

GEORGE BUTTERWORTH (1885-1916)**Is my team ploughing?**

George Butterworth (1885-1916) was one of a number of promising young composers who were killed during the First World War (the most local one is Ernest Farrar, who was born in Micklefield, to the east of Leeds). Butterworth was killed during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He is remembered for a number of finely crafted songs and descriptive orchestral works in the English pastoral tradition – his orchestral rhapsody ‘A Shropshire Lad’ was first performed in Leeds in 1913.

His best known songs are two groups of settings of poems by A.E. Housman, published in 1896 as ‘A Shropshire Lad’. The poems, written in the direct and simple manner which always attracts composers, gives a number of pen-portraits of the idyllic life in rural Shropshire at the end of the 19th century, which is then disrupted by wars in which many young local men will lose their lives. The poems are not, of course, about the First World War, but about Victorian wars when the soldiers still wore red uniforms, but the relevance to the Great War of 1914 to 1918 is striking and poignant.

This song, the last of the ‘Six Songs from A Shropshire Lad’ is a conversation between the ghost of a man killed in battle and his friend, who is still alive. The ghost sings quietly and the friend loudly and at a slightly faster pace. The poem develops through its four double verses, as the conversation turns from farming and football to thoughts of the sweetheart the dead man had to leave behind and the revelation – not stated, but obvious to everyone – that the dead man’s sweetheart has now taken up with his friend.

The accompaniment is simple and chordal, with ‘suspended’ notes adding some interest. This enables the voices to have prominence in their declamation and to be heard very clearly, as if in normal speech. The ending is quiet and – even with the final low note in the bass – not really conclusive; this conversation has not really solved anything.

The song is usually performed by one singer, although it could be attempted as a duet.

*"Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?"*

*Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;
No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.*

*"Is football playing
Along the river-shore,
With lads to chase the leather,
Now I stand up no more?"*

*Ay, the ball is flying,
The lads play heart and soul;
The goal stands up, the keeper
Stands up to keep the goal.*

*"Is my girl happy,
That I thought hard to leave,
And has she tired of weeping
As she lies down at eve?"*

*Ay, she lies down lightly,
She lies not down to weep:
Your girl is well contented.
Be still, my lad, and sleep.*

*"Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thin and pine,
And has he found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?"*

*Yes, lad, I lie easy,
I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.*

Alfred Houseman (1859-1936)