



# Stratford Symphony Orchestra

## *WW 1 Passchendaele*

Saturday November 3, 2018 at 7:30 pm

The Battle of Passchendaele, the Third Battle of Ypres, began in July 1917, lasting into November. The 100,000 soldiers of the Canadian Corps were ordered to the front in mid-October. The unceasing fall rains and shellfire turned the battlefield into a bog of bodies where men, horses and equipment were swallowed whole. The name Passchendaele conjures, more than any other battle in the First World War, the absolute horror of this war.

What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

\* *From Anthem for Doomed Youth, Wilfred Owen, 1917*

This concert tells a kind of story of those doomed youth.

We begin with Butterworth's *A Shropshire Lad*, an orchestral rhapsody based on a theme from a song cycle the composer had earlier set to poems by A.E. Housman. The poems and Butterworth's treatment of them convey a tender but ultimately melancholic feeling for "The lads that will die in their glory and never be old." Though this line from the end of poem 23 predates the Great War by 20 years, it expresses that massive death of innocence. George Butterworth died at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is music to mourn with. The title literally means "the tomb of Couperin" and was written, in a Baroque style, as an elegy to friends of the composers who perished in the First World War. Ravel was a munitions driver for the French 13th Artillery Regiment in 1915 and 1916. We are fortunate that he survived this dangerous service.

In contrast to the music of mourning there is Korngold's *Military March*. He composed this in 1917 while serving as a private in the Austro-Hungarian army where he was in charge of the regimental music library and conducted the regimental band. Military marches were designed to promote order and discipline, but perhaps they were also meant to elevate a soldier's sense of camaraderie and purpose by closely binding him to his brothers-in-arms with this act of unity. Consider how this musical ideal of order contrasts to the disorder and chaos of the battlefield at Passchendaele.

Farrar's English Pastoral Impressions from 1915 and MacMillan's Fantasy on Scottish Melodies from 1946 are gorgeous illustrations (they could even be considered idealizations) of the countryside to which those who died in Flanders' fields never returned. MacMillan was interned in Ruhleben prison camp near Berlin in 1914 where he remained for the war's duration. Farrar was killed in action in France, 1918.

Nimrod is by far the most famous movement from Elgar's Enigma Variations which, itself, was considered the most distinguished British orchestral piece to that date. Though its composition predates the Great War, its drama and passion embody the emotions a person inevitably feels on remembering those who have been lost too young. It is always played at the national ceremony at the Cenotaph on Whitehall in London on Remembrance Sunday.