

When Music Sounds - programme notes

Rebecca Dale 2025



Choral symphony *When Music Sounds* began its life in 2012, when as a young composer I was selected for a programme called 'Adopt a Composer'. The UK scheme (run by charities Sound & Music, Making Music and PRS in association with BBC Radio 3) paired emerging composers with ensembles to create a piece. I was matched with the Nottingham Festival Chorus, who asked for something to celebrate 'the power and joy of music' for their 30th anniversary, and buzzing to work on my first large-scale commission.

I searched for texts, and Walter de la Mare's poem, *Music*, felt just right as the central idea. It describes music's transformative power to illuminate our experiences and draw out the wonder of the world around us. Fragments of other poems through the work then expand on this theme. I'd been gifted a full-scale symphony orchestra along with the symphony chorus (many a composer's dream!). As a young composer pretty obsessed with film scores and the evocative potential of sweeping orchestration, I was keen to write something full of colour and explore the many textures only possible with such an ensemble. The vivid depictions in de la Mare's poem felt perfect for this too.

*When music sounds, gone is the earth I know,
And all her lovely things even lovelier grow;
Her flowers in vision flame, her forest trees
Lift burdened branches, stilled with ecstasies.*

*When music sounds, out of the water rise
Naiads whose beauty dims my waking eyes,
Rapt in strange dreams burns each enchanted face,
With solemn echoing stirs their dwelling-place.*

*When music sounds, all that I was I am
Ere to this haunt of brooding dust I came;*

*And from Time's woods break into distant song
The swift-winged hours, as I hasten along.*

Central to this piece is a four note motif, echoing the four syllables of the title (for music nerds: degrees of the scale 5 #4 6 3). You'll hear it woven in throughout, from the very start in the cellos to the final cor anglais solo, intended as a reminder of that transformative power of music.

Prelude: To The Wild

*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild*

- from *The Stolen Child* by W.B.Yeats

De la Mare's original poem is full of magical forests created by music, so I intended to begin by creating exactly that. Opening with wind, whispers and fragmented voices, the enchanted 'distant song' of a forest of music should lure the listener inside.

1. Song's Flight

If you cannot teach me to fly, teach me to sing

- J.M.Barrie

Once in this forest of music we hear the snippet of a song, a strange lullaby at first, before 'swift-winged', it takes flight.

2. Out Of The Water

This movement takes its cue from 'When music sounds, out of the water rise / Naiads whose beauty dims my waking eyes'. I love a good melodic theme, and wanted to explore this more directly here. The siren call of wordless naiads interweave with watery orchestral currents that ebb and flow. This movement has always felt like something of a ballet to me.

3. Strange Dreams

With music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums

- from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman

I keep such music in my brain

*No din this side of death can quell;
Glory exulting over pain,
And beauty, garlanded in hell.*

*My dreaming spirit will not heed
The roar of guns that would destroy
My life that on the gloom can read
Proud-surging melodies of joy.*

*To the world's end I went, and found
Death in his carnival of glare;
But in my torment I was crowned,
And music dawned above despair.*

- from *Secret Music* by Siegfried Sassoon

*There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies.*

- from *Song of the Lotos-Eaters* by Lord Tennyson

Music's power isn't just in creating beauty and joy, and *Strange Dreams* is made up of two parts. The first (*To The World's End*) explores music in war, both as a call to arms and as the surreal insulation from its horrors (illustrated powerfully in Sassoon's poem). In the aftermath of this and the more otherworldly second part (*There Is Sweet Music*), music entices us into a mystical sleep – or the 'strange dreams' of de la Mare's original poem. This ethereal section requires both the choir and soloist to perform delicately in a high register, and is one of the most challenging of the work. But it's perhaps also my personal favourite. It concludes by reclaiming an atonal passage from the first section "*to the world's end I went and found...*" into something altogether more dreamy.

4. I'll Sing

*I remember the songs we shared;
I hear the singing: it's as if you are there.
Your joy in music, it stays with me;
It means that you'll never leave.
And everything you loved I feel you in,
So for us both I will sing,*

I'll Sing, I'll Sing.

- Rebecca Dale

Two years before I started *When Music Sounds* I'd lost my mother to breast cancer. I'd go on to write her a whole requiem, but at the time I didn't know this and hoped to include something for her. My mother loved music, and did so much to encourage my composing. She also loved performing in local choirs, and enjoying music together was one of the things that connected us. As part of the 'Adopt A Composer' programme I got to spend time with the big community choir I was writing for, some of them making music together for three decades, and I was struck by the bonds they'd formed. That's what this movement is really about - and music's power as a memory that keeps those bonds alive. I had the idea of a melody in my head and searched for an appropriate text but, unable to find one, I wrote my own. I don't usually write lyrics, and perhaps these might be seen as a little trite - but they express something that felt important to encapsulate.

5. The Earth I Know

I'd been working on the earlier movements of *When Music Sounds*, and showed some drafts to the choir. The feedback was "we like it, but it's not all that celebratory is it!" So for the final movement I knew I had my work cut out! With the title poem finally appearing, this movement interweaves many themes from previous movements into a jubilant celebration of the power of music, and the wonder of the earth around us.