



The Sounds of Solace

By Benjamin Pomerance

Photo Left: Jennifer Moore. Photo provided

Photo Right: Rose Chancler. Photo provided

IN THE EARLY DAYS, as a pandemic howled outside her walls, Rose Chancler remained socially distant from her piano. As the world locked its doors, and the music stopped around her, she found herself tap-dancing around the instrument, avoiding it, as if even the act of practicing would be something too normal on a planet turned upside-down. “My brain was absolutely everywhere for a while,” she recalls. “I didn’t know what to think.” She pauses.

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But then came a longing, a feeling so urgent that it caught the concert

pianist by surprise. “It’s like chicken soup or maybe chicken pot pie. It’s a comfort food but with excellent ingredients and a great recipe. It’s something that we have a craving for when it is taken away,” she explains. “And what has been taken away from us during this time is structure. A lot of structure is being torn down and obliterated. We’re missing that structure now. We want to feel safe. We want to just crawl inside of something and be able to breathe.”

Then she found a root in the Adirondack ground, tracing a trail that she could follow back to a structure that she had built. Back to Piano By Nature, the concert series for which she serves as artistic director, building year after year of chamber music programs in the parlor of the historic Hand House in Elizabethtown. Back to Jennifer Moore, her long-time co-conspirator in musical matters, the esteemed pianist, conductor and chorister who teaches music for every grade level in the Willsboro Central School District.

Years ago, they had baptized Piano By Nature together,

performing side-by-side in that venerable parlor, the inaugural offering of a series that has evolved to provide so much to all who have listened. Now, as the world churned, they recognized the need for an encore. It wouldn’t be the same, they knew, not for themselves and not for their audience, but the essence would be there — not the journey’s end, but a necessary station to offer a place of comfort. Here, in this familiar spot, was their structure.

And from this origin came thoughts of Gerald Finzi. Here was someone else who had sought to sculpt structure from tumult, a bottomless yearning that lasted for a lifetime. He was only 7 years old when his father died. Then the globe erupted into flames, The Great War, the adults called it, although the shy adolescent found nothing great about it, and his family moved from London to the far smaller community of Harrogate. In this new place, he met Ernest Farrar, the first man to teach him music.

Yet The Great War took Farrar from him, first temporarily through his enlistment into the Grenadier Guards and then permanently with his death at the Battle of Épehy. By this point, Finzi had already suffered the loss of his three brothers, and the death of his mentor proved to be the final kick into a well of depression. Already withdrawn, he became silent.

But Farrar had proclaimed that young Finzi was “full of poetry,” and it was ultimately poetry that drew the aspiring composer toward the light again. Thomas Hardy and *Christina Rossetti* offered writings that contrasted childhood’s innocence with adult worldliness, an evolution that had entered Finzi’s own life all too soon. He could relate to these words and found relief in setting them to music. In the early 1920s, he authored his first published composition: a song cycle of Hardy’s texts.

Then came the epiphany. On New Year’s Eve in 1925, Finzi uncharacteristically accepted an invitation to a party. The location was a spot near Gloucester known as Chosen

Hill, a pastoral setting that Finzi had visited often. That night, when the clock struck midnight, the attendees at the party heard church bells ringing across the countryside and walked out into the frosty air. As the guests reveled, Finzi looked upward into a blanket of stars. Overcome with indecipherable feelings, he went home and began to write.

Something about the infinity that Finzi witnessed in that midnight hour unlocked a door whose existence had eluded him. Both his music and his personality started to flourish in unexpected ways. He befriended Ralph Vaughan Williams, one of the English compositional legends, who arranged a teaching post for Finzi at the Royal Academy of Music. This new job offered opportunities for London audiences to hear Finzi’s compositions, and the city soon embraced the burgeoning writer’s elegiac works.

Despite his newfound success, however, Finzi never felt entirely comfortable with urban life. In 1932, he rented a country cottage as a place to escape and write in solitude. One day, the flue in the fireplace malfunctioned, filling the home with smoke. Annoyed, he went to call on the couple from whom he had rented the place and forgot all about his annoyance when their daughter, Joyce Black, answered the door. She was a poet and a visual artist, particularly skilled at drawing pencil portraits. Finzi was entranced. A year later, they were married.

They invited only three people to their wedding, two of whom were Vaughan Williams and his wife, Adeline. Then they got out of London to start a new life in the country, filled with music, literature and agriculture, taking particular pride in saving several rare English apple varieties from extinction. Their library of British poetry, philosophy and literature expanded to more than 3,000 volumes, along with a collection of more than 700 works of 18th century English music. Preoccupied by such pursuits, Finzi’s compositional output slowed.

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In 1939, though, Finzi completed *Dies Natalis (Day of Birth)*, a setting for solo voice and string orchestra of Thomas Traherne's mystical poems. Finzi felt that the piece was his best yet, an assessment with which critics ultimately agreed. Yet it took significant time before they could agree because the world had entered another war, upending life as they knew it and delaying virtually all planned performances. Directed to work at the Ministry of War Transport during World War II, Finzi and Black devoted the years ahead to sheltering war refugees in their home.

When the second world war of Finzi's lifetime finally ceased, the composer began writing faster than ever before, as if he were trying to make up for lost time. His *Clarinet Concerto* emerged from those postwar years, as did his choral ode *For St. Cecilia* and his *Intimations of Immortality*, casting some of his most innovative music upon the words of William Wordsworth. He also crafted his *In Terra Pax*, inspired by the lasting impacts of that New Year's Eve night below the stars on Chosen Hill.

By this time, Finzi finally appeared poised to leap into the pantheon of his era's greatest composers. Yet Finzi already knew that the sands in his hourglass were running low. In 1951, doctors diagnosed him with Hodgkin's disease and informed him that he had only a few years left to live. In 1955, he authored a cello concerto, a composition that many commentators today deem his finest work. A year later, badly weakened by the disease, he sat with Joyce by the radio to hear a performance of the concerto broadcast from the BBC Proms. The next day, he died.

From Finzi's story comes themes resonant in today's existence — the tragedy of legacies delayed by global turmoil; the ability of music to provide solid ground amid life's instability; and the capacity for beauty to emerge from difficult times, arising everywhere from the immensity of a night sky to the intimacy of a quiet love or the grief of a beloved one's loss. We do not know how many artistic legacies are delayed by this virus as Finzi's was by war. Yet we do know that art and artistry survives, filling a visceral need for audiences and for the artists themselves.

And in performing Finzi's music during these times that the composer would have found foreign yet familiar, two friends and musical companions have discovered something new about each other. "I've never been accompanied by Rose before," Moore explains. "Talk about being cared for and given a structure from which I can fully express. The first time that we played this work together, I was wrapped in this security of knowing that whatever I played, Rose would be right there supporting me. It was a special feeling."

The composition generating this feeling is Finzi's *Ecologue*, a creation that Finzi started in the years following his midnight stimulation on Chosen Hill. He intended to write a piano concerto but abandoned the project after finding that a single movement provided everything that he hoped to convey. After Finzi's death, a publisher added the title to that movement, a reference to an archaic form of poetry representing a dialogue between shepherds, evocative of the English countryside where Finzi seemed happiest.

"Each time I play it, I have this sense of my heart being opened and lying there very gently," Chancler says. "And you never want it to stop. Each time, I want it to last longer."

From there, the rest of the colleagues' musical menu took shape, filled with compositions echoing the *Ecologue's* ability to build expressive freedom on a firm foundation. All discussions about structure in music stem from Johann Sebastian Bach, leading to the selection of Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in B Major*. Contained in the composer's first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, a set of prelude and fugue groupings spanning all 24 keys, it is magnificence in miniature: complex but entirely transparent, not long in duration but still wholly satisfying.

The same attributes apply to Frederic Chopin's *Prelude*



Rose Chancler and Jennifer Moore. Photo provided

in c-sharp minor. "He is the boldest, the proudest, poet-soul of his time," Robert Schumann proclaimed of Chopin, and this poetic sense — both the autonomy to tell a story and the structure to keep the story intact — fills every bar of this work, a maximum impact with a minimum of material. César Franck's *Prelude, Fugue, Variation*, published in 1868 and later transcribed for two pianos, offers an extension of this same concept, even honoring Bach's inspiration with its Baroque-style fugue.

And then there is Olivier Messiaen's *The Virgin's First Communion*, the 11th movement of a two-hour pianistic reflection on the life of the baby Jesus. At first, the prolific and wide-ranging modernistic writer seems an unconventional partner with the likes of Bach, Chopin, Franck and even Finzi in a program centered on structure. Yet Chancler and Moore point out that the man who was enthralled by birdsongs and wrote a treatise discussing a musical language of his own was indeed influenced heavily by the structures of his predecessors.

"He studied Greek rhythms, Indian rhythms," Chancler says. "He studied plainchant, of course. You can't listen to Messiaen with the same ears that you would listen to Bach with. You have to let yourself go. But if you do, you will find in this work another miniature that is so well-structured." In this composition, that structure centers on four chords, a musical representation of God, that flow into Mary's expression of joy and then, deep in the bass line, the thump of the baby's heartbeat.

"We didn't want to get into a major Christmas mode this year," Chancler explains. "But we wanted to give something. This is our gift." A gift that returns to treasured ground, the two initial Piano By Nature performers back in the Hand House parlor, filmed by Anna Finucane — whose videography as a high school student was featured in a concert during Piano By Nature's first season — and broadcast online under the heading of "Solace," referencing the offering of consolation and comfort that comes from structure during days of distress.

It is a gift that both Chancler and Moore experienced in returning to their instruments after the pandemic's initial shock waves registered. "Sometimes, at the school, I just sit down and play and leave my classroom door open," Moore states. "And people can hear somebody playing music at a time when most of the working day is so quiet." From these sounds of solace comes a sense of what Finzi discovered on that night beneath the stars: the recognition that somehow, despite every trial that has already come, hope on the horizon could be about to dawn.

Piano By Nature will present "Solace," featuring pianists Rose Chancler and Jennifer Moore, on Dec. 12 at 7 p.m. Email pianobynature@gmail.com to receive the link to attend online. For two weeks following the live-streamed program, the concert video will be available on the Piano By Nature website. For more information, visit pianobynature.org.



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