

*"...we vanish into the books with our names in.*

*We do not know how we fit into the pattern."*

*George Szirtes 2013*



Whilst inspired by centenary commemorations of World War 1, *The Returning* extends this zeitgeist into a deliberately universal message which considers the continuing emotional fall-out from human conflict wherever it may occur.

After the first of numerous roll calls, where names of WW1 fatalities are given a brief recall, the work opens with lively reminders of the 1914-18 conflict. There is a jocular atmosphere initially from newly-demobilized troops, with hints of WW1 songs; but George Szirtes' libretto soon proceeds to examine what life may hold for those who survive such a conflict. We may have moved on today from whizzbangs and trenches to cruise missiles and satellite technology; from shell shock to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – but does society satisfactorily rehabilitate and support “the returning” after an initial heroes' welcome?

Bureaucratic state interference is parodied for its vacuous control over men who have risked their lives for their country. The Church and society are also gently parodied – we may pay annual lip-service with poppies, two minutes' silence and wreath-laying at decaying war memorials, but this may omit honouring the survivors. A chorale-like, sardonic treatment of the iconic hymn, St Anne ('Oh God, our help in ages past') helps to portray a typical UK Remembrance Day Service with all its shortcomings.

*The Returning* does not set out to extol pacifism per se (“there are the just wars, there are true causes. There exist tyrants, there are moments for sacrifice”). However, it invites us, whilst remembering the atrocities such as WW1, to reconsider our attitude towards rehabilitating those who have returned from any war or conflict.

The recurring roll calls of international names are all of WW1 fallen – and serve as a minute sample of the millions lost to us. The UK names in the score are all from one microcosmic area - Abbots Langley in Hertfordshire (but local names, pertinent to a performance, are permissible and encouraged).

Work on *The Returning* commenced at the time of another important centenary – the birth of Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976). There are numerous hidden musical motifs intended as a tribute to this seminal influential composer.

A characteristic fusion of musical styles is employed – traditional English modal lyricism, simple 'oompah' village band parody, hints of modern jazz, complex serialism and tonal clusters – with much reworking of the musical material, producing an organic and approachable composition.

## Notes for performance

***The Returning* (42') would make an ideal companion piece to Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem* (40'), which has a similar instrumentation and sentiment.**

### Roll calls

The names printed in the score are international, as this work is not intended to be partisan. The majority of the names, however, are from one English village in Hertfordshire, serving as a microcosm of the overwhelming losses suffered during WW1. If preferred, a performance may be personalised and made more poignant, by using names of local fatalities instead.

Various ways are possible for presenting the roll calls. Imaginative, but sensitive, presentation is to be encouraged, whichever option is chosen:

1. It is preferred that a silent PowerPoint presentation should be used, with a rolling list of international WW1 combatants, as indicated by arrows in the score. There is just one section in the work where the roll call is required to be vocal and not visually presented: between Figs. 36 - 37 (\*see also chorus notes).
2. If a backdrop projection is not feasible, it is possible for the two male soloists to act also as spoken narrators. The start and finish of each roll call is notated precisely in the solo parts (and the arrowed indicators should be followed). Names must be intoned fairly solemnly, and not at too brisk a pace. Importantly, the speaking rhythm must not synchronise with the incessant bass drum beat.
3. An offstage, unseen narrator could recite the names through a PA system, which would give an 'other worldly' effect. This may give rise, however, to co-ordination problems if at a distance from the conductor.

**If the printed names are to be substituted with names local to the performance, the duration of the roll calls must still be strictly adhered to, as indicated by arrows in the score:**

1. Bar 8 - Fig. 1 (16 seconds) circa 8 names
2. Bar 264 - Fig. 12 (52 seconds) c. 23 names
3. Bar 361 - Fig. 16 (30 seconds) c. 12 names
4. Bars 500 – 512 (32 seconds) c. 14 names
5. Bars 615 - 633 (23 seconds) c. 10 names
6. Between Figs. 36 – 37: Bars 670 – 687 & 699 – Fig. 37 c.40 names to be said or shouted as a 'babble', endeavouring to be heard at the loudest points. (No video projection here). See **Chorus Notes** below.
7. Bars 732 - 765 (43 seconds) c. 16 names
8. Bars 916 - 931 (19 seconds) c. 9 names
9. Bars 997 - Fig. 53 (19 seconds) c. 9 names
10. Figs. 61 - 62 (24 seconds) c. 11 names
11. Bars 1669 - 1696 - This is not a roll call, but the soloists speak in turn, reading the text in the score, starting and finishing exactly where indicated by the arrows.

## Video projection

Some silent video footage of those returning from war zones - casualties or veterans of any conflict from around the globe - could be used imaginatively. Minimal use of battle zone images should be shown, as this work is focusing on those who are returning from conflict.

The video projection could commence in bar 3 (arrowed) and could run until Fig. 6 (3'05"). This is intended to enhance the musical references to WW1 songs at this point. However, the roll call names would need to be superimposed or cut into the video as marked in the score. It could be run again, for example, between Figs. 34 - 36 (54") and Figs. 42 - 44 (40"). Certain images within the text could be suggested visually (e.g. war memorials, poppies etc) when appropriate. This can all be applied at the discretion of the director, whereas the roll calls must be used precisely, as indicated in the score.

## Instrumentation

All instruments are required. All wind and brass parts are written in the score at pitch. Percussion ranges are as follows:



## Chorus

A highly competent and well-balanced large choir is required to sing this work.

NB: Figs 36 – 37. In addition to the names in the score, several choir members should call out a name (of a local or family member lost in conflict). They need to call out with reference to the prevailing dynamic and during a given rest in their vocal part. Strong voices will be required to project, even shout, when the choral and orchestral texture in this section gets louder. It is suggested that the singers have a single name to enunciate, freely and antiphonally in this section; they should sing throughout the section, but at an appropriate rest, they should say or shout their selected name.

*Duration: 42 minutes*