

**Challenge Classics: CC 72527
Songs of Quest and Inspiration; Songs by Cyril Scott
and Ralph Vaughan Williams
Robbert Muuse (Baritone), Micha van Weers (Piano)**

In January 2011, the Dutch baritone singer Robbert Muuse and pianist Micha van Weers contacted me after they had come to know about my article “Music, Theosophical Spirituality, and Empire: the British Modernist Composers Cyril Scott and John Foulds” (Journal of Global History, 3, 2, 2008). We decided to come together, as they were working on their debut CD, which would include 13 songs of Cyril Scott (see list below), besides the *Songs of Travel* and two songs from *Five Mystical Songs* of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Until that time, I had only studied Scott’s instrumental works and especially his piano music. From the beginning, however, I realized that this was an exceptional project because Scott had composed around 150 songs and, surprisingly, few of them had ever been recorded before on CD. After a delightful first meeting, therefore, I happily agreed to write the liner notes. Sometime later, we met again to discuss the potential repertoire for the recording. Robbert and Micha had collected and studied around 80 songs and during that day I was fortunate to listen to a great number of them. Though I immediately recognized Scott’s piano idiom in sound and print, what especially struck me was the variety of musical styles that he had chosen to employ (at first, in fact, I heard parallels with the distinctive songs of Charles Ives!) and we agreed that the selected songs had to reflect this aspect. Since the recent revival of his music, it is generally known that during the early decades of the twentieth century, Scott was a major figure in helping British music to break away from Austro-German musical hegemony. The famous conductor and composer Eugene Goossens even called him ‘The Father of Modern British Music’. Much to his own frustration, however, Scott became especially known as a successful composer of innumerable ‘popular’ short songs and piano pieces rather than for his serious compositions. By and large, he produced these ‘trifles’, as he called them, while still under contract with Elkin, a contract that he had signed in 1904 and given that he composed only four songs after 1930, it is clear it had much to do with the ending of this arrangement. In his songs, Scott reveals himself as a versatile composer whose characteristic chords not only enhance the singer’s part, but often transcend the importance of the melody itself. Today, one can more or less understand the popularity among early twentieth century audiences of his arrangement of the Scottish folksong *Ballad of Fair Helen of Kirkconnell* (1925) or his slow songs *To-Morrow* (1927), *An Eastern Lament* (1909), *Water-Lilies* (1920), *Prelude* (1908) and his most popular *Blackbird’s Song* (1906). Because of their often dissonant tonalities and/or repetitive rhythms, however, the same cannot be said so easily about *Sundown* (1919) and *Picnic* (1906) or of his more theatrical songs such as *Time O’Day* (1919), *A Song of London* (1906), *Song of Wine* (1907), *Have Ye Seen Him Pass By?* (1921) and *The Huckster* (1921). Be it as it may, Scott’s use of modernist musical materials and styles in his songs, certainly was daring at the time and, posthumously, he perhaps deserves credit for

having introduced them successfully to a wider public. Both separately and together, Robbert Muuse and Micha van Weers are experienced and sought after musicians in the Netherlands. Even so, they were exceedingly excited about this project, because their interpretations would be pioneering. In addition, each of Scott’s songs desired a different performance practice and some proved technically demanding. A number of songs simply were not suitable for a baritone singer and required a female voice. To my disappointment, it was eventually decided not to include *My Captain* (1904), after a text by Walt Whitman, though it was written for baritone voice. For while Micha found the piece pianistically brilliant, Robbert repeatedly felt uncomfortable about the relationship between the music and the text. The recording took place during two sessions in July and September near Leipzig in Germany. The result is a remarkable debut CD of a duo that performs with fervour and knows how to capture the great diversity of Scott’s songs. Now, one can only hope that Challenge or another recording label will continue to support the results of their original explorations into the songs of Scott and other British composers, which have unjustly remained unknown to our generation.

The CD was released on 6 November (2011) and contains the following songs of Cyril Scott:

1. Time O’Day (1919)*
2. Blackbird’s Song (1906)
3. Song of London (1906)**
4. Sundown (1919)*
5. To-Morrow (1927)*
6. Picnic (1906)*
7. An Eastern Lament (1909)*
8. A Song of Wine (1907)*
9. Water-Lilies (1920)*
10. Prelude (1908)*
11. Ballad of Fair Helen of Kirkconnell (1925)*
12. Have Ye Seen Him Pass By? (1921)**
13. The Huckster (1921) *

*World première recording

**Unrecorded, except on 33 1/3 rpm or tape

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