

44. On Christmas Night [Christmas] (1912)

George Butterworth
(1885-1916)
arr. William Melton

Butterworth, George

(born 12 July 1885 in Paddington, London; died 5 August 1916 in Pozières, Somme)

George Sainton Kaye Butterworth came to his love of music through his mother, singer Julia Wigan, and his father, music-loving solicitor Alexander Kaye Butterworth (later a railway manager, he would receive a knighthood in 1914). Their son had organ lessons at school in Yorkshire, took piano at Eton, and attended Trinity College, Oxford where he was elected president of the University Musical Club. Butterworth subsequently taught music and wrote on the subject, but reserved his special passion for English folk songs (he was, in addition, an avid Morris Dancer). He published many folk songs in his own arrangements, encouraged by a circle of friends that included Adrian Boult and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

With the outbreak of the First World War, Butterworth enlisted as an infantry private, but soon procured a commission as a Subaltern in the 13th Battalion Durham Light Infantry; he wrote home repeatedly of his admiration for the Durham miners that formed the bulk of his battalion. Butterworth was wounded during an assault on enemy trenches during the Battle of the Somme and awarded the Military Cross. On 5 August 1916, he was shot and killed by a sniper during a German attack on his position. His body was lost in the vicious tides of the struggle, and was never recovered.

The orchestral rhapsody 'A Shropshire Lad' and its song cycle pendant remain the best known creations of Butterworth's short life. His biographer Michael Barlow allowed that he 'was no innovatory composer, nor was his music very influential, but he will remain an important minor figure with a reputation based on a handful of works, the sincerity and musical value of which assure him a place in the history of English music'. 'On Christmas Night' is a good example of his sincerity in the setting of a traditional English carol for a cappella mixed chorus. The composer was first shown this particular variant of the melody by George Knight of Horsham, Sussex in 1907, and the resultant piece was published by Augener of London in 1912. Ralph Vaughan Williams' own fine arrangement of the carol has since eclipsed that of his friend, but Butterworth's version has a delicate felicity of its own.

Text by William Melton