

A Walk Into War

(Tenor and piano quintet)

(Words: Laurie Lee)

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A Walk Into War for tenor and piano quintet is based on two books by the English writer, Laurie Lee. The first, *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*, is an account of Laurie Lee leaving his village in Gloucester, walking through Wiltshire and the South before working a year in London and travelling to Spain. Laurie Lee left Spain at the onset of the Spanish Civil War, but returned to fight some time later. The account of this is given in a later book, *A Moment of War*.

This piece has three main sections. The first, an English phase, is concerned with Laurie Lee's departure from his village, making his living by busking, and working in London. Laurie Lee was just 19 years old ('still soft at the edges') and these years were the 1930's; hence at times there exists a layer of apprehension to the lighter quality. A Spanish section sets some of the dominant aspects of his long walk through Spain, a period of his book which captures so beautifully his own youth and naivety, and the 'unspoilt' feeling of Spain at this time. The third and final portion of this piece takes as its basis his return to Spain to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Subsequent analysis has brought some controversy to Laurie Lee's account but his writing still remains one of the most evocative and important descriptions of this period of history, not least because he writes so easily about the contradictions of war - optimism and desolation, organization and confusion.

I have constructed this libretto from the two books and with the exception of one or two minor alterations all the phrases are preserved in their original form. Some deliberate musical references have been made, chosen because their première occurred in the year in question. These include Vaughan Williams and Walton, as well as allusion to Spanish structures of particular regions. *A Walk Into War* was commissioned by the Allegri String Quartet and supported by Southern Arts for its première at the Salisbury Festival 2002 with guest artists Paul Agnew (tenor) and Daniel Tong (piano).

Introduction

(Spoken)

The stooping figure of my mother,
waist-deep in the grass
and caught there like a piece of sheep's wool,
was the last I saw of my country home
as I left it to discover the world.
She stood old and bent at the top of the bank,
silently watching me go,
one gnarled red hand raised in farewell and blessing,
not questioning why I went.
At the bend of the road I looked back again
and saw the gold light die behind her;

then I turned the corner,
passed the village school,
and closed that part of my life for ever.

Departure

Laurie Lee left his Gloucester village in June 1934 and began to walk to the sea (his earlier life is described in his most famous book, *Cider With Rosie*). The image is that of 'Englishness' and summer but with touches of foreboding, in part reflecting these inter-War years. I have made reference to a work premièred in 1934, *Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra* by Vaughan Williams.

It was 1934,
I was nineteen years old,
still soft at the edges.
I carried a small rolled up tent,
a violin in a blanket,
a tin of treacle biscuits,
and a piece of cheese.
I was excited,
knowing I had far to go;
but not, as yet, how far.
'Marry and settle down.'
The day's silence said,
'Go where you will,
it's up to you now.
You're on your own.'
I tramped the edge of the road,
watching my dusty feet,
not stopping again.
Birds sang, and the grass steamed.
'Marry, settle down.'
I came down through Wiltshire,
burning my roots behind me,
taking it easy.
This pocket of England seemed immense,
not bulldozed for speed.
I passed down the Wylye valley
and came out to a vast and rolling plain.
I was unprepared for the delicate spire
that rose suddenly out of the empty sky.
As I walked, it went before me,
gliding behind the curve of the hill,
just a spire in the grass,
my first view of Salisbury.

Southampton

After Salisbury, Laurie Lee walked to Southampton and then westwards along the south coast, disappointed by 'that shabby shoreline suburbia.' He supported himself by busking with his violin. He soon learnt what to do and what not, and found that slow melodies brought in more money than fast ones. More specifically, he found that *Loch Lomond*, *Ave Marie*, *Largo*, and *Rose of Tralee* worked particularly well and towards the end of this movement these can be heard together, each instrument of the quartet taking one melody.

I drew the violin from my coat like a gun.
I was tense and shaky,
it was the first time after all.
The first notes I played were loud and raw,

like a hoarse declaration of protest.
Then they settled down and ran more smoothly,
and stayed more or less in tune.
To my surprise I was neither arrested
nor told to shut up.
Indeed, nobody took any notice at all.
Then an old man surreptitiously
dropped a penny into my hat
as though getting rid of some guilty evidence.
Old ladies were generous,
and barmaids and bookies,
but never a man with a briefcase or dog.
'Why aren't you working young man?'

London

By the time Laurie Lee reached London he was an experienced traveller. The first gentle roar of the capital that he described is evoked by close dissonances within the quartet, to be used in various guises in later movements. Following a girl who he had met in Gloucester (Cleo, 'her lovely mouth was a political megaphone') he lived in Putney, staying for the best part of a year. He began to absorb his first experiences of city life and among these were visits to Queen's Hall. I have made reference to William Walton's first symphony* which was premièred there in 1935. Laurie Lee worked as a labourer on flats at the top of Putney Hill and a strike in May 1935 gave him his first 'hallucinations of communism.'

* With kind permission of Oxford University Press

I suddenly saw London,
dry, rusty red,
it lay like ash from some spent volcano,
simmering gently in the summer morning
and emitting a faint metallic roar.
No architectural glories,
no towers or palaces,
just a creeping insidious presence.
I could already feel the intense radiation,
an electric charge in the sky
that rose from a million roofs
in a quivering mirage,
almost visibly dilating.
A tall leggy figure, Cleo,
we pretended to be in love.
'If daddy knew,
he'd murder you.'
My time was spent on the buildings,
submerged by its mindless routine.
The job was poorly paid,
often dangerous,
we of the workers.
Someone sounded the alarm,
provocation.
Five hundred men in the raw cold wind.
'Comrades! We got to stand solid,
chuck 'em out,
put our demands to the bosses.'
I tasted the first sweet whiff of revolution.
Then suddenly the strike was over,
closed by a grudging agreement.
We were back at work again;

unchanged except for two weeks of hunger.

Vigo

By early summer Laurie Lee's work on the flats was coming to an end. He realized that he was free to go anywhere, 'I was a young man whose time coincided with the last years of peace...' He bought a one-way ticket to Vigo, a town on the coast of northern Spain, and departed on a Royal Mail Line ship in July 1935. The beginnings of Spanish structure now appear, the 'crushed' semitone in the harmony, and basic elements in the rhythm.

I lay in the anchored silence,
and listened to the first faint sounds of Spain.
A howling dog,
the gasping spasms of a donkey,
the thin sharp cry of a cockerel.
The Spanish sun rose,
everything looked barnacled,
rotting, and deathly quiet.
People lay sleeping,
like bodies washed up by the tide.
The drowned men rose from the pavements,
lit cigarettes,
and shook the night from clothes.
Bootblacks appeared,
banging their brushes,
strange vivid girls,
mouths red and savage,
crumbling walls,
scribbled with graffiti,
armed policemen sitting on the Town Hall steps.
So I cut the cord
and headed for the open country.

Dance

On arriving at Zamora, Laurie Lee heard three young German musicians giving a street concert with 'waltzy gusts of Strauss'. He joined them that evening at an old dance hall where they were providing the music. The second violin, viola, and cello here mimic the accordion of one of the musicians and allude to the 'Vienna Woods' of which Laurie Lee makes reference. The piece closes with brief mention of the Pasodoble which was a feature of the wild drunken evening that followed.

Instrumental

Sunstroke/To the Sea

Laurie Lee continued towards the South and twice most evocatively describes the effect of walking in the intense heat. All the instruments are set high (with the earlier dissonances of 'London') but elements of the first movement can be heard as his hallucinations take him back home. His journey then took him on to Segovia and Madrid before travelling to the Southern coast. This later portion of the piece mixes up a number of Spanish structures including *Soleares*, *Fandango*, and *Alegrías*, the latter a form associated with Cadiz.

I was treading the rim of a burning wheel,
feet scorched and blistered,
not advancing an inch.
Pinned for ever at this sweltering spot,

the same poppy,
the same brittle wheat,
the same lizard, flickering.,
I walked head down,
not daring to look at the sky,
one huge sun,
the brass-taloned lion which licks the afternoon ground.
Water rose up and wrapped me in cool wet leaves,
and filled my mouth with dripping moss.
I drank monsoons
and winter mists,
and lay naked on deep-sea sponges.
I heard my mother in her summer kitchen
splashing water on garden salads.
Segovia's cliff of blood,
easy death on the edge of town.
A white-faced matador carried to his car,
weeping softly.
Royal gardens of La Granja
rising from the dust,
I was impatient to reach Madrid,
To the Sea, Toledo
To the Sea, Seville
To the sea, Cadiz.
Great forests,
peaks dusted with snow,
racing brooks,
a new kind of heat.
The south grew more bitter,
brutal and hard...
The river at midnight,
the first hint of trouble.
'Hallo, johnny,
if you want to see blood,
stick around,
you're going to see plenty.'

Execution

Laurie Lee was evacuated from Southern Spain in July 1936 but unable to settle back in England he returned in December 1937 to fight in the Spanish Civil War against the Fascists. After crossing the Pyrenees he was held for some time in a hole in the ground, accused of being a spy. The following texts are taken from *A Moment of War*, a sequel to *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*.

Locked in the dark with Dino,
I drew steadily towards my hour.
Which of the two of us would be called out first?
When it came, it came suddenly,
with us both half-asleep.
A low voice called the young deserter's name,
giving us just time for a quick fumbling handshake.
I heard the clink of glasses,
some casual chatter,
Dino's short laugh,
then a pistol shot.
My hand touched the deserter's cap,
it was still warm.

Bombing

Having survived accusations of spying for Franco, Laurie Lee joined the International Brigade. In *A Moment of War* he twice experienced the bombing of a city, 'I was surprised at my detachment and lack of fear.' The bombing of cities and their population was a new technique in warfare and its effect was of interest to the German Luftwaffe who collaborated with Italy and Franco in these attacks.

Stillness smothered the city,
a stretched and expectant waiting.
Then from the blank eastern sky
came a fine point of sound,
growing to a deep throbbing roar..
The bombers closed in,
black Junkers,
snapping fighters,
the Devil's hand tearing holes in the sky.
They swooped low and fast,
bombs were released
and the ground shook.
The air screamed,
a house came down before me,
like a man dropping a dusty cloak.
The body takes over the mind;
it stiffens and melts,
and the mouth floods and dries.
All intimacies exposed,
the wedding portrait,
the little crucifix,
the broken bed hanging bare to the street.
Families broken,
splintered and pulped,
blasted to death in one breath.

Conflict and Home

Throughout the book Laurie Lee vividly captures the misery and desolation of Civil War in Spain, more often or not through 'minor' incidents and experiences that are quite personal. None are arguably more poignant and pathetic than four boxes that are gently parachuted down to the expectant peasants. This is followed by reference to his one experience of battle which resulted in retreat, hand-to-hand fighting, and the killing of a man. Shortly afterwards Laurie Lee was advised to leave Spain ('You could write about us, make speeches, paint posters - or something . . .') and he caught a train from Barcelona to the French border where an 'amour' was waiting.

That lone Fascist plane
flew over the city.
Four separate parachutes,
wooden boxes,
not bombs.
Four little boxes,
tied with ribbon,
they might be gifts.
Four little boxes,
the quartered body of a Republican pilot.
One act of kindness though,
a bomber dropped a fine, fat ham,

it fell on a man and tore off his arm.
Lights moving,
distant shouts,
small, panting men,
red-faced boys.
The rattling of tanks
and sharp, coughing guns.
The breathless hand-to-hand,
awkward pushing,
grunting, swearing,
pushing, swearing,
death a moment's weakness,
I killed a man.
The night train to the frontier was waiting,
murmuring, unheated,
smelling of unwashed wounds.
We picked up speed,
in a steady slouching way.
Curtains were lifted,
fresh morning skies,
neon-lit cafes,
the cloud of her breath,
we arrived.
She looked at my hands,
then my face.
'Well, I hope you're pleased with yourself,
you look so smug,
I've been through absolute hell.'