



Why do we remember the poets and not the composers of WW1?

Video transcript – Composers and the war

Probably the most famous piece of music we associate with this time is Vaughan Williams “Lark Ascending”.

It’s come, in the popular imagination, to signify a loss of innocence and an Elegy for the war dead.

But actually not a note of it was written during the First World war. Vaughan Williams joined the Royal Ambulance Medical Corps and from 1914 – 1918 he didn’t write anything. The story goes that on the day war broke out in 1914 he was sketching “The Lark Ascending” in a note book, a little boy saw him and thought he was a spy, writing code, and arrested him.

Remarkably, there were some composers who managed to write music at the front. Ivor Gurney was shot and gassed while serving as a private with the second and fifth Gloucesters, and although through circumstance most of what he wrote, at that time, was poetry, he still managed to compose music.

Some music deals more directly with the war. While he was serving in the trenches, the Scottish composer Cecil Coles, began writing an orchestral suite which he called, “Behind The Lines”. In the second movement he depicts a military funeral procession

During his act of service Coles sent manuscripts home to his mentor, the composer Gustav Holst. At Christmas time 1917, Holst received one of Coles’s manuscripts, splashed with bloodstains and muddy watermarks. A year later, Coles was killed near the Somme, while attempting to rescue wounded comrades.

It is remarkable that people managed to compose on the front line. Many of the younger generation of composers that fought, died and were wounded in the first world war, studied here at The Royal College of Music. They were used to writing within a context of an institution like this. With all of its facilities and community of musicians. Those who did write within the trenches, left us a legacy that’s very much of its time, and heartbreakingly poignant.