

Music Reflection - Beside the Seaside!

As we pass the longest day, we enter July and high summer. Despite all of the constraints of the Covid pandemic, summer leads to thoughts of holidays and for most of us that in turn raises visions of the sea – as the song says “I do like to be beside the seaside!”. The sea has as many moods as we can imagine from raging ferocity to limpid calm and is capable of instilling almost every emotion from abject fear through to complete relaxation and peace but most of us are captivated by it and can spend more time watching it than we would almost anything else.

As well as providing rest and relaxation and offering great beauty, the sea is also a means of transport, a source of energy and food and in the past a defensive barrier to an island nation; it can of course also be a cause of destruction and danger thus it also requires our respect. Sadly, and to our shame we have abused the sea by using it as a depository for our waste and pollution and by irresponsibly depleting its resources.

The sea figures in almost every book of the bible starting with creation in Genesis and running right through to Revelation. The sea is mentioned no less than 352 times in the King James Bible and the Sea of Galilee plays a significant part in accounts of Jesus’ ministry providing the location for miracles, respite away from the crowds, a pulpit for preaching to those on the shore as well as a spot for the risen Jesus and his disciples to eat together.

As we enjoy the sea and the seaside may we remember that they are part of God’s wonderful creation that he gives us to use freely. May we keep in mind that we are given God’s gifts to use responsibly, wisely and to the good of all both now and in the future.

My musical recommendations this month are again secular in nature but of course all rejoice in the beauty of God’s creation and his wonderful gift of music.

Desert Island Discs is one of the most well-known and popular radio programmes, it was devised by Roy Plomley in 1942 initially for the BBC Forces Programme but soon moved to the mainstream stations where it has stayed to the present day after well over 3250 editions. The programme features a celebrity ‘cast away’ on a desert island and the signature tune “By the Sleepy Lagoon” certainly evokes an image of palm trees, a sandy beach and warm blue sea. The reality is really rather different as Eric Coates, its composer was in fact inspired to write this slow waltz in 1930 by the view on a warm, still summer evening across the “lagoon” from the east beach at Selsey towards Bognor Regis.

Eric Coates 1886-1957 was the only son in five children born to a Nottinghamshire GP, both of Coates parents were highly musical but, as we have heard so often in these reflections, his father was strongly opposed to his son following a musical education instead wishing him to follow a career in a bank. Persistence on the part of Eric obviously paid off since his Father in due course paid for him to apply to the Royal Academy of Music where he studied the viola with Lionel Tertis and composition with Frederick Corder both highly accomplished musicians. Coates set out to become a successful composer of light vein classical music and certainly achieved his aim with perhaps his ‘London Suite’ and ‘Dam Busters March’ being the most well-known.

Without a doubt “By the Sleepy Lagoon” must be the most frequently broadcast of Coates works – it is performed here by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Last Night of the Proms in 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWecOTL6hEE>

Joseph Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was, along with Claude Debussy, regarded as an 'impressionist' composer although Ravel disliked that description, he was however, without doubt, regarded in the 1920s and 30s as the greatest living French composer. Ravel was born in the Basque town of Ciboure, France, near Biarritz, into a family with an interest in music. After being educated at home, Ravel was encouraged by his father to seek entry to the Conservatoire du Paris which he achieved in 1889. Despite having obvious talent as a pianist and composer Ravel had a turbulent relationship with the Conservatoire authorities at one stage being expelled but his composition teacher Gabrielle Faure recognised his undoubted talent and played a significant part in bringing about his success. In 1899 Ravel composed his first significant piano piece; Pavane pour une infante défunte ("Pavane for a dead princess") which interestingly at the time generated little interest. 'Miroirs' is a five-movement suite for solo piano written by Ravel between 1904 and 1905, the third movement 'Une Barque sur L'Océan' pictures a boat as it sails on the waves of the ocean. It is played here by André Laplante.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTYUyDjVCRU&list=RDbTYUyDjVCRU&start_radio=1

John Edward Masefield (1878 – 1967) was born in Ledbury, Herefordshire where sadly both his parents died while he was still young. Masefield had an unhappy education as a boarder at Warwick School following which he joined HMS Conway, a naval training ship, both to train him for a life at sea and because his aunt, in whose care he was left, though it would break his insatiable desire for reading. Masefield found that, in reality, a life at sea gave plenty of opportunity for reading and stayed at sea for a number of years. In due course the young Masefield found he had an interest in storytelling and determined that he should become a writer and story teller himself. Masefield jumped ship in New York and after a time as a semi-vagrant found work in New York and after a while returned to England where he married and in 1902 was in charge of fine art section of the Arts and Industrial Exhibition in Wolverhampton. At this point Masefield was getting his poetry published in magazines and later in 1902 his first collection of poems "Salt-Water Ballads" was published. The collection includes the poem "Sea Fever" which talks of the poet's desire to go and sail on the lonely sea. Masefield of course went on to become a renowned poet who in 1930 was appointed Poet Laureate which role he held until his death making him the longest serving Poet Laureate after Lord Alfred Tennyson. In 1913 "Sea Fever" was set to music by the English composer John Ireland who has figured in these articles several times and is best known perhaps for his hymn tune "Love Unknown". The song is performed exquisitely here by Roderick Williams baritone accompanied by Julius Drake on the piano

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoxttGAQX-E>

Claude Debussy (1862- 1918) was born in Paris to a modest family. The young Claude showed considerable musical ability and as a consequence gained admission to the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten. Slightly older than Ravel and never on good terms with him, their lives had a remarkable similarity in that they both had a bad relationship initially with the Conservatoire authorities, both were labelled to their annoyance "impressionist" in their musical style and both made the decision to focus on composition as their principal interest. Despite his principal interest being elsewhere, Debussy was an accomplished pianist and in his early career had considerable success as such. In 1902 Debussy's first opera "Pelléas et Mélisande" had its debut in Paris to a very mixed reception although much of the disapproval was of Debussy's treatment of women, including his wife, rather than the music alone. In 1903 the composer started work on the second of his orchestral works "La mer, trois esquisses symphoniques pour orchestra" often now simply referred to as "La Mer", the work was completed in 1905 and Debussy took the

proofs with him on holiday at the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne to check them. The work was premiered in Paris later in 1905 where it received a lukewarm reception and it was not until after performances in the US in 1906 and the UK in 1907 that a further performance in Paris in 1908 saw it become Debussy's most popular and frequently performed work. The theme of the work is a dialogue between the wind and the sea, something we may well experience when we are "beside the seaside". "La Mer" is performed here by the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Pierre Boulez.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loENgt1h4_A

As I mentioned earlier the sea can have many moods from ferocity to absolute calm and the Cornish coast can provide dramatic demonstrations of all these. If you have been fortunate enough to visit Cornwall recently you will have been able to see this display first hand but, if not, then many of us will have seen some impressive displays in the televised episodes of Poldark. Tintagel Castle provides a wonderful setting to view the sea in its various moods and Sir Arnold Edward Trevor Bax chose this location as the subject for his symphonic poem Tintagel. Arnold Bax (1883–1953) was the son of a wealthy barrister and grew up with considerable private means which give him a greater freedom in his life choices than most. Bax attended the Royal Academy of Music where he studied composition and piano but although being recognised as a formidable pianist, he chose to pursue a life in composition. Arnold Bax was a prodigious and successful composer in his time indeed during the 1920's and 30's many regarded him as the leading English symphonist. On the death of Sir William Walton in 1941, Bax succeeded him as Master of the King's Music and as such composed a number of pieces for royal events including the coronation of our present Queen. "Tintagel" seeks to portray the various moods of the sea against the background of a proud but ruined castle. After his death "Tintagel" was the only work of Bax' to be heard for some time although he has more recently achieved the recognition he deserves; the work is performed here by the Scottish National Orchestra.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixF5f2cqIKo>

After a busy day beside the seaside perhaps we might want to know what sea conditions will be tomorrow by listening to the Shipping Forecast on Radio 4 before it closes down for the night. If you are a night owl you will probably be familiar with the orchestral piece by Ronald Binge entitled "Sailing By" which regularly precedes the late night shipping forecast. Ronald Binge (1910-1979) was born into a working-class home in Derby, he was a chorister in his local church and studied music at the Derby School of Music. Binge was an accomplished cinema organist and in his early career played at Blackpool and Great Yarmouth. After WWII Mantovani offered Binge the role of composer and arranger of music for his new orchestra and it was in this role that Binge devised the "cascading strings" effect much beloved of Mantovani and other band leaders of the time. Without doubt "Elizabethan Serenade" is the most well-known of Binge's compositions but "Sailing By" (1963) has a niche of its own that ensures its daily performance. Here it is performed by the Alan Perry/William Gardner Orchestra – have a good night!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFdas-kMF74>

Keith Day