

THE DARK PASTORAL

Andrew Kennedy records rare songs of the first world war

Altara Music ALT 1035 Release date: June 2008



English tenor **Andrew Kennedy** has chosen to use part of his 2006 Borletti-Buitoni Trust award to support a special recording project that explores new territory and new perspectives in the music and poetry of WWI. He has chosen previously unheard or unpublished songs of three composers – **William Denis Browne, Ivor Gurney** and **Eugene Goosens** – and juxtaposed them with works from poets and writers mostly eclipsed by the more famous war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. The poems are movingly read by celebrated English actor, **Simon Russell-Beale**.

The choice of these composers - one killed before he could reach maturity, one who became gradually insane and another who survived - represent three different attitudes, fates and time periods and has been made to reflect the variety of inspiration the early decades of the 20th century provided. Denis Browne was one of the most promising young composers to be killed in the First World War, overlooked principally because of his short life and limited published repertoire. Browne was passionately attached to Rupert Brooke, and both shared an artistic concern with beauty and love. Despite their youth and early success, both poet and composer anticipated the war in a darkness of tone and weariness beyond their years, lending added poignancy to their premature deaths.

Gurney's work as both composer and poet spans the First World War, and after only four post-war years of freedom, the remaining fifteen years of his life were spent in an asylum. During this period, despite increasing insanity he continued to write both poetry and songs, and whilst a small number are well-known as classics, the majority remain unpublished. Gurney was driven by his abiding passion for natural beauty, even when separated from his beloved countryside by either the battlefields of France or the walls of the asylum. Hence, the landscapes of his imagination offer an insight into what it meant to celebrate beauty in a time of disillusionment and darkness. Goosens did not fight in the First World War, but he did compose in the shadow of absence, having been deeply affected by the death of his musician brother.

The chosen poems represent a broad cross-section of the many voices of the war decades: modernist verse, Georgian pre-war poetry, Housman's iconoclastic poetry (written before the turn of the century but taken up by the war generation as meaningful to their experience), lesser-known poems by the most famous war poets Sassoon and Blunden, and unpublished and little-known poems by Gurney. Vera Brittain and Charlotte Mew provide female perspectives (rarely considered) and the older generation is represented by Thomas Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush*, whose bleakness uncannily prefigures the war poets' projection of anxiety and despair onto the pastoral.

A romantically influenced artistic trope common in the first decades of the twentieth century was to draw on pastoral imagery. In much war poetry, the countryside is invoked to provide a contrast with the shattered landscape in which the soldier poet finds himself. The pastoral was a rich source of inspiration, and its integral link with the dark ethos of the times is Kennedy's key focus in a collection of songs and poems reflecting the anxieties of the times, but also depicting love, optimism and beauty.

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Press Release date: May 2008