

A Corncrake Story

In 1940, during the Second World War, a Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), was appointed to help promote and maintain British culture. Chaired by Lord De La Warr, President of the Board of Education, the Council was government-funded and after the war, in 1946, was renamed the Arts Council of Great Britain. However, it was not until 1962 that the Arts Council of Northern Ireland was established and, in the meantime, the local version of the CEMA committee continued to promote the arts here, chaired by Captain Peter Montgomery, distinguished member of an Anglo-Irish family whose leafy estate and Jacobean-Revival pile grace the outskirts of Fivemiletown.

Captain Peter, as he was affectionately known, was unusually handsome, in a Rupert-Brooke-First World-War-poet sort of way, tall, broad-shouldered, flat-stomached, and with a flop of blond hair. He and Anthony Blunt had been lovers when they were at Cambridge together. He had founded the Fivemiletown Choral Society, which practised and performed in Enniskillen. My parents were both keen members, so it was natural that they should hear about, in the late fifties/early sixties, I can't remember the exact date, a recital, to be held in Castle Coole, sponsored by CEMA, by the Belfast-born soprano, Heather Harper.

A couple of years later she would make the musical headlines by stepping in at the very last moment to sing the soprano role in the world premiere of Benjamin Britten's magnum opus, the *War Requiem*, given in the newly-rebuilt Coventry Cathedral. The performance was to be seen as an act of reconciliation between nations after the Second World War, with the British tenor, Peter Pears, the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and the Russian soprano, Galina Vishnevskaya. As the performance approached it became clear that the Soviet authorities would not allow her to leave Russia so, at ten days' notice, Miss Harper learned some very difficult modern music and gave a stunning performance, with the eyes and ears of the world watching and listening.

But that was all ahead of her. The CEMA concert at Castle Coole took place on one of those rare, hot, sunny, early-summer days from which dreams of childhood are made. I was a gangly teenager, the chief chorister of the Cathedral in Enniskillen and passionate about music, so there was no question that I would not go with my parents.

Miss Harper sang, amongst other things, Ravel's *Chansons Madécasses*. I think I remember that she started off as a mezzo. It was certainly the first time I ever heard (the beginning of) these wonderful sultry songs, their mood enhanced by the heat of summer wafting in through the entrance door, which had been left wide open.

The performance was in French, so perhaps the irony of the middle of the three songs, with its strongly anti-colonial sentiments, being sung in a building erected from the proceeds of the harvesting of Caribbean hardwoods by slave labour, was lost on the listeners. It is a very angry song, but not

as angry as Captain Peter became when an audacious corncrake commenced his fortissimo opposition on the far side of the gravel sweep. Though Captain Peter was handsome and well-put-together he was not the most physically coordinated of men and, as the recital was paused to allow the removal of the unwelcome counterpoint, we all watched him zig-zagging through the long grass, waving his arms and shouting "Shoo! Shoo!"

He returned to the Hall, beads of sweat on his brow, his collar and blond quiff awry, and the concert proceeded, suffused with polite good humour. It didn't last. Mr Corncrake didn't take the hint.

Eventually three male volunteers, the teenage me included, were posted strategically in the meadow and the doors and shutters of the Hall closed against any possible audio-interruption. Captain Peter was taking no chances. The songs, set in the heat of dusty Madagascar, continued in spartan neoclassical half-light.

Richard Pierce is a retired architect who has exhibited his watercolours, has written a novel, climbed Kilimanjaro, swims a mile a day and spends half the year in Finland with his partner.