This July seventy-two City Choir singers and friends embarked on a tour to England. Aboard a double-decker bus we visited iconic sites like Stonehenge and Bath, made pilgrimage to the temple of choral singing that is King's College, Cambridge, sang at the great cathedrals of Gloucester and Ely, participated in the Music at Oxford concert series, and competed with World Cup fans for an audience in London. England lost in the semi-finals, but we had a good crowd!

England and the English choral tradition holds a special place in Maestro Robert Shafer's heart. He writes: "The great tradition of British choral singing must be considered one of the singular glories of music history. The enormously high standard set by British conductors and composers has influenced and inspired most if not all northern European countries. Certainly this has had an enormous impact on American choral singing and composition."

When the opportunity came for TCCW to perform a concert in remembrance of the centennial of the Armistice, Shafer was immediately drawn to the idea of a program by British composers who were alive during WWI, all of whom were directly involved and intensely impacted by the war.

Ralph Vaughan Williams, although in his forties, immediately enlisted as a private and was sent to the front to drive ambulances. We will be performing his great meditation on war and peace Dona Nobis Pacem.

His teacher, Sir Hubert Parry, contributed to the war effort by writing the patriotic song "Jerusalem": it was commissioned in the darkest days of 1916 to give hope to soldiers and those at home that England would prevail and return to peace.

John Ireland wrote "Greater Love Hath No Man" in the prewar days of 1912, but with its sentiment: "greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends," it soon became an unofficial anthem of the war-and perhaps a recruiting tool.
Gerald Finzi, although too young to fight, lost all three of his brothers and his music teacher to the war. He began his song "Farewell To Arms" in the aftermath of the first world war, and completed it in 1944 during the second world war. Its title invokes Hemingway's great novel of WWI; its subject, taken from two 16th and 17th century poems, is an elderly warrior who has laid down the tools of war. Finzi's choral work In Terra Pax was inspired by a New Year's Eve visit to Chosen Hill in Gloucester; in the cold starry midnight he heard the chiming of the church bells and the angel's promise of "on earth peace, good will toward men."

So the legacy of the Great War was on many singers' minds as we toured and sang. Gloucester Cathedral is home to memorials to Sir Hubert Parry, composer of "Jerusalem," Gerald Finzi, and the troubled poet, composer, and veteran of WWI Ivor Gurney, who was a chorister there as a boy. Gurney was fervently admired by Finzi (although the two never met, Finzi acquired Gurney's manuscripts and was instrumental in keeping his legacy alive).

Gurney suffered from mental illness and eventually died in an asylum, but his war years were ironically his happiest—perhaps the chaos raging around him kept his inner demons at bay. Gloucester Cathedral commissioned sets of stained-glass windows embodying both Finzi and Gurney's great works, a beautiful and moving tribute. The inscription on Parry's memorial was written by Robert Bridges, Poet Laureate and author of "Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913," the text of the baritone solo in In Terra Pax.

Memorials to the fallen of WWI abound throughout Britain. The memorial wall at King's College, Cambridge is inscribed with the names of the dead, the great poet Rupert Brooke who wrote, "If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field/That is for ever England," among them.

We saw wild poppies growing by the roadside and paper poppies on war memorials.
At Trinity College, Cambridge, we saw the courtyard of the Wren Library which had been turned into a makeshift hospital during the War.

We hope to bring some of these moving experiences home to our audience as we perform this Armistice Day.

The City Choir of Washington England Tour

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