



Photo: David King / flickr CC.

Chris Lawson writes about a remembrance of 1914-18 in words and music

*And we are only justified in going on living
if our futures manifest at every point and at all times
a heroism equal to those killed in battle.*

The above words are based on the thoughts of Corder Catchpool in 1919 which Emily Feldberg uses in the concluding section of her new composition *Fragments: Voices from the First World War*. Corder Catchpool, a Quaker, had spent the first part of the war in the Friends' Ambulance Unit (FAU) in France, during which he was awarded the Mons Star for bravery, and the second part in prison in England for refusing to register for conscription.

The choir goes on to sing words often sung at German military funerals:

*Ich hatt' einen Kameraden,
einen bessern findst du nit
(I had a comrade,
you will find no better)*

This juxtaposition of German and English language and sources is a major part of the whole work, reminding us how similar the hopes and fears of people are on both sides of such a conflict.

Emily Feldberg's research has been extensive in finding records of events, and poems and writings from a wide range of sources – from a Ruhr miner to a woman munitions worker. She has added her own work skilfully and sensitively. The libretto is therefore full of interest in itself, as is the way she has composed music that fits the words and sentiments. Even in rehearsals, members of the choir found the combination emotionally powerful.

Three times during the whole work a lament is sung. The words include:

*Schmerz! Schmerz! Genommen und genommen.
Menschcn genommen, Glauben genommen.
(Pain! Pain! Taken and taken.
People taken, faith taken.)*

These words are taken from the diary for 1917 of Käthe Kollwitz, whose son was killed in the opening months of the war fighting for Germany. From the other side, a phrase from Mohammed Agim, a wounded Indian officer writing in hospital in Brighton, just says: 'There is no counting the number of lives lost.'

Cakes

Emily Feldberg lives near Minehead and has family members and friends from Germany. One of them was told by her grandfather of an episode when he was in the German army and billeted in a village in captured enemy territory. The soldiers returned to their accommodation one day to find that some of the villagers had baked cakes for them. 'Kuchen! Kuchen! Kuchen für uns!' was their surprised reaction. The song gives the reasoning of one of the women who had made the cakes:

*Somewhere I have a son; he fought and killed
just like you.
He smiled, had fears, but I cannot dry his tears,
And he lived and liked cake, just like you.
He was his mother's son; you are your mother's son*

*And you still live, to you I give this cake to
a mother's son.*

Local Quaker and choir member Christina Lawson says: 'I find "*Kuchen*" particularly moving. Emily has made the words and music go together so well that there are tears amongst us even as we rehearse it.' Jane Durham, in the orchestra, comments: 'It's made up of such contrasting pieces musically with different emotions, but all so real and heartfelt.'

Emily Feldberg attends Minehead Meeting's monthly weekday Meeting for Worship. I was able to provide her with background material for the work about conscientious objectors.

From the special issue of *the Friend* in 2016 marking the centenary of the introduction of conscription, she picked out a phrase from David Boulton's article ('the knock on the door') to show in one section that that is the moment 'that brings the great decision.'

The feelings about joining the military or not that were around in 1916 are highlighted by a quote from a military writer, doctor H Miller ('By George, I'd have [universal] military training in Heaven!') being set alongside key phrases from the Quaker Peace Testimony in its 1660 wording: 'All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny...'

Challenge

Emily Feldberg has been a campaigner for peace for many years. She was involved in the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, and composed a special short oratorio for the fiftieth anniversary of Amnesty International, performed in Minehead in 2011. She has published resource material for music education and taught in schools.

She says: 'Marking the centenary of the ending of the first world war is a challenge. I wanted to compose something that would reflect the huge variety of experiences of people caught up in it.'

Over the four years that the hour-long piece has been taking shape, far from being a shut-away composer, she has found that, from the beginning, this project has been shaped by the input of many different people... It really has become a community project.' The eighty or so people in the choir and orchestra preparing for the first performance would confirm that.

The musical styles are very varied to reflect the texts, from patriotic fervour to extreme grief, cheerfulness in the face of danger to deep reflection. They include two that would not be out of place in *Oh! What a Lovely War*. One is the defiant attitude of women working in a munitions factory, well aware of the dangers but, in the words of a poem written in 1917 by Madeline Ida Bedford:

*Afraid! Are you kidding? With money to spend,
Years back I wore tatters, now silk stockings, mi friend.*

The other uses as its text a poem published in the trench newspaper *The Wipers Times*, which shows how humour was often used to help deal with the realities of life at the front:

*Three Tommies sat in a trench one day
Discussing the war in the usual way.
They talked of the mud and they talked of the Hun
Of what was to do and what had been done...
But the point which they argued from post back
to pillar,
Was whether Notts County could beat Aston Villa.*

It's humour, but it's not funny. The whole piece is in sorrow not triumph. Commitment to duty and bravery are there, though the view throughout is from those caught up in the war, not leading or commanding it.

Lest we forget

The final lines start with a quote from another member of the FAU, Ernest Pettifer, and end with a heartfelt reminder:

*Peace has come to a suffering world
Suffering, suffering world.
Lest we forget.
Lest we forget, lest we forget.
Lest we forget.*

The first performance of *Fragments* is in Minehead on 10 November. The date is intentional – giving an opportunity to reflect on the events and feelings to which the 1914-18 war gave rise, and their significance today when wars are still seen as solutions even if, so often, they just add to problems.

Friends and many others will be grateful to Emily Feldberg for making the past reach into the present in this powerful way, and to her partner and project manager Elizabeth Atkinson for bringing it all to fruition. Thanks are also due to the Arts Council England and many others for their backing.

I hope the first performance may be followed by many others as different choirs take up the opportunity to present some of the fragments from the war of a century ago.

Chris is from Minehead Meeting.

Further information: www.emily-feldberg-music.uk