt very much like refusing to allow the men to go over that morning, because it was sheer murder, but, of course, when the time came we had to do our duty and over the top we went. There were terrific casualties, men going down right and left all over the place. I was with a sergeant-major just preparing to run from one position up forward when a machine-gun bullet got me through the thigh. I fell on the broad of my back and couldn't get up, the bullets were zipping all around me, and I could see over my toes the poor men of my company trying to get through the wire. Then the miracle happened, suddenly the Germans came out with their hands up! ... All firing ceased. Had they fired for another few seconds, there wouldn't have been a man alive. That morning I went in with four officers and a hundred and eight men. By nightfall there were only eight men left alive.¹⁰

3. Corporal Clifford Lane Sophie

That winter was so cold I felt like crying. I'd never felt like it before, not even under shellfire. What I *had* felt under shellfire, especially during the first two years, was a wish for a wound, a 'Blighty wound' we called them, to get me home. You thought a Blighty wound was the most fortunate thing that could happen to you.

But there were times, after being shelled for hours on end during the latter part of the Somme battle, that all I wanted was to be blown to bits. Because you knew that if you got wounded, they could never get you away, not under those conditions. You'd see other people with internal wounds and you thought your only hope was to get killed outright, your only relief. It wasn't only me who felt like that, it happened to lots of people.¹¹

4. Siegfried Sassoon, *Suicide in the Trenches* Heather

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.¹²

Programme of Concert of WWI Words and Music Part II

Section 1: The Horrors of War

1. Captain Reginald Thomas: David

It was a magnificent sight as the French cavalry came out of the forest at Soissons. Their uniforms were all new, bright blue, every bit and spur-chain was burnished and polished; their lances were gleaming in the sun; and as the bugler blew the charge the horses went into the gallop in a fan attack – two regiments of French cavalry. They went along beautifully, magnificently, through the wheat field in the afternoon sun, until they hit the German machine-guns which had just come up ... The machine-guns ... opened [fire] on them at close range and aimed high enough to knock the riders off the horses. Riderless horses went all over the field for two or three hours. At the end of that time there was practically nothing left of those two cavalry regiments.¹³

2. Private Fred Lloyd: Sophie

We used horses for almost everything: pulling supplies, food, ammunition, bringing back the dead and wounded and, God knows, there were plenty of *them* ... the animals suffered terribly in that war...at one stage so many of them had been killed that we had to bring them in from Canada and South America. The vets had to shoot hundreds of them because they'd gone blind. They put that down to exposure – the bitter cold and non-stop rain. But I dealt with them every day, and I'd swear it was the poison gas that both we and the Germans were using. I've seen horses so broken with fatigue, blind and deafened by the noise of guns, that they'd just give up, and they'd lie down and die. It was the same as many a soldier on both sides did.¹⁴

3. Bombardier J W Palmer: David

It was mud, mud, everywhere: mud in the trenches, mud in front of the trenches, mud behind the trenches. Every shell-hole was a sea of filthy oozing

mud. I suppose there's a limit to everything, but the mud of Passchendaele – to see men sinking into the slime, dying in the slime – I think it absolutely finished me off.¹⁵

4. Lieutenant Ulrich Burke: Juliet

The conditions were miserable. You lived cave-like. You can imagine a man after being in one of those holes for a week, where he couldn't even wash. Each day he got a two-gallon petrol tin of tea given him, delivered in a small box of hay which was supposed to insulate the tin and keep the tea warm. Well those tins were baked, boiled – everything was done to them – but whenever you put a hot substance in them you still got petrol oozing out, and that gave the men violent diarrhoea. But they had to drink it because it was the only hot drink they had.¹⁶

5. Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et decorum est* Heather

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
 Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
*Pro patria mori.*¹⁷

Section 2: Women at war

1. Mary Hillyer: Juliet

My father was a doctor in a small town in Somerset, and my mother was a perfect sweetie but a doormat really...When the war broke out I had just left

school ... I overheard [my parents] saying 'Of course we shall have Mary with us for the war.' Well, Mary thought otherwise, and when I read in the paper about a course being opened at Sealham College for women who wanted to go on the land, I decided that that was what I was going to do. I went off to the Post Office and removed my life savings of £12. 10s. and wrote to Sealham College. I was completely, utterly and absolutely innocent, as we all were on the course. I remember looking on the board one morning and, for my first job, I saw, 'Will Miss Hillyer please take the sow to the boar.' ... So I harnessed the sow with a halter and marched her down the road, then popped her into a stable at the Boar Hotel. And I thought I'd done my job rather well, but when I came back, of course, there was an almighty row.¹⁸

2. Mrs M Hall: David

It was a perfect factory to work in: everybody seemed unaware of the powder around them, unaware of any danger. Once or twice we heard, 'Oh, so and so's gone.' Perhaps she'd made a mistake and her eye was out, but there wasn't any big explosion during the three years I was there...

Each day when we got home we had a lovely good wash. And believe me the water was blood-red and our skin was perfectly yellow, right down through the body, legs and toenails even, perfectly yellow. In some people it caused a ...very nasty rash all round the chin. The hair, if it was fair or brown, went a beautiful gold, but if [there] was any grey, it went grass-green. It was quite a twelve-month after we left the factory that the whole of the yellow came from our bodies....

Each day we really and truly worked as I've never seen women work like it in my life, before or since ... But we were just one big happy family. It was amazing and I shall never forget it as long as I live, the way those women worked and talked and chatted about their ordinary everyday experiences, their boys at the Front, but mind you, it was the boys at the Front that we worried about and thought about and that's what made us work like that.¹⁹

3. Miss G M Mitchell: Sophie

Here in the long white ward I stand,
 Pausing a little breathless space,
 Touching a restless fevered hand,
 Murmuring comfort's commonplace –

Long enough pause to feel the cold
 Fingers of fear about my heart;
 Just for a moment, uncontrolled,
 All the pent tears of pity start.

While here I strive, as best I may,
 Strangers' long hours of pain to ease,
 Dumbly I question – *Far away*
 *Lies my beloved even as these?*²⁰

4. Mrs Scott-Hartley: David

I was working as a VAD in a hospital in Bulstrode Street, in West London. It was a big house taken over by the authorities, and all the cases were shell-shocked, which meant they couldn't keep their hands or their heads still. I had to hold them gently behind their heads and feed them, and I also used to write their love letters. Many couldn't say what they wanted to say, or they were probably too shy to tell me, but I used to write them for them, and let them read them back. I used to say, 'My dearest darling', you know, and 'Forever yours'.²¹

Section 3: Reflections on The Armistice, 11th November 1918

1. Corporal Clifford Lane: Sophie

As far as the Armistice itself was concerned, it was a kind of anti-climax. We were too far gone, too exhausted really, to enjoy it. All we wanted to do was go back to our billets, there was no cheering, no singing. That day we had no alcohol at all. We simply celebrated the Armistice in silence and thankfulness that it was all over. And I believe that happened quite a lot in France. It was such a sense of anti-climax. We were drained of all emotion. That's what it amounted to.²²

2. Corporal Reginald Leonard Haine: David

It wasn't like London, where they all got drunk of course. No, it wasn't like that, it was all very quiet. You were so dazed you just didn't realise that you could stand up straight and not be shot.²³

3. Sergeant-Major Richard Tobin: Sophie

The Armistice came, the day we had dreamed of. The guns stopped, the fighting stopped. Four years of noise and bangs ended in silence. The killings had stopped.

We were stunned. I had been out since 1914. I should have been happy. I was sad. I thought of the slaughter, the hardships, the waste and the friends I had lost.²⁴

4. Captain Fred Roberts: Heather

England seems to have had a jollification, but here one saw nothing but a disinterested interest in passing events. Perhaps that was because the end came without the expected culminative crash, and the decisive battle was spread over many months, and so became an indefinite action and not a

'show'. Anyway, though some may be sorry it's over, there is little doubt that the line men are *not*, as most of us have been cured of any little illusions we may have had about the pomp and glory of war, and know it for the vilest disaster that can befall mankind.²⁵

5. Marjorie Wilson: Juliet

Gemmed with white daisies was the great green world
 Your restless feet have pressed this long day through –
 Come now and let me whisper to your dreams
 A little song grown from my love for you.

There was a man once loved green fields like you,
 He drew his knowledge from the wild birds' songs;
 And he had praise for every beautiful thing,
 And he had pity for all piteous wrongs.

A lover of earth's forests – of her hills,
 And brother to her sunlight – to her rain –
 Man, with a boy's fresh wonder. He was great
 With greatness all too simple to explain.

He was a dreamer and a poet, and brave
 To face and hold what he alone found true.
 He was a comrade of the old – a friend

To every little laughing child like you.

And when across the peaceful English land,
Unhurt by war, the light is growing dim,
And you remember by your shadowed bed
All those – the brave – you must remember him.

And know it was for you who bear his name
And such as you that all his joy he gave –
His love of quiet fields, his youth, his life,
To win that heritage of peace you have.²⁶

6. Laurence Binyon: **David**

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.²⁷

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- ¹ *Last Post: The Final Word from our First World War Soldiers* edited by Max Arthur (Phoenix, 2005), 30-31.
- ² *Forgotten Voices of The Great War* edited by Max Arthur (Ebury Press, 2003), 64-5.
- ³ *Ib.* 83.
- ⁴ *Ib.* 102-3.
- ⁵ *Ib.* 45.
- ⁶ *Ib.* 55-56.
- ⁷ *Ib.* 55.
- ⁸ *Ib.* 92-3.
- ⁹ Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push; an Episode of the War* (London, 1917)
- ¹⁰ *Forgotten Voices*, 301.
- ¹¹ *Ib.* 189-90.
- ¹² <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/suicide-in-the-trenches>.
- ¹³ *Forgotten Voices*, 293.
- ¹⁴ *Last Post*, 112-3.
- ¹⁵ *Forgotten Voices*, 235.
- ¹⁶ *Ib.*, 242.
- ¹⁷ Wilfred Owen
- ¹⁸ *Forgotten Voices*, *Ib.* 12.
- ¹⁹ *Ib.* 67-9.
- ²⁰ *Poems of the First World War*, 274.
- ²¹ *Forgotten Voices*, 197.
- ²² *Ib.*, 311-12.
- ²³ *Ib.*, 311.
- ²⁴ *Ib.*, 313.
- ²⁵ *The Wipers Times: the Famous First World War Trench Newspaper*, introduction by Christopher Westhorp (Conway Publishing, 2013), 319.
- ²⁶ *Scars upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* edited by Catherine W. Reilly (Virago, 1981), 130.
- ²⁷ <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/laurence-binyon-for-the-fallen.htm>