



Vagabonds

5 Organ Grinder Songs from “The Starlight Express”

Words: Algernon Blackwood Music: Edward Elgar

Songs of Travel

Words: Robert Louis Stevenson Music: Ralph Vaughan Williams

Robert-John Edwards (Bass-Baritone) & Sara Wilander (Piano)

5 Organ Grinder Songs

from *The Starlight Express*

Music: Edward Elgar (1857-1934), Words: Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951)
Accompaniment arranged by Julius Harrison (1885-1963) [1,2 & 5] and Robert-John Edwards (1976*) [3&4]

1: To The Children; 2: The Blue Eyes Fairy; 3: The Curfew Song;
 4: Wake up, You Little Night Winds; 5: My Old Tunes.

These five songs are all taken from a children's play by Algernon Blackwood, produced during the war in 1915 and adapted from his own novel (co-written with Violet Pearn) *A Prisoner in Fairyland*. The two newly arranged accompaniments were written in 2015 to mark the centenary of Elgar's composing of "The Starlight Express". All five songs are sung by the Organ Grinder: a nomadic Sandman-type character associated with the sleep of children. There are also multiple musical references to Elgar's own *Wand of Youth* suite.

The story is one of lost magic and innocence. The four children are associated with constellations throughout the story and constant references to them are made throughout the cycle (Pleiades, Pole Star, Big/Little Bear and Orion) – this in particular explains the text of the *Curfew Song*. The adults, however, are all deeply troubled individuals: e.g. the father is an unsuccessful author and the mother has domestic issues. In the story, the children go on an adventure for some fairy dust to take away the problems of the "wumbled" adults. Characters such as Lamp-Lighters, Chimney Sweeps and other Street Sellers adorn their journey; all significant by their near obsolescence during the 1910s when this work was first performed.

In May 1918, Charles Mott, the original Organ Grinder ("Tramp") was killed in France by a German shell burst aged 37. Elgar was deeply affected by this and wrote to a friend of his disbelief at the news, describing Mott as a "simple, good and honest soul". In a further twist of fate, the play and a great many of the materials belonging to the play (including props, costumes, script and score) were destroyed in two air raids during WWII, in 1940. Only the full manuscript score survived: this score had many of Elgar's markings and revisions, allowing a republishing to later take place.

Songs of Travel

Music: Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), Words: Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Vaughan Williams' cycle "Songs of Travel" have often been referred to as the English *Winterreise*, starting as they do with the defiant Vagabond and the evocative piano accompaniment literally trudging along. Written between 1901 and 1904, the works were published in two volumes: 1-3 in the first volume, 4-8 in the second

and the ninth song going unpublished until after Vaughan Williams' death more than 50 years later. Whilst there is no specific intended narrative to Stevenson's words, a logical story line does appear to be implied.

The Vagabond is the best known song of the set. The Vagabond declaims that he is carefree and will take whatever comes at him. He states that he does not seek wealth or love, just the open road and sky. However, as the song closes, this defiance waivers as he states that he does not ask for wealth or love but he does ask for the open road and sky.

Let Beauty Awake is a tranquil evocation of beauty at dawn and dusk over a rippling piano accompaniment. The Vagabond may well be in love with more than nature, though, as he mentions "let her wake to the kiss of a tender friend".

The Roadside Fire is a lively song where the Vagabond talks to a companion, perhaps a protégé or his love. He talks of how he will make a palace from birdsong and the blue days at sea and of how they should wash in the river and the dew. He finally mentions the song that only they will know, perhaps a song of their love, or simply for the beauties of nature.

Youth and Love is full of imagery. It is a recollection of the Vagabond's youth and his first love, whom he hides waiting for. Then, as he sees her, he can no longer resist and calls out to her, before departing, embarrassed and not awaiting the young girl's response.

In Dreams is the most harmonically complex piece in the cycle and it carries the most emotional weight. The Vagabond sees his lover in a dream, imagining her to be sad and retaining the tokens of their love, hidden away and almost forgotten. He imagines her tears and recalls how he left her with a smile and reminds the memory of her that she will never be forgotten.

The Infinite Shining Heavens is a total contrast to the weight of the previous song. The piano part undulates gently, as the Vagabond examines the stars; dumb, shining and dead and yet dearer than to him than food. Night upon night the Vagabond stares up to the same stars until he looks in the dusk and sees that a star has come down for him. This ambiguous ending may indicate the Vagabond's death, which gives the following three songs added poignancy.

Whither Must I Wander has the feel of the folk-songs that Vaughan Williams was well known for collecting. Indeed, the words were written by Stevenson with the Scottish ballad "Wandering Willie" in his mind. It is winter in the song and the Vagabond tells of his childhood home and recalls the friends that have all now left the house in the moor-land, empty and cold. The final verse expresses that spring shall soon return but the Vagabond explains that he goes for ever and can never return.

Bright is the Ring of Words is about the song of a singer (most likely the Vagabond himself) whose songs are still sung after his death and bring the hay-swains home. It concludes with a lover singing and a maid, likely the one mentioned in previous songs, remembering the long-forgotten Vagabond. (In this, it shares its themes with *My Old Tunes* in Elgar's set earlier on.)

I have trod the Upward and the Downward Slope makes the fate of the Vagabond clearer and was finally added to the group in 1962, changing the character of the ending of the cycle completely. Whereas "Bright is the Ring of Words" has a positive, almost bitter-sweet ending, the rediscovered item has a bleak yet majestic feeling of resignation to it as it recalls the previous two songs and concludes with the Vagabond walking off into the ether. Has there ever been a discovery that has so changed the nature of a work?