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EXMOOR COMMUNITY MUSIC PROJECT COMMEMORATES FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY

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Article and photos by Elizabeth Atkinson, Project Manager for 'Fragments: Voices from the First World War'

West Somerset will be hosting the world première of a new choral piece by local composer Emily Feldberg on 10 November, involving more than 90 musicians from across Exmoor and beyond. *Fragments: Voices from the First World War* brings together the voices of British and German people caught up in the war, using original sources from the time. It will have its première at Minehead Avenue Methodist Church on the eve of the centenary of Armistice Day, and will be conducted by leading choral conductor Nigel Perrin. Tickets for the evening performance have already sold out, but there is still an opportunity to hear *Fragments* at the open rehearsal on the afternoon of 10 November, at the same venue, starting at 2pm.

The composer, who lives in Carhampton, started work on the hour-long piece in 2014, at the centenary of the outbreak of the conflict, and completed it earlier this year. "Writing any music about the First World War is extremely emotional," she said. "I have spent the last four years both crying for the tragedy and questioning whether I was representing people's experiences appropriately. I have really tried to let the voices of German and British participants speak for themselves."

A wide range of texts dating from the First World War have been used for the piece, including the words of a Devon farmer, a Ruhr miner, a German soldier, a woman munitions worker, a grieving mother, a conscientious objector's memoirs, the Somme Army report, a humorous poem from the *Wipers Times* and verses found on a scrap of newspaper in a German railway carriage in 1918.

Different musical styles in the piece reflect this range. Starting and ending with the words, 'Lest we forget,' the music moves the listener from the first swells of patriotic fervour through the tragedy of loss, to the jaunty defiance in the face of danger of the Tommies in the trenches and the women in the munitions factories, and the horrors experienced in the mire of the Somme. It takes in both the agony of decision for conscientious objectors and the stoicism of young British and German soldiers in the face of impending death. The piece draws to an end with the sombre reflection that 'Peace has come to a suffering world' and the implied challenge expressed in the words of Quaker peace campaigner Corder Catchpool (1919): "We are only justified in going on living if our futures manifest, at every point and at all times, a heroism equal to that of those killed in battle."

From the outset, this project has been shaped by the input of many different people in many different ways. "Composing a piece of music is only the beginning," said Emily. "People have shared stories, suggested ideas, provided texts and given advice and encouragement. Each new contribution has changed and widened the end product. It really has become a community project, not only because of the number of people involved in the first performance, but also because of those who have influenced its development." Even the publicity has drawn on local inspiration, featuring graffiti scratched into the lead roof of Carhampton church tower 100 years ago: 'PEACE NOV 11 18'.

Most of the participants have a direct connection to the conflict. The section on Conscientious Objectors was inspired by materials provided by Chris Lawson of Minehead Quakers (Chris and his wife Christina will both be involved in the performance) whose father was a Conscientious Objector in the First World War. Among other materials, Chris provided Emily with the journal of a member of the Friends Ambulance Unit, with which two uncles of Philippa Gerry, who is singing in the piece, also served. Philippa's father was shot and gassed on the Somme, an aunt supervised hospital trains, a cousin nursed the wounded in northern France and died of pneumonia and two more uncles' lives were irretrievably changed by shell shock. Thelma Vernon's grandfather, like so many others, was killed in the first year of the war, while Helen Jowett was moved by her own grandfather's experience of the trenches to write a poem. 'Devon Farmer'. which now forms part of the libretto of the piece (the only text not actually dating from the war). And the effect is felt through the generations: the baritone soloist for November's performance, Jamie Rock (a favourite visiting soloist for Minehead audiences), wrote, "My Great Great Grandfather fought and died in WW1, so it will mean a lot to me and my family to represent his fallen friends and foes. I hope my Granny will be able to make it over for the performance." And one survivor of the conflict will be present at the performance: Tim Hedgecock will be playing in the orchestra on a violin his grandfather played in an army band in India during the war.

Links with the German experience of the war are also important for many of the participants. Emily has German family links herself, and has also drawn on the accounts of German friends and relatives. Emily's friend Anna Fleisch related how her grandfather only spoke about one aspect of his experience of the war: although billeted on enemy ground, his unit were given cake by the women in the village on their safe return from the trenches, and Emily has used this for the section entitled 'Kuchen' ('Cake!') in the piece. For other participants, the German link is more recent: "I'm half German," said Bill Griffiths. "My mum would have been really proud that I'm doing this."

Orchestral rehearsals started back in 2017, and a choir of more than 50 singers started rehearsals in April of this year, with members coming from as far afield as London, Yorkshire and Scotland, as well as from a wide range of local choral groups. Participants' responses to the music have been overwhelming. Helen Jowett wrote, "The music is wonderful and so emotional – I can't sing 'Kuchen' [depicting a mother who has lost her son] without a wobbly voice!" while cellist Jenny Quick wrote, "It is a fantastic achievement and already wielding the power to touch and move us all." Singer John Osborn, writing in response to a full-day workshop with conductor Nigel Perrin, wrote, "I have Emily's music in my head all the time. I was three feet off the ground when I got home from Saturday's workshop – it was one of the best days I've ever had."

For some singers, this is the culmination of a lifetime's ambition. Tim Pettigrew, who is singing a solo from the choir as a conscientious objector, wrote, "It realises a childhood dream when my Mum started taking me to the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester Cathedral (in the 1950s and '60s) and I remember being emotionally electrified for days afterwards by the baritone solo of the Priest at the conclusion of Part 1 of *The Dream of Gerontius*. I wondered what it must be like to sing something like that and even daydreamed that I might do something similar one day. Well now, some 60 years later, you have realised my dream and have given me a musical experience that I will cherish and which will be with me for the rest of my life."

The project is also bringing together singers with a wide range of musical experience and expertise: some have never been involved in anything on this scale before and some don't read music but have learnt the whole piece from singing along with the music on the project website, while others are seasoned performers bringing their skills to the piece to the benefit of all concerned. The orchestra, too, contains players with a wide range of skills and experience, including one adult learner who has never played in an orchestra before. Participants' own suggestions have also led to additional support: they can now sing along to their own lines on the website, watch videos of rehearsal sections, practise their German pronunciation with online tutorials and attend extra sections for note-learning. "The rehearsals have a real buzz," said Emily. "You can feel the commitment."

An Arts Council grant has enabled the amateur performers to work both with conductor Nigel Perrin and with five professional

orchestral players, and local individual and business patrons are also supporting the project with funding and services. There are still opportunities to give support: please email emilyfeldberg@btinternet.com or phone 01643 821756 for details. Entry to the open rehearsal on 10 November is free, but donations towards the cost of the project would be welcomed. Souvenir programmes will be on sale at the rehearsal, containing the full text of *Fragments* and the composer's notes on the piece: anyone attending the rehearsal or performance is advised to read these before it starts if they can. As it is a working rehearsal (so visitors are asked to remain silent), there may be some stops and starts, but a full run-through of the hour-long piece is planned for shortly after 2pm.

To find out more about the project and get a flavour of the music, visit www.emily-feldberg-music.uk/ or simply search online for Emily Feldberg music.

PHOTO: Emily, the composer, working with the orchestra.