

Thomas F. Dunhill – an introduction

Thomas Frederick Dunhill (1877-1946) was an English composer born in London, whose life and career was spent at the very epicentre of the English musical establishment.

As well as composing throughout his life, he was a teacher, writer, international examiner, adjudicator at music festivals, and arranger of orchestral works for piano – alongside writing over 100 works across a range of musical genres, ranging in scale from small song-settings to his large-scale *Symphony in A minor*.

His career embraced a momentous period of change, including two world wars and great shifts in culture and society, of which the advent of recorded music and motorised transport were just two examples of rapid technical change during his lifetime. His early chamber music is from the Victorian era; he was still composing after the 2nd World War - with a continuous output in-between.

Dunhill's first musical interest was in the comic operas of Gilbert & Sullivan – he may even have attended the first run of *The Mikado* in 1885. He spent much time co-writing small operettas with a childhood friend, James Findlay, alongside taking piano lessons.

From 1893 Dunhill was a student of Composition under Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music where his contemporaries included Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams and John Ireland. He remained a student there for seven years, having gained a scholarship (along with Ireland) to extend his composing studies.

He taught music at Eton College for six years before returning to the Royal College in 1905 as teacher of harmony and counterpoint, and where he soon became professor. In the early years of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) he undertook examining tours of New Zealand, Australia, Jamaica and Canada. From 1907 he organised a long-running series of Thomas Dunhill concerts in London designed to promote the works of younger British composers.

During the 1st World War, he served as a bandsman in the Irish Guards in London, playing the bassoon (which he had started playing as a student). Clearly this cannot have been too time-consuming, as he was able to devote much time to writing the symphony, which he dedicated to his wife Molly. She was a great-niece of the poet Matthew Arnold. They married in 1914, but she died from tuberculosis in 1929.

After the War, as the mood in society rapidly shifted away from Edwardian sensibilities, he increasingly focused on composing music for the stage. In 1931 the light opera *Tantivy Towers* (with lyrics by A P Herbert) was a notable success on the London stage.

Most of Dunhill's music was published, and most orchestral pieces received public performances, including at the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall and at the Three Choirs Festival. His works include chamber music, a symphony, song-settings, orchestral and choral works (including some church music), light opera and ballet, suites for numerous solo instruments, including organ, and very many pieces for piano - ranging from beginners' pieces to works for concert professionals.

Although most of his oeuvre has not been heard publicly for several decades, a number of works, including chamber music, works for flute and clarinet, the symphony and his well-known song-setting *The Cloths of Heaven*, have been recorded and are available on CD. There have been recent performances at The Wigmore Hall, London, of his early chamber music by the Endymion ensemble and in 2012 by The Phoenix Trio

As a young professor at the RCM Dunhill had access to the latest musical developments, and his work shows his ability to assimilate influences from the great classical masters as well as from his English and international contemporaries. It is useful to remember that during his years of study there was no recorded or broadcast music of any kind: to discover the works of old or new composers, one had to go to a concert or get hold of a copy of the score and read it.

Dunhill also wrote some well-respected books. *Chamber Music*, published in 1925, was a standard textbook for students. A small guide, *Mozart's String Quartets*, was published in 1928, followed by *Sullivan's Comic Operas – a critical appreciation* in 1929. A biography, *Sir Edward Elgar*, came out in 1938 four years after the composer's death. Dunhill was a great admirer of Elgar, and Elgar himself showed interest in Dunhill's progress.

Through the 1920s and 1930s he was frequently commissioned to write and edit music for students and for use in schools, including song-settings for publisher Edward Arnold. He wrote a five-volume series of studies entitled *The Wheel of Progress*, published by ABRSM, which many piano teachers may recall. And he composed numerous small piano suites aimed at those of moderate ability to play at home. He also arranged orchestral works for piano, including Bizet's *Carmen*,

Prokofiev's *Peter & the Wolf*, Edward German's *Merrie England*, and twelve comic operas by Gilbert & Sullivan.

In the early 1940s, having re-married, he returned with his new wife and music teacher Isobel Featonby to teach once again at Eton College where he composed some delightful pieces for organ, alongside suites for woodwind instruments and French horn. He died after a short illness in 1946 and is buried at Appleby, Lincolnshire, close to his wife's family home – and where his gravestone is inscribed 'Maker of Music'.

Dunhill's works do not share the dissonances that characterise more progressive composers of the early 20th century. But his immaculate workmanship, strong melodic themes, and deep knowledge of historical and contemporary music have left a legacy of music of its time that is - as he intended - a pleasure to play and listen to.

Paul Vincent, 2012

