

WILLIAM
WALTON:
MUSE OF
FIRE

Stephen Lloyd

William Walton

Muse of Fire

Stephen Lloyd



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Introduction and Acknowledgements

Anyone investigating the life and music of William Walton is indebted to certain writers whose books have become standard works of reference on the composer. Michael Kennedy's penetrating *Portrait of Walton* (OUP 1989, revised 1998) and Lady Susana Walton's more personal and gossipy portrait of her husband, *William Walton: Behind the Facade* (OUP 1988), are two that come immediately to mind. Nor can anyone wanting to examine the music overlook Frank Howes' *The Music of William Walton* (OUP 1965), the second edition of which (1974) included a new chapter covering the works composed between 1965 and 1972.

But there are two special debts that must be acknowledged. Stewart Craggs, in both his *William Walton: A Catalogue* (OUP, second edition 1990) and its companion *William Walton: a source book* (Scolar Press 1993), has surely done the groundwork for all future commentators on the composer. This is a debt that one cannot stress too highly, and it was rightly acknowledged in the Introduction to the second edition of Craggs' *Catalogue* by another researcher and writer to whom one is endlessly grateful: the late Christopher Palmer. Not only did he provide an illuminating introduction to the *Catalogue*, but in his own inimitable style he wrote perceptive notes for the complete series of recordings by Chandos Records Ltd. He went further. He saved a number of works from neglect by preparing performing editions and suites: for example, of many of the film scores, and the music for the epic 1942 radio play *Christopher Columbus*. These all form part of the Chandos complete recorded edition. Had he lived longer he would no doubt have written an absorbing book on Walton.

In climbing on the back of these experts, I am not attempting to displace any existing study of Walton. One may even ask whether yet another is necessary – a question thrown at me by the veteran radio and film producer, the late Dallas Bower. The centenary, in 2002, of Walton's birth provides sufficient justification: centenaries and similar anniversaries are often times for reassessment and re-evaluation, and a composer of Walton's stature deserves examination from a variety of perspectives. But a further compelling reason is that in recent years new biographies of a number of people close to Walton – among them Sir Osbert Sitwell, Lord Berners, Hubert Foss, Stephen Tennant, Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Olivier – have thrown fresh light on the composer, and these I have shamelessly plundered. Further personal research, into the first public performance of *Façade* (which was far from being the riot that the Sitwells – and Walton – would have us believe), into the circum-

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stances of the commissioning of *Belshazzar's Feast* and *Christopher Columbus* (both BBC initiatives, as was *Troilus and Cressida*), and into the background to the fourteen films for which he provided music, will hopefully broaden our knowledge of the man.

I hope, then, that this book can be read as a parallel commentary on the composer. I have attempted to present the facts as much as possible using the words of Walton and others involved, through letters, through contemporary reviews, and with the help of numerous broadcast interviews in addition to those I have conducted myself. Tony Palmer's revealing 1981 television documentary of Walton, *At the Haunted End of the Day*,¹ has been one such valuable source that I readily acknowledge.

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There are many others I would like to thank: the Boston Public Library for supplying a copy of Constant Lambert's important 1926 article on Walton that is here re-printed for the first time as Appendix 1; Neil Somerville, senior assistant at the BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham, Reading, for guiding me through the BBC's Walton files and for allowing me permission to quote from material in its keeping; Paul Collen and Oliver Davies at the Department of Portraits, Royal College of Music, for providing me with copies of certain programmes, including the recently discovered one for the first public performance of *Façade*; Roy Douglas, Kyla Greenbaum and Sidonie Goossens for kindly sparing the time to talk to me about Walton, and similarly the late (and sadly much under-rated) Dallas Bower for several

¹ This television documentary can be seen at *La Mortella*, Walton's home at Ischia.

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hours of reminiscence, and the late Carole Rosen for introducing him to me; Robert Tucker, Senior Librarian at the Barbican Centre, London; The Executive Director of Planning & Conservation for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea; Tony Benson, Paul Guinery, John Hely-Hutchinson and Maureen Murray, all of whom have been very helpful in a number of ways. I thank also the staff at the British Library for making available the correspondence to Lady Aberconway (Mrs McLaren), Edward Clark, Sir Adrian Boulton and Harriet Cohen, the latter only recently coming into the public domain. It is with much regret that, for reasons of distance, I was not able to see the Sitwell-Sassoon correspondence and additional Sitwell papers at the Washington State University Libraries.

I would like to express my gratitude to my editors Caroline Palmer and Cathy Harrison and all at Boydell & Brewer for bringing to completion a seven-year project.

Three people deserve special thanks: I am particularly grateful to Stewart Craggs for his generous assistance at many stages during my research; to Lewis Foreman for his continued help and encouragement throughout the writing of this book and, by reading early draft chapters, eliminating many errors and not a few howlers – any that remain are mine; and to Bruce Phillips without whose support this book would not be appearing in print.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my wife Pauline to whom I dedicate this book, for patiently sharing with me journeys of research to Ischia, Amalfi, Ravello, Pallanza and Ascona, and – even more patiently – enduring the lonely ‘computer hours’.

Stephen Lloyd
January 2001

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1

Oldham and Oxford

William Walton had two façades. One was the brilliant, witty Entertainment of that name, composed in collaboration with Edith Sitwell, that brought him a degree of notoriety and ultimately lasting fame. The other was the cool exterior that masked a cauldron of emotions which gave birth to music as vital and exciting as any of his generation, with a verve and energy that few composers could match. Laurence Olivier, his friend for nearly forty years, remarked on this paradox:

His exterior – and his personality – is remote, removed, distant, rather chill; and his look is the same: rather cold. His look is very very pale, very very pale sort of hair, very pale sort of eyes, and what comes out of him is the most gutsy bash and crash and bang you ever heard in your life, and it doesn't go with his face. It doesn't go with his personality at all when you meet him. . . .¹

You expect a genius to act and behave like a genius, and to look like a genius, but . . . he looks, as he always has, the most normal person on earth, with the shortest cut hair you ever saw – 'choir-boy cut' I call it – in the thirties, and it's remained like that ever since. . . . What's so unusual is what is so unexpected about him, because he's always had the appearance, when he was young, of being rather a delicate flower without being in the least bit willowy . . . when here's this music, that's got more guts and more spunk and more attack and almost more *venom* than one could possibly imagine would be hidden within that form of person and personality. . . .²

¹ In Tony Palmer's film profile of Walton, *At the Haunted End of the Day*, London ITV *The South Bank Show*, 19 April 1981.

² Interview with John Amis, in a BBC Transcription Services programme *Portrait of Walton* presented by John Amis and broadcast on Radio 3 on 4 June 1977. Repeated in Radio 4's memorial *Kaleidoscope* tribute, also presented by John Amis, and broadcast on 8 March 1983 with a repeat on 20 July 1983. BBC Sound Archives T083853; National Sound Archives NP6825W.

To another friend who knew him in the late 1920s, he was ‘an Enigma, a Sphinx’.³ Often uncomfortable and evasive in interview, Walton was a very shy man. With an output that is the smallest of any major British composer, composition was for him a slow and difficult process – he even described himself as lazy, but this denies the thoroughness with which he approached the task. His works may be comparatively few in number but half a dozen remain as landmarks in British music. *Façade* and *Belshazzar’s Feast* have been matched by no-one, while the violin and viola concertos, his first symphony and the film score for *Henry V* stand among the finest of their kind.

Like Elgar and Delius, Walton was mainly self-taught. When someone referred to him in a letter as having been an *enfant terrible* of the Royal College of Music, he responded sharply: ‘I wasn’t at the RCM – or anywhere else.’⁴ Like Elgar and Delius, Walton gained an early reputation on the Continent, and like Delius in time he abandoned his home roots, choosing to live abroad. But, unlike both of those composers, he did not entirely make his own way. ‘Looking back, I can trace a distinct element of luck that has been a major asset in my career – that, and some very staunch friends, not to mention a certain amount of musical talent and a great deal of persistent hard work,’ he observed as he approached his sixtieth birthday.⁵ Luck certainly played a significant hand in a life that was, to a large extent, dependent upon the help, friendship and generosity of others.

William’s parents were both singers. His mother, née Louisa Maria Turner from whom he took his second name, was a contralto from Stretford, close to Manchester. She came from a family of upholsterers and furniture makers, and her father was an excise man in Hull. She had met her husband while singing at a recital at Chorlton-cum-Hardy. After they were married in 1898, they lived in Oldham. Charles Walton, a bass-baritone from Hale in Cheshire, had been one of the first students at the Royal Manchester College of Music when it opened in 1893. His teacher of singing there was Andrew Black, who at that time was just establishing his name in the round of the provincial festivals. He was to sing the title-role in Elgar’s *Caractacus* at the Leeds première in 1898, Judas at the Birmingham première of *The Apostles* in 1904, and he was the first to sing substantial extracts from the opera *Koanga* in Delius’s privately financed London concert in 1899. Charles’s part in college concert performances included ‘Wotan’s Farewell’, leading rôles in *The Magic Flute* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Mephistopheles in Gounod’s *Faust*. He left in 1897, but returned in 1902 to take part in a concert performance of *Don Giovanni*. Exactly a week later, on 29 March, the Waltons’ second child,

³ Stephen Tennant, in a letter to Dr Stewart Craggs from Wilsford Manor, 10 June 1975.

⁴ 1 October 1936, replying to a letter from Kenneth Wright, 12 August.

⁵ *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 March 1962.

Oldham and Oxford

William Turner, was born at 93 Werneth Hall Road. A brother, Noel, had preceded him in 1899, to be followed by a sister, Nora, in 1908 and another brother, Alexander, in 1910. Their father was by then both a teacher of singing and choirmaster at the local church of St John's in the Parish of Werneth. A strict disciplinarian, he made young William, from about the age of five, and Noel sing in the choir, and if either sang a wrong note he would rap him on the knuckles with his ring. It was perhaps for this reason that much later Walton could confess: 'I'm not too fond of church music.'⁶ One incident that stuck in his memory was a scene that ended in tears because he was not allowed to sing a solo in the church choir when about six.

William's upbringing, strictly Church of England, was simple and unpretentious. The Waltons lived in a typical terrace house with an outside toilet. School was a nightmare for William. While his brother Noel went to the grammar school, their father could not afford to send both, so William was sent instead round the corner to the rough school that stood next to a stable for tram horses. The boys were separated from the girls by iron railings – 'What a pity!' he wryly remarked in old age. Women were to play a strong part in both his personal and his creative life.

By the time he had gained some recognition as a composer, Walton spoke with gratitude in a newspaper interview about his parental upbringing:

I expect I have been singularly fortunate for home influences have been the greatest possible aid in a career such as mine. My father, the late Mr C. A. Walton, was a well-known local musician, and my mother, Mrs Louisa Walton, who now lives at Werneth Hall Road, still teaches singing. In some households it is dangerous to dabble with art, and to sit down and write music often meets with a good deal of ragging and bullying. In fact, most people, I think, will agree that an artistic career is a very difficult one, but my parents never raised any objections and from both I have had every possible encouragement in my work.⁷

The next stage in William's career, in 1912 when he was only ten, was when luck first intervened.

It was luck that my father, a singing teacher in Oldham, happened to notice an advertisement for Probationers in the choir of Christ Church, Oxford. Luck, that, in spite of missing the train connection, my mother and I managed to arrive just in time for me to do my piece, do a few rudimentary ear-tests and be chosen for the vacancy.⁸

Having spotted the advertisement in the newspaper, his father decided to let him have a go. But it was his mother who took him to Oxford, although

⁶ Interview with Alan Blyth, *Radio Times*, 23 March 1972, 15.

⁷ *Oldham Chronicle*, 1 May 1926.

⁸ *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 March 1962.

in fact we almost didn't go at all. When the moment of departure arrived, the ticket money had disappeared. My father had been to the pub the night before and had somehow lost the fare. We had to borrow the money from the local greengrocer. I'd never been on a train before, at least not for such a long train journey, and you can't imagine the excitement. I remember I was very sick. My mother really had to beg Dr Strong, the Dean of Christ Church, to let me have a go. I cried, I think. Eventually I had to do a few tests which was all new to me. Then I sang what I had prepared, a thing by Marcello: *O Lord our Governor*. Luckily for me they took me on, and I joined up as a probationer. . . . It was horrid. The problem was I had a broad Lancashire accent and the other boys used to sit on my head until I spoke the same as they did, properly, as they thought.⁹

And so the ten-year-old from Oldham found himself at Oxford, with a scholarship to Christ Church Cathedral School¹⁰ where he was to stay for the next six years. For most of that period, war would be raging across Europe. In contrast with the rough local school at Oldham, Oxford provided Walton with his first 'cushion' from the hardships of the outside world. But his future after Oxford seemed very uncertain. Although he was good at sport, he had shown no aptitude for musical instruments. Earlier attempts at home to learn the violin had come to nothing. What path should he follow? 'So I thought, . . . I must make myself interesting somehow, otherwise when my voice breaks I'll be sent back to Oldham. What can I do to make myself interesting? Write music! So I did.'¹¹

His earliest signs of composition had been *Variations for Violin and Pianoforte on a chorale by J. S. B.* that progressed no more than a dozen bars. 'Not very interesting and wisely decided to stop,' he much later recalled.¹² For a while no further attempts were made. But at Oxford he tried his hand at writing something for the choir. 'I had begun some tentative compositions – settings of Shakespeare from the plays we happened to be studying, some organ pieces and a march for a wedding. Two pieces from this time were eventually published.' The first of these, dated Easter 1916 (the year in which he was confirmed in Christ Church Cathedral), was *A Litany (Drop, Drop Slow Tears)*, a motet for unaccompanied mixed chorus, with words by Phineas Fletcher, that is remarkably adventurous both harmonically and structurally for a boy only just fourteen, and then two years later *The Winds*, a song to a text by Swinburne, with a rapid restless semi-quaver accompani-

⁹ Tony Palmer, *At the Haunted End of the Day*, ITV.

¹⁰ In 1994 the Sir William Walton Centre was added, incorporating a large assembly hall for concerts, recitals and drama.

¹¹ Tony Palmer, *ibid.*

¹² Letter to Hubert Foss in 1932; Dora Foss, 'Memoirs of Walton' (unpublished), part of the Hubert Foss Archives in the private possession of Mrs Diana Sparkes, née Foss. He gave no date to this first effort, adding only 'However broke loose again about 13'.

ment. Swinburne seems to have been a favourite poet of his at that time as in July 1918 he set three more of his verses – *Child's Song*, *Love Laid his Sleepless Head* and *A Lyke-wake Song* – for voice and piano.¹³ Of the Shakespeare settings, *Tell Me Where is Fancy Bred* from *The Merchant of Venice*, dated 2 July 1916, is among his earliest surviving compositions. It was arranged for soprano and tenor voices, three violins and piano – ‘all far too high . . . full of high B flats’, he recalled. His most ambitious score from that year was a cantata for soprano and tenor soloists, double female chorus and orchestra, setting Matthew Arnold's *The Forsaken Merman*. It was 425 bars in length, and he completed it in short score that summer. It has not been performed. Fourteen years were to elapse before he was to write for mixed voices again, and then spectacularly, in *Belshazzar's Feast*. Another Shakespeare setting, of *Where the Bee Sucks*, seems not to have survived, along with many other works of that period. As he admitted, ‘After that [I] fairly went in for it and produced about 30 very bad works of various species, songs, motets, Magnificats, etc.’¹⁴ He may have had the excitement of two or three of his songs being performed at a private function early in July 1919, as he wrote home that some of them were to be given at the home of Lady Glenconner, the mother of his future friend Stephen Tennant.

Walton's great fortune at Oxford was that the music staff with whom he came into contact were open-minded and did not discourage individuality. There was no beating him into conformity. One of his first teachers at Christ Church was the assistant organist Basil Allchin who gave him piano lessons. (He was never to become an accomplished pianist – Alan Frank, of Oxford University Press, went so far as saying that he played ‘excruciatingly badly’, and he was to write very little for that instrument – but an early surviving manuscript is of an 89-bar *Valse in C minor* dated 2 February 1917.) Walton would sometimes show Allchin reams of manuscript paper covered with notes, mostly cast in the form of elaborate motets for double choir with unorthodox part writing. Beyond pointing out the unorthodoxy of these youthful efforts, Allchin to his credit was not discouraging.¹⁵

Walton's musical instruction came mainly from Dr Henry Ley, organist of Christ Church and one of the most brilliant of his day (later professor of organ at the Royal College of Music), and Hugh Allen (organist of New College and Professor of Music at Oxford, and soon, in 1918, to succeed Parry as Director of the Royal College of Music). When Allchin's military commitments became too demanding, Ley took over Walton's piano and

¹³ Unpublished. The manuscripts of these three songs were auctioned at Sotheby's in 1989.

¹⁴ Brief biographical notes in a letter to Hubert Foss, 1932; Dora Foss, ‘Memoirs of Walton’.

¹⁵ Frank Howes, *Oxford Mail*, 2 April 1962, and Frank Howes, *The Music of William Walton* Vol. 1, ‘The Musical Pilgrim’ series, OUP 1942, 7.

organ tuition. But his guardian was Dr Thomas Banks Strong, a double doctor, of music as well as divinity, Dean of Christ Church and later Bishop of Ripon and of Oxford. It was Dr Strong more than anyone else who prepared Walton's future path as a composer. 'I am to go to him for money when I am without,' William wrote home in October 1918. The war had drastically affected his father's income through the decrease in the number of his singing pupils so that he was not in a position to meet the full costs of his son's education. Even at an early stage Walton's financial concerns were to be handled by others.

Strong, Ley and Allen were quick to recognise Walton's very considerable musical gifts, as did Sir Hubert Parry who, staying with Strong at Oxford, happened to notice some manuscripts of Walton's. 'There's a lot in this chap, you must keep your eye on him!' was Parry's perceptive comment.¹⁶ 'An awfully jolly old person' was the young chorister's description of England's senior composer when they met in June 1917. Walton's introduction to contemporary music came not only through the fine collection of scores he avidly studied in the Ellis Library of Music in Oxford – new works of Stravinsky, Debussy and Ravel as they came out – but also through Dr Strong. 'Do you like your T. Strong?' was a standing joke of the time.

[He] used to have a group of us to the Deanery after Sunday morning service for religious instruction. Occasionally, perhaps as a recompense, he would play what seemed to us very odd music indeed – pieces such as the Schoenberg op. 11 and op. 15. I also remember him once playing some music by [Leo] Ornstein [who] was notorious around 1914 as a sort of John Cage of his day.¹⁷

The young William by now was determined not to go back to Oldham, 'home of cotton mills, brass bands and other things . . . not my favourite part of the world'.¹⁸ He remained at the choir school from 1912 until 1918, staying on, through the intervention of the Dean, after 1916 when his voice broke. There was even talk of him furthering his musical education in London. He wrote home rather grandly on 8 October 1916: 'The Dean has been saying something to me about the Royal College of Music. He says it is unpatriotic of England to let slip such a musical brain.'¹⁹ When he had reached the end of his time in the choir school, Dr Strong suggested to Walton's father that his son, although only sixteen, should join Christ Church as an undergraduate, continue his musical studies there and obtain his

¹⁶ Letter from Thomas Strong to Hubert Foss, 8 January 1938; Hubert Foss Archives.

¹⁷ Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, Faber & Faber 1963, 74. Schoenberg's op. 11 was 3 *Klavierstücke*, op. 15 the song cycle *Der Buch der hängenden Gärten* to verses by Stefan George.

¹⁸ Tony Palmer, *At the Haunted End of the Day*, ITV.

¹⁹ Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Walton*, 9. In his letters home he signed himself as Billy.

MusBac and BA degrees. Again through the Dean's intervention, the fees would be paid by a fund that existed to support needy undergraduates. This arrangement met with Mr Walton's approval, especially in view of the increasing financial problems he was having to face in Oldham since the outbreak of war.

This arrangement also suited his son only too well. As a result of the war Oxford was not overflowing with undergraduates. 'There was nobody there, that's why they took me in,' he admitted much later. 'I didn't work at all. I couldn't be bothered when I suddenly had masses of scores there to be read.'²⁰ Having successfully passed the first half of his Bachelor of Music examination in June 1918, he was awarded an in-College Exhibition for two years.

Greek was one of the requirements for his degree course, and having the same Greek tutor as Walton was the South African-born Roy Campbell whom Edith Sitwell generously regarded as 'one of the very few great poets of our time'. Walton was a year younger than Campbell, but the two became good friends, 'my great pal', as he recalled many years later. '[Roy] wasn't quite so . . . well, he was a bit quieter in those days. We neither of us did any work, and both failed Responsions.'²¹ In the second of his two autobiographical volumes, *Light on a Dark Road*, Campbell remembered Walton in glowing terms:

The first person I met in Oxford was one of the greatest men who have been there this century, a real genius, and, at the same time, one of the very finest fellows I ever met in my life . . . We walked out with two young ladies, who were also good friends, and who were employed as waitresses. Of course, needless to say, Willie's one eventually became a countess. Something magical seems to happen to everything he touches.²²

During the year I was at Oxford . . . William introduced me to the people who have influenced and helped me most in my subsequent literary career, Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Thomas Earp, Philip Heseltine, Cecil Gray, and others.²³

But, as Roy Campbell added, 'it was soon apparent both to William and myself and to our excellent tutor [of Greek] Mr Young that we were not cut out for scholars of the routine sort'.²⁴ In December 1919 Walton failed at his third attempt to pass Responsions. 'Some time I'd pass in Algebra and fail in

²⁰ *Sunday Times*, 25 March 1962.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Roy Campbell, *Light on a Dark Horse: An autobiography (1901-1935)*, Hollis & Carter 1951, 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

Greek; otherwise I'd pass in Greek and fail in Algebra. I could never do them all at the same time. So I was sent down finally'²⁵ – for two terms.

At this juncture a former Christ Church undergraduate, the up-and-coming conductor Adrian Boult (who had himself experienced Dr Strong's kindness and understanding – 'that great man' he described him²⁶), was approached by Henry Ley to see if any musical job in London could be found for 'this wonderful Lancashire boy who had been kept at Ch. Ch. by the Dean and was now to come to London and MUST find a job'. Boult obliged by arranging an interview with the publishers Goodwin & Tabb for a proof-reading job, only within a few days to receive from Walton a letter in which he wrote that he had 'decided to starve in a garret and compose all day rather than enjoy a nice job'.²⁷

In June 1920 he passed the second part of his BMus, but near the end of the year his grant was terminated. Fortunately for Walton a garret was already being prepared for him, one in which there would be no question of starving. In fact, board and lodging and a small income would be provided. His meeting with the Sitwells was another stroke of fortune that would alter the course of his career.

²⁵ Interview with John Pearson in his radio portrait of the Sitwells, *Façades*, broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 13 November 1978. NSA T38610.

²⁶ Adrian Cedric Boult, *My own Trumpet*, Hamish Hamilton 1973, 25.

²⁷ Michael Kennedy, *Adrian Boult*, Hamish Hamilton 1987, Papermac 1989, 76.