FINZI
Intimations of Immortality
Dies natalis

JOHN MARK AINSLEY
CORYDON SINGERS
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GERALD FINZI
(1901–1956)

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JOHN MARK AINSLEY tenor
CORYDON SINGERS
CORYDON ORCHESTRA
MACIEJ RAKOWSKI leader
MATTHEW BEST conductor
GERALD FINZI’s choice of poems and prose by Thomas Traherne, and of William Wordsworth’s ode *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* for the texts of two of his most characteristic works was a consequence of experiences during his formative years. His childhood was predominantly unhappy; as the youngest of five children and the only one manifesting artistic skills and interests, he felt himself to be the outsider in an uncomprehending family. His loneliness caused him to find companionship in books, leading to an encyclopaedic knowledge of English poetry and literature. These were years haunted by death too; by the age of seventeen, his father and all his brothers were dead, as was his revered composition teacher Ernest Farrar.

Finzi’s experience during these years left a threefold legacy which informed his adult personality and artistic sensibility. First, the breadth of his reading gave him penetrating literary critical faculties which were translated in his songs and choral works into settings of insight and intensity, a remarkable marriage of words and music where the composer seems utterly at one with the writer. Secondly, he had an acute awareness of the frailty of existence which found its musical expression primarily in his settings of Thomas Hardy, whose work often shares similar preoccupations. Finally it left him with the conviction that, for many, the reality of adult life and experience dims the instinctive, intuitive freshness of childhood. It was this that struck such a resonance when he discovered Traherne and Wordsworth, making them a natural inspiration for his music. The results were the cantata *Dies natalis* and *Intimations of Immortality*.

*Dies natalis*

Thomas Traherne was a little-known seventeenth-century metaphysical poet whose work was forgotten for two centuries. In 1896 an unsigned manuscript of poems was discovered and assigned to Henry Vaughan. However, the scholar Bertram Dobell was struck by the resemblance in style to an obscure book of religious meditation by Traherne published in 1699. By diligent research Dobell established that the newly discovered poems were indeed by Traherne, and he subsequently edited two volumes of his work, published in 1903 and 1910 respectively. Traherne’s significance lies in his continuing the line of Anglican mystical poetry after Vaughan, yet little is known about the poet himself. He was born in Hereford circa 1636, gained his BA at Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1656 and returned to his native county as rector of Credenhill, a few miles from Hereford. There he became spiritual adviser to Susanna Hopton for whom he wrote his most important prose work, the *Centuries of Meditation*. From 1669 to 1674 he lived in London where he died aged only thirty-seven.

Finzi began his setting of Traherne’s vision of a child’s innocent and unsullied perception of the world in the mid 1920s. The ‘Rhapsody’, a free adaptation of the opening stanzas of the poet’s *Third Century of Meditations*, was composed first, followed by the ‘Intrada’ and the closing ‘Salutation’. As often with Finzi, the work was then laid aside, allowing it to mature and develop in the recesses of his mind. During the next ten years he composed the setting of the poem ‘Wonder’, but it was a request from the Three Choirs Festival for a work to be performed at the 1939 festival that galvanized him into revising the extant movements and adding the contrasting fast ‘The Rapture’, subtitled ‘Danza’. The finished work, which he called *Dies natalis* (literally, ‘Day of birth’), resembled a Baroque cantata in form. The planned premiere was cancelled due to the outbreak of war and the work instead received its first performance at Wigmore Hall on 26 January 1940; Elsie Suddaby was the soprano soloist with Maurice Miles conducting his own string orchestra.
Finzi’s choice of a purely instrumental movement, ‘Intrada’, to begin *Dies natalis* creates an image of the unborn child in the womb, and is synonymous too with Traherne’s lines, ‘An empty book is like an infant’s soul, in which anything may be written, it is capable of all things but containeth nothing’. Its musical ideas are shared with the second movement ‘Rhapsody’: an ingenuous phrase to swaying rhythm and, in the middle section, a stately flowing melody which swells to a heady climax, pregnant with anticipation.

The title ‘Rhapsody’ should be understood in its seventeenth-century meaning of ‘rapturous delight or ecstasy’, its text describing the infant’s wide-eyed response to the world it has entered. Finzi’s setting is composed in the fluid, supple recitative-cum-arioso style of which he was a master and responds to each nuance of the text. This approach reflects his comment to the poet Edmund Blunden in 1952: ‘I like the music to grow out of the actual words and not be fitted to them.’

Finzi had two images in mind when composing ‘The Rapture’: the dancing circle of angels above the oxen-stall of Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* that hangs in The National Gallery, and the magnificent carved wooden angels in March Church in the Fens which he had visited on holiday in 1927. With these in mind Finzi fashioned this swirling dance of praise, as he recalled in 1939:

There is a great resemblance between the static and the ecstatic. I discovered this one day when I was standing in March Church looking up at the double hammer-beam roof and the row of carved angels—which gave the feeling of a Botticelli Nativity and were static from very ecstasy.

At the movement’s climax, to the words ‘O how Divine Am I!’, the music attains an exultant ecstasy through the jostling clash of G and F naturals in the voice and violins and F sharp in the first cellos.

‘Wonder’ is set as a tender arioso. Traherne’s opening line, ‘How like an Angel came I down!’, is evoked through a vocal phrase that seems to float in its descent, whilst once again Finzi exploits a harmonic frisson between the voice and second violins on the word ‘like’ to emphasize the poet’s imagery. The climactic phrase ‘With Seas of Life, like Wine’ is mirrored by Finzi in rich nine-part string writing.

A quality of concord and timelessness characterizes ‘The Salutation’, in which the soloist’s aria is cast in the form of a Bachian chorale prelude. Its arching, soaring melody is quintessential Finzi, and is accompanied by flowing counterpoint in quaver motion over the steady measured tramp of the bass. The violas set the movement in motion and their contrapuntal idea is then shared amongst the other instruments; the verses are interspersed with limpid orchestral flowerings marked by falling sevenths until finally the violas wind the movement to stillness in a mood of rapt wonder.

**Intimations of Immortality**

*Intimations of Immortality* is a lament, not only for the lost joys of Traherne’s state of childhood, but also for the severing of the adult soul from the intuitive primal state. As Diana McVeagh has perceptively suggested, Finzi translated this into an exhortation to the artist—and, by extension, to any adult—to keep his or her vision alive and fresh at all costs. As he commented in one of his Crees Lectures given in 1953:

> We all know that a dead poet lives in many a live stockbroker. Many of these people before they fade into the light of common day, have had an intuitive glimpse which neither age, nor experience, nor knowledge, can ever give them.

Significantly, Finzi quoted from Wordsworth’s ode there as he had done in a letter shortly before the major turning point in his life, his marriage to Joyce Black in 1933:
For the first time in my life, or since my infancy (for I suppose that there was a time when ‘Every common sight to me did seem appareled in celestial light’—though I can’t remember it) things have appeared rather more happy and clearly. The birth of his sons was a reminder of his responsibility as a parent; above all he would ensure that their childhoods would be rich in stimulation. 

*Intimations of Immortality* was begun in the 1930s, about one third being completed before war interrupted work. Finzi took it up again after 1945 and completed the short score in May 1950, four months before the scheduled first performance. However, scoring it became a scramble, indeed almost a nightmare; in the last two weeks before the premiere he wrote that there were ‘2 copyists in the house for the last few days all working to 2 and 3.30am and then up at 6.0!!’.

The work is scored for tenor soloist, chorus and orchestra. Herbert Sumion conducted the first performance on 5 September 1950 in Gloucester Cathedral; Eric Greene was the soloist and it was dedicated to Vaughan Williams’s first wife, Adeline (known affectionately to the Finzis as ‘Aunt Ad’). The title on the original vocal scores bore the classic misprint: ‘Intimations of Immorality’!

Setting Wordsworth’s ode had posed Finzi a challenge and he knew that many critics would consider the poetry unsettled. However, he countered this view fiercely: I do hate the bilge and bunkum about composers trying to *add* to a poem; that a fine poem is complete in itself, and to set it is only to gild the lily... obviously a poem may be unsatisfactory in itself for setting, but that is a purely musical consideration—that it has no architectural possibilities; no broad vowels where climaxes should be, and so on. But the first and last thing is that a composer is (presumably) moved by a poem and wishes to identify himself with it and share it.

The work begins with an orchestral prelude focusing on two recurring principal ideas: the opening horn-call, which seems to arise out of nothing, and a spacious, typically Finzian, melody around which the first and second of Wordsworth’s stanzas are set. An instance of Finzi’s inspired response to Wordsworth occurs at ‘The Rainbow comes and goes’, where, after a ravishing harmonic progression, the tenor’s rapturous phrase rides high over the chorus. With the first of several linking orchestral interludes, the tempo quickens before the chorus conjures images of spring in a joyous setting of stanzas three and most of four, bringing a climax mid-way at ‘Shout round me’.

The tempo slackens as the central question is addressed: ‘Whither is fled the visionary gleam?’ The horn-call returns to preface stanzas five, six and nine, which form the heart of the work where the poet philosophizes on how the adult has become divorced from an earlier, more perfect condition, and then offers a solution in the ninth stanza beginning with the exultant outburst ‘O joy! that in our embers Is something that doth live’. It is possible for the soul to ‘have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither’, providing the intuitive part of humanity is nurtured.

The tenth stanza is a recapitulation of the earlier fast music, and with the return of the prelude’s broad melody the final stanza is ushered in; the words drew from Finzi some of the most touching music in the whole piece with the solo flute and violin’s pastoral evocation of the brooks and sunset. Most inspired of all, though, is his setting of the final lines where the poignancy of the tenor’s suspended dissonance is full of aching melancholy. The hushed, brief coda with a reprise of the horn-call seems to echo those thoughts as the music fades away in meditation.

ANDREW BURN © 1996
Dies natalis

1 INTRADA orchestra only

2 RHAPSODY Recitativo stromentato
   Will you see the infancy of this sublime and celestial
greatness? I was a stranger, which at my entrance into the
world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys; my
knowledge was Divine. I was entertain’d like an Angel with the
works of God in their splendour and glory.

   Heaven and Earth did sing my Creator’s praises, and could not
make more melody to Adam than to me. Certainly Adam in
Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of
the world than I. All appear’d new, and strange at first,
inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. All things were
spotless and pure and glorious.

   The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should
be reap’d nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from
everlasting to everlasting. The green trees, when I saw them
first, transported and ravished me, their sweetness and
unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with
ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things.

   O what venerable creatures did the agéd seem! Immortal
Cherubims! And the young men glittering and sparkling
Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty!

   I knew not that they were born or should die; but all things
abided eternally. I knew not that there were sins or complaints
or laws. I dream’d not of poverty, contentions or vices. All
tears and quarrels were hidden from mine eyes. I saw all in
the peace of Eden.

   Everything was at rest, free and immortal.

3 THE RAPTURE Danza
   Sweet Infancy!
   O Hevenly Fire! O Sacred Light!
   How Fair and bright!
   How Great am I
   Whom the whol World doth magnify!
   O hevenly Joy!
O Great and Sacred Blessedness
   Which I possess!
   So great a Joy
Who did into my Arms convey?
   From God abov
Being sent, the Gift doth me enflame
   To prais his Name;
The Stars do mov,
The Sun doth shine, to shew his Lov.
   O how Divine
Am I! To all this Sacred Wealth,
   This Life and Health,
Who rais’d? Who mine
   Did make the same! What hand divine!

4 WONDER Arioso
   How like an Angel came I down!
   How bright are all things here!
When first among his Works I did appear
   O how their Glory did me crown!
The World resembled his ETERNITY,
   In which my Soul did walk;
And evry thing that I did see
   Did with me talk.

The skies in their Magnificence,
   The lovelly lively Air,
Oh how divine, how soft, how sweet, how fair!
   The stars did entertain my Sense;
And all the Works of God so bright and pure,
   So rich and great, did seem,
As if they ever must endure
   In my Esteem.
A Nativ Health and Innocence
Within my Bones did grow,
And while my God did all his Glories show
I felt a vigor in my Sense
That was all SPIRIT: I within did flow
With Seas of Life, like Wine;
I nothing in the World did know
But ’twas Divine.

5 THE SALUTATION Aria
These little Limbs,
These Eys and Hands which here I find,
This panting Heart wherewith my Life begins;
Where have ye been? Behind
What Curtain were ye from me hid so long?
Where was, in what Abyss, my new-made Tongue?
When silent I
So many thousand thousand Years
Beneath the Dust did in a Chaos Ly,
How could I Smiles, or Tears,
Or Lips, or Hands, or Eys, or Ears perceiv?
Welcom ye Treasures which I now receiv.

From Dust I rise
And out of Nothing now awake;
These brighter Regions which salute mine Eys
A Gift from God I take;
The Earth, the Seas, the Light, the lofty Skies,
The Sun and Stars are mine; if these I prize.

A Stranger here
Strange things doth meet, strange Glory see,
Strange Treasures lodg’d in this fair World appear,
Strange all and New to me:
But that they mine should be who Nothing was,
That Strangest is of all; yet brought to pass.

THOMAS TRAHERNE (c1636–1674)

Intimations of Immortality
Finzi omits stanzas 7 and 8 of the eleven stanzas of Wordsworth’s ode. These are given here in italics.

6 Andante sostenuto

7 I There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

8 II The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where’er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

9 III Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor’s sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday;—
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy!

IV Ye blessèd Creatures, I have heard the call
Ye to each other make; I see
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
My heart is at your festival,
My head hath its coronal,
The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.

Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,
This sweet May-morning,
And the Children are culling
On every side,
In a thousand valleys far and wide,
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:—
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!

But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But He
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this be frames his song:
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his 'humerous stage'
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

VIII
Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

IX
O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!
The thought of our past years in me doth breed
Perpetual benediction: not indeed
For that which is most worthy to be blest—
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—
Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.
Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!
And let the young Lambs bound
As to the tabor’s sound!
We in thought will join your throng,
Ye that pipe and ye that play,
Ye that through your hearts to-day
Feel the gladness of the May!
What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet;
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o’er man’s mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

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Front illustration: *Sunrise through Trees* by Harold Hitchcock (1914–2009)
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