



[Hall Orchestra](http://www.halle.co.uk) at [The Bridgewater Hall](http://www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk/)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](http://speakers.html#denis-joe) June 2012

Thirty-five years ago, as a 19-year old, spotty-faced youth, I bought myself a copy of the Sex Pistols single *God Save The Queen*. It was the latest landmark in an exciting youth movement and like many others of my age we were caught up in the Punk scene. It was rebellious, exciting and struck an anti-establishment pose. We didn't examine the more reactionary facets, such as the sneering manner in which Johnny Rotten, and the rest, viewed the masses with a patronising contempt for their celebrations of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. More than a third of a century later, I find myself at a concert celebrating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and enjoying it immensely.

For over 250 years Britain was known as the land without music. Henry Purcell was the last of the great British composers, up to the turn of the 20th century. It seems strange that Britain, as a major world power, did not have a strong musical base, unlike that of Central Europe and that it took so long for a musical tradition to find root again. When it did the North West region of England certainly fostered a great deal of music that attracted composers and musicians from all over the world.

Franz Liszt performed in Manchester in the early 19th century and Felix Mendelssohn conducted a performance of his oratorio *Elijah* in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, in 1847. This should come as no surprise. One of the major economic interests of the Empire was the harvesting and production of cotton and the North West, particularly the Lancashire area, was home to some of the wealthiest and more powerful cotton merchants of the time, responsible for the for the creation of many public institutions that helped to foster a greater interest in art and its creation.



One of the finest composers, William Walton, hailed from Oldham, and this concert opened with the first of three pieces of his music, *Crown Imperial*, from his two *Coronation Marches* (The second, *Orb and Sceptre*, closed the evening's programme). The opening march in C major gives way to a trio section, A-flat major, that recalls Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* march. Walton was indeed the heir to Elgar and it is so apparent from this most popular of his compositions. His critics, at the time, felt this to be unrepresentative of his work and heard it as a pastiche of Elgar's marches. Though Walton may well have consciously borrowed from Elgar, he did so in the knowledge that here was a form that could not be bettered. The triumphalism and sheer joy of the piece certainly provoked [Stephen Bell](#), conductor, into a choreography that almost had him jumping from the podium. It proved a great opening for this evening's celebrations.

Next up was the first of two pieces by Alexandre Desplat, who mainly composes for the cinema. Many composers, including Walton have composed music for films but unlike those, superior composers, Desplat's music has very little going for it apart

from an accompanying piece: more like muzak. The connection to the monarchy was tenuous. Both pieces are from recent British films which, rather than celebrating the monarchy, portrayed them at their most personally fragile. The first, from the film **The Queen** was instantly forgettable as was the second, from **The King's Speech** (performed in the second half of the programme). Both received a polite applause but I admit that I am at a loss as to why they appeared in a programme intended to celebrate the Queen. Neither piece had anything to recommend it as a stand-alone composition, and both sounded as if they were cut to length, having no obvious beginning nor end.

For the third composition we return to Walton and film music, very much a 20th century art form. Initially film makers would use existing compositions to soundtrack their works but gradually they came to realise the value of bespoke music as a part of the filmmaking process ([Paul Serotsky, notes on Suite: "Henry V"](http://www.musicweb-international.com/Programme_Notes/walton_henryv.htm "Paul Serotsky")). In the USA Erich Wolfgang Korngold revolutionised the practice in Hollywood as did Shostakovich for the Soviet film industry. But it was Arthur Bliss who pioneered the practice in Britain and serious composers such as William Alwyn, Malcolm Arnold, Arnold Bax, John Ireland, Alan Rawsthorne, Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton became some of the medium's greatest exponents.

Laurence Olivier's film **Henry V** is one of the great propaganda films of all time. Made in 1944 as a morale booster, it is a cinematic rendition of Shakespeare's masterpiece (although a modern translation), telling the story of how English forces defied overwhelming odds at The Battle of Agincourt to defeat the mightier French forces during the Hundred Years War. Walton's music for the film was not simply an accompaniment, it rose to the challenge of this great work and the suite is unmistakably Walton.

For this concert we were given two pieces from Walton's suite: **The Death Of Falstaff** and **Touch her Soft Lips And Part**, from the arrangement by Muir Mathieson. In Walton's time both of these sections of the suite were for strings alone. **Passacaglia on the Death Of Falstaff** is a threnody that captures both loss and yet a sense of optimism and reminds me very much of Purcell's **Funeral Music For Queen Mary** in that it does not simply mourn a passing as much as celebrates a life. Whilst there is a sombre feel to the music there is also a great sense of celebration.

The second piece from the suite takes its title from the modern translation of Henry V, (2.3.56: Pistol: **Touch her soft mouth and march**). It is unmistakably film music: a beautiful; simple; lullaby. It is lush and sentimental, but nonetheless an outstanding composition.

Another area of compositional music that Britain dominated, particularly due to the advent of radio, was light classical music. One of its greatest composers was Eric Coates. Light classical music is sometimes looked down upon by classical snobs. It doesn't make grand philosophical statements, it simply entertains. Many serious composers have written some great light music; in fact this whole concert is given over to that form. Yet composers such as Albert Ketbey, Ernest Tomlinson and others dedicated their lives to it. Light orchestral music (sometimes referred to as **easy listening**) occupied a place between serious classical music and **pop**. It is defined mainly by its melodic appeal. Dennis Norden once said that it is "not just tuneful round the outside, but tuneful right through."

The Three Elizabeths Suite, **Halcyon Days** (used as 'The Forsyte Saga' TV series Theme), **Springtime In Angus** and **The Youth**

Of Britain' March, by Coates are an outstanding example of the craftsmanship that goes into such compositions. There are six movements to the suite originally, but these three movements were chosen for this concert.

Halcyon Days opens with a fantastic French horn fanfare capturing the triumphalist mood of the Empire and characterising the navel strength of the first Elizabethan age. *Springtime In Angus*, dedicated to the King's consort (the Queen Mother) contains a beautiful oboe tune, that suggests a Scottish folk song. Faultlessly played by chief oboist of the Hall Hugh McKenna, it was one of the loveliest moments of the evening and *'The Youth Of Britain' March* (dedicated to the then princess Elizabeth) captures a spirit of youthful optimism.

To end the first half of the programme we had Edward Elgar's *Coronation March*. Actually the piece bears no resemblance to any march I have heard and it would be a very strange procession that could march to this sombre, but wonderful piece.

The second half of the concert opened with Arthur Bliss's *Welcome The Queen*. Master of the Queen's Musick, this piece was written for a Pathé documentary of the new Queen's tour of the Commonwealth in 1953. Though much of the soundtrack was composed by Malcolm Arnold, it was thought only right that Bliss contributed to the score. The piece is typically rousing and not indicative of Bliss's work, but is a tunefully stirring piece nonetheless.

This was followed by four sections from Elgar's *Nursery Suite*, dedicated to the children of King George VI. After a charming *Aubade* it goes on to depict the temperaments of three dolls, supposedly the princess's favourite playthings. Interesting enough is the fact that *Nursery Suite* received its premier in the recording studio and each section had to conform to the length of one side of a gramophone record. Whilst *Nursery Suite* may not have the same inventiveness of the composer's earlier *The Wand of Youth*, it is still a wonderful piece of music particularly the second movement, *Serious Doll*, which contains a magnificent section for the solo flautist (executed to great effect by Hall section leader Katherine Baker).

One of my most memorable opera experiences was Opera North's production of Benjamin Britten's neglected masterpiece, *Gloriana*, back in the early 1990s. Written in 1953 to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. The theme of the opera was not thought to be suitable material for representation of the monarchy, dealing with the first Elizabeth's struggle between her duty as a head of state and her emotional feelings for the Earl of Essex. I think it is safe to say that the opera would receive a far more favourable reception had it been presented in these rather confused times whereby the monarchy are seen more as celebrities than powerful (and undemocratic) heads of state.

The five courtly dances from the opera hark back to earlier music, yet still hint at the great composer's very unique style. Their inclusion in this programme was wholly welcomed as a more sedate celebration.

After the second piece from Desplat we reached the highlight of the programme. I always think that music makes William Blake's poetry a little more bearable, none more so than Hubert Parry's *Jerusalem*. It is a work that stirs the heart, irrespective of how one views British nationalism. Few musical works equal its ability to awaken strong emotions in the listener. The fact that the Hall audience were called upon to sing the words and did so with a passion (and a bit of flag waving) was truly moving. From my seat in the choir stalls it was quite unimaginable to think that it could have been bettered.

The programme ended with a return to the second of Walton's Coronation marches. *Orb And Sceptre* is one of the composer's most loved pieces. A

typical middle section sandwiched between a confident fanfare was a great way to close this most enjoyable evening. </p><p> </p> <p>The Hall◆Orchestra provided a fantastic evening of entertainment and a welcome return to its traditional roots. So why should a lifelong republican like myself find a celebration of the most backward form of government: a monarchy; such a pleasure? Many of my peers (Irish or progressives) would balk at the idea of taking pleasure from such triumphalist music that celebrates much that is wrong in a modern world. But perhaps if Republicans spent more time highlighting what is wrong with hereditary governance rather than sniping at the people who take part in such celebrations, Britain would be closer to being a modern democratic republic. And also, why should the ruling elite have all the best tunes?</p><p> </p><hr width="100%" size="2" /> <p>Editor's Note: In case you missed this programme and would still like to catch it, it will be performed in Blackburn at the King Georges Hall on 22 June - see http://www.kinggeorghall.com/whatson/events/blackburn-classics-the-halle22jun12.html for details.</p>