

Composer John Foulds: The lost requiem

Branded a coward, labelled a communist, dismissed by his peers, forgotten by the critics. Now, finally rediscovered, the genius of John Foulds

By Jessica Duchon

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This Sunday, the Royal Albert Hall in London is to play host to an extraordinary musical resurrection. John Foulds's *A World Requiem* has not been performed for 81 years. Composed in the aftermath of the First World War to commemorate the dead of all nations, it is one of the most gargantuan works by a British composer ever to have reached the public ear.

The Requiem enjoyed a glittering launch. For four years in succession, from 1923 to 1926, it was a centrepiece of the Armistice Day Festival, which brought war-ravaged Britain to a virtual halt every 11 November. Each time the work was performed, no fewer than 1,250 musicians were required, such was the piece's breathtaking ambition.

But, in spite of these celebrated beginnings, *A World Requiem* disappeared. So, in his own way, did its composer, who spent the rest of his too-short life wondering whether he would ever hear his masterpiece again (he never did), and died of cholera 13 years later while living in self-imposed exile in India. Unpopular, shunned by the polite society whose lofty echelons he had never comfortably inhabited, Foulds and his great work were all but forgotten.

Until now. On Sunday, the BBC Symphony Orchestra aims to restore the composer's finest work to the place and occasion for which it was conceived. In association with the Royal British Legion, the performance promises a startling total of 20 movements. The audience will be treated to texts from the Requiem Mass and words by John Bunyan and the Hindu poet Kabir. Eight decades after

the Requiem was last heard, it promises to be accessible and yet global – just the right piece for the present day.

It would, of course, be an understatement to say that Foulds and his Requiem have merely been neglected. In fact, after its initial popularity, the work was unofficially banned.

Recent research by James Mansell at the University of Manchester has revealed that Sir Adrian Boult, then the director of music for the BBC, regarded the piece as "boring"; high-placed figures, including the editor of the Daily Express, were suspicious of Foulds's socialist views; and as the composer had not himself served in the war, he was unpopular with the Royal British Legion, even though he donated all proceeds from the performances to the Poppy Appeal. All this proved a lethal cocktail.

When I first heard Foulds's music, it struck me as a bizarre mingling of the English pastoral style commonly nicknamed the "cowpat school" with the mystical excesses of the synaesthetic Russian Alexander Scriabin. But one shouldn't rely on first impressions; further acquaintance with Foulds's works, which have been championed by the conductor Sakari Oramo in a series of recordings, proved that he had a voice all his own, one that was way ahead of his time.

His music crams together a huge range of influences; he rarely, if ever, repeats himself; and his breadth of imagination is both forward-looking and, at its best, breathtakingly daring. Foulds was a maverick, but he was also a brilliant man, with more than anyone's fair share of intellect and spirit; one who had to struggle against his circumstances, and one whose output more than merits reappraisal.

To see why the Establishment was so scared of John Foulds, we have to go back to the beginning. Foulds was born in Manchester in 1880, the son of a bassoonist in the Hallé Orchestra. One of four children in an intensely musical family, he began piano lessons at four years old, next learning the oboe and finally the cello, which he later played professionally. But the household was one step away from poverty. Foulds's mother was an invalid, and both parents, members of the Plymouth Brethren, established an inflexible religious regime against which John soon chafed. At 13, he ran away.

Legend has it that the lad fell into the care of a woman whom some (including his daughter) called "a lady of ill fame", but whom he described as his "guardian angel". From the age of 14, he worked as a professional musician, jobbing around the North of England. In 1900, after an apparent reconciliation with his family, he too joined the Hallé Orchestra.

All the while, he composed prolifically. As a composer, he was almost entirely self-taught – a quality he shared with Edward Elgar, who had also suffered

setbacks due to his lower middle-class background before achieving success in middle age. Life was more straightforward for those composers who studied at public school, Oxbridge, the Royal College of Music or all three. Like Elgar, too, Foulds boosted his income by writing light, popular salon works, which sold well but induced extra snobbery towards his serious efforts.

Foulds was 24 when the First World War broke out. His failure to serve did him few favours in the public eye. Malcolm MacDonald's fascinating study of him states: "He volunteered for army service, but it was considered that he would be more usefully employed in a civilian capacity as a musician."

It's unlikely, though, that the public would have been aware of this at the time. Besides, the reasons for that decision are not clear. Was he rejected because of a physical deficiency? Some accounts describe him as having had a withered arm, possibly because of a childhood malady; yet becoming a professional cellist would have been well-nigh impossible with such a disability. Did rumours of his political leanings perhaps have a hand in it?

The composer certainly espoused views that would not have endeared him to an English Establishment either before the war or, even more, after it, when the Russian Revolution of 1917 had generated terror of a Communist uprising. His underprivileged background doubtless contributed to a political passion that found him becoming close friends with activists such as Frederick and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who founded the journal *Votes for Women* in 1907. Meanwhile, his parents' restrictive religion could well have imbued him with a spiritual awareness that sought a freer outlet.

He found one. The Theosophical Society, founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky in 1875, garnered many followers, among them Scriabin and, in Britain, the architect Edwin Lutyens (a friend of Foulds's), the composer Gustav Holst – and Foulds.

Theosophy advocated the universal brotherhood of humanity and encouraged the study of comparative religions; suggesting that all of them held a portion of the truth, it embraced elements of mysticism and spiritualism, often extending to the occult. Foulds, in his book *Music of Today*, describes how a programme of strict dieting and meditation rendered him able to receive his music as dictation from the spirit world, which he termed "clairaudience". He began to do this in 1915, under the influence of a remarkable woman who was to change the course of his life.

In 1909, Foulds had married Maud Woodcock. Their son Raymond was born in 1911. They set up home in Manchester, but the signs were that this could not remain a conventional household for long. Foulds, besides writing music, was a keen painter and woodcarver, and he brought his skills in the latter to their living-room fireplace. A photo taken of it in around 1910 shows a plethora of mystical

patterns, among them the swastika, which hadn't yet been shouldered with the sinister connotations it would carry two decades later. There's also Foulds's personal signature, a design combining his initials JHF into one symbol. His personal motto is visible too: "Ho exorientes fos" – "The light from the East". Foulds's bent for spiritual and artistic adventure was not likely to be restricted to suburban life in Manchester.

In 1915, in London, Foulds met Maud MacCarthy and instantly fell in love with her. She was a former violinist child prodigy, a singer, an educator and a leading expert on Indian music, and had travelled through India with Annie Besant, the social reformer and prominent pupil of Madame Blavatsky. This second Maud's concerns coincided gloriously with Foulds's; they were obvious soulmates. Both were already married, and unhappy with their spouses.

They decided to handle the situation by organising a meeting in which all four of them could discuss the matter openly. A decision was reached, not unreasonably, that both couples should divorce and that the musicians should marry. Afterwards, though, the first Mrs Foulds backtracked and declined to divorce her husband. Foulds and MacCarthy moved in together anyway and had two children; it was some years before they married. One can imagine how this scenario must have gone down with the wider society around them.

It was a stormy relationship, by all accounts, but a highly creative one. MacCarthy encouraged Foulds's study of Indian musical techniques and shared in his "clairaudient" experiences. Parts of the World Requiem were apparently composed in this way. MacCarthy described one occasion when she heard inwardly some wonderful music and, seeking out Foulds, found him writing down exactly the same notes.

In 1935, after living in Paris for several years, the couple moved to India, where Foulds became head of Western music for Indian Radio. There – decades before terms such as "world music" and "fusion" were formed – he intensified his efforts to make a synthesis of Western and Indian music.

But this life of exploration, open-mindedness and zest for artistic discovery was cut tragically short when Foulds caught cholera in 1939. After his death, most of his Indian manuscripts were lost; many are thought to have disintegrated due to climatic conditions, or to have been consumed by vermin. Maud, for her part, founded an ashram and became a swami.

Sakari Oramo, the Finnish conductor who has been Foulds's chief evangelist in recent years, agrees that Foulds was simply too wayward for the British musical scene of the time. "He was neglected and ridiculed after the success of the World Requiem died down," he recounts. "Although he kept writing to the BBC asking whether his music would be broadcast again, he mostly received no replies.

"He was seen as an almost dangerous influence at a time when culture was still dominated by a post-Victorian longing for order and discipline; his music can seem quite chaotic. The trouble was that he was much ahead of his time and wouldn't modify his ideas to suit it. After he fled to Paris, and later India, he certainly didn't want to come back to Britain."

In fact, the BBC did keep on broadcasting Foulds's light music; perhaps he had been confined to an inconsequential pigeonhole that kept him safely out of controversy's way.

The American maestro Leon Botstein, who conducts the performance on Sunday, feels that this is just the right moment for the return of Foulds. "He fits well into the ongoing revival of religion and the popularity of so-called 'spiritual minimalist' music," he says. Not that Foulds is remotely minimal. "The World Requiem is a lush, intense, spiritual work with a strong mystical streak," Botstein says. "I'm sure that audiences will respond to its lyricism. It's clear that Foulds must have had a political commitment to accessibility in his musical style: the work is expressive, direct and idealistic, building on the post-First World War ideologies of pacifism and world co-operation."

Above all, Botstein suggests, its appeal lies in its genuineness. "We're often a little allergic to anything that we feel is hypocritically exaggerated in our own countries, anything oversentimental or kitsch. But I feel this work does not have that quality. It's disarmingly, vulnerably authentic in its emotions. This was an honest man."

One audience member at a World Requiem performance in the 1920s, Geoffrey Hodson, also a Theosophist, set down his impressions of the work in his book *The Kingdom of Faerie*. The volume is an account of "research" into supernatural beings – observations of flower sprites and angels pepper its pages, and there's even a description of Valkyries hurtling down the slopes of Mont Blanc.

But Hodson responds passionately to Foulds's music: "The physical sound awakened, evoked the Heavenly Chorus, and, under the genius of one man, the music of the spheres seemed to be sounding forth indescribably sweet and with an all-compelling beauty," he wrote. "Compassion and consolation came to us in colour and in sound. Hope filled our breasts during the immortal hour, with which John Foulds blessed our day of remembrance. Blessed we were indeed, for even the angels sang for us, and it was a joy to think of our dead."

John Foulds died disappointed, exiled and forgotten, but now his day could be dawning at last. And, as a postscript, it seems fitting that the long overdue revival of his greatest work will be led, this Remembrance Sunday, by an organisation that once refused to answer the despairing composer's letters.

John Foulds's A World Requiem, Royal Albert Hall, 11 November; live broadcast on BBC Radio 3 (box office 020-7589 8212)

John Foulds: a life out of tune

1880 Born 2 November in Hulme, Manchester, the son of a bassoonist.

1898 Public performance of string quartet using quarter-tones, singling Foulds out as ahead of his time.

1900 Joins Hallé Orchestra, under Austrian-Hungarian conductor Hans Richter, who gave him experience with the baton.

1906 Meets Mahler, Strauss, Delius and Humperdinck in Essen. The English conductor Henry Wood gives Foulds's Epithalamium its premiere at the Queen's Hall Prom, now the BBC Proms.

1909 Marries Maud Woodcock. They had a son, Raymond, two years later.

1911 Cello Concerto premiered, while his Keltic Suite is a great popular success.

1915 Starts an affair with Irish writer and musician Maud MacCarthy, whom he later marries. Develops an interest in Indian instruments and music.

1923 First of four annual performances of his World Requiem at the Royal Albert Hall.

1934 Publishes book Music To-day.

1935 Moves to India, where he immerses himself in Indian music.

1937 Becomes director of European music on All-India Radio in Delhi.

1938 Founds the Indo-European Orchestra, which featured Indian musicians playing traditional instruments.

1939 In the same year his Symphonic Studies are performed in Bombay, Foulds dies of cholera in Calcutta.
