

Our Fighting Ships

by Michael Short

This article is based on a talk given by the composer during a concert at St Mary-in-the-Castle Arts Centre, Hastings, on 11 April 1999, during which he conducted the 1066 Concert Band in several of his own works

A few years ago I received a commission from a wind band in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, asking me to write a special piece to celebrate the tenth anniversary of its foundation. At first I thought this was rather odd, as I couldn't imagine why an Arab band would ask a British composer to write for them, but it turned out that the band consisted of ex-patriates, mainly British, who were working in Saudi Arabia in the oil industry, defence, medicine, and telecommunications. Because the culture of that country was rather different from their own, the band provided a means for the players to meet socially and keep up their musical skills, which were much appreciated by the large audiences who attended their various performances.

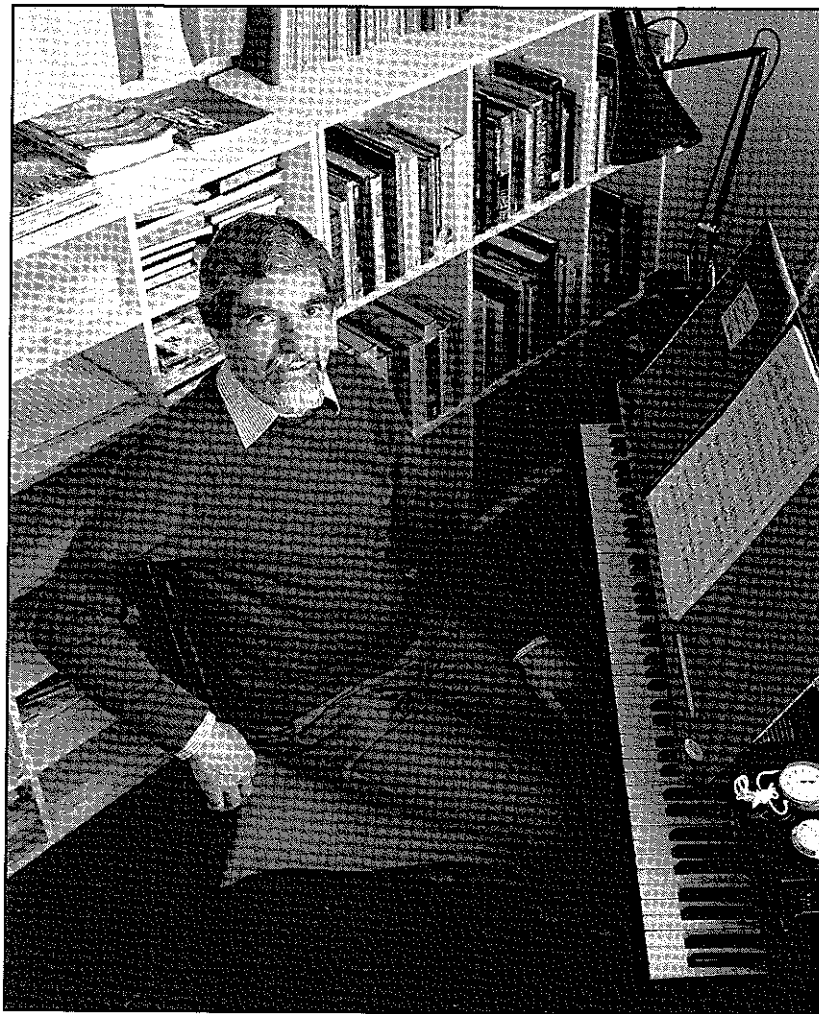
They wanted me to write something patriotic, but I was rather dubious about this, as the 'Land of Hope and Glory' type of chauvinism is not really for me, but they mentioned such a reasonable fee that it was an offer I couldn't afford to refuse! Then I remembered that among my notes were some folk-song melodies which I had noted down from various published sources years ago with the intention of making them into some kind of suite, but the opportunity had never arisen and they had remained unused. I have always been attracted to folk music, because in the process of transmission from one generation to another, each performer seems to have added something, so that the melodies acquire a kind of timeless 'rightness' which sets them apart from recently composed music. Also, the songs seem to have originated from actual human experience, and they therefore have a genuine quality of expression and lyricism, as the singers strove to give voice to the emotions generated by the events which inspired them.

The seven tunes which I had written down were all about ships of the British navy, which seemed to fulfil the patriotic requirement, and I decided to arrange them in a sequence of contrasted settings, consisting of the *Amphitrite*, *Victory*, *Golden Vanity*, *Royal Oak*, *Bold Princess Royal*, *Ramilles*, and *Arethusa*. These songs, however, are by no means all devoted to the celebration of great victories. In fact, life in the navy was very hard in the days of sailing ships, and as there were very few actual volunteers, men often had to be forced into service. If you visit Nelson's flagship *Victory* in Portsmouth harbour, the guide will tell you that when the ship was in port, a 24-hour guard of armed marines was posted with strict orders to shoot any sailor who tried to get off. In fact, my second tune is about this very ship, originally sung by a young woman whose lover had been seized by a press-gang and taken away to serve on

the *Victory*, where he was killed at the battle of Trafalgar.

Besides this obvious danger from warfare, other hazards included attack by pirates, as described in *The Golden Vanity* and *The Bold Princess Royal*, and the ever-present risk of shipwreck. During a violent storm on 15 February 1760, the magnificent 82-gun warship *Ramilles* was wrecked on the rocky coast of North Devon, and the entire crew of 700 men were drowned. This was such a traumatic event for the local inhabitants that they commemorated the disaster in a hauntingly beautiful folk-song.

Although I didn't have the words to the songs when I made these settings, I tried to convey in music what I thought the words were about. Later, when I acquired some of the words I discovered that I had made a mistake. I had imagined that the first tune *Amphitrite* depicted a brave frigate with sails billowing, flags flying, and cannons booming, whereas in fact the song turned out to commemorate yet another tragedy. The real *Amphitrite* left London on 28 August 1833 bound for New South Wales with a cargo of over a hundred female convicts who had been sentenced to transportation for various offences. But the ship never got to Australia. In the English Channel near Boulogne she encountered a violent storm and was driven onto the rocks to be smashed to pieces - the song was supposedly written by one of the few survivors. Although my



setting is therefore erroneous, I think that it nevertheless makes a good start to the piece.

The last song to appear salutes the famous *Arethusa* (which actually lost the battle celebrated in the song, but fought very well indeed!) As the music proceeds, melodies from the previous sections begin to re-appear and become tangled in a dissonant web of misty recollections as the ships fade into history, so that the only real memory of them and of the experiences of the people who sailed in them is through the medium of these beautifully expressive folk-songs.

Our Fighting Ships was first performed by the Riyadh Concert Band conducted by Ken Meisinger in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on four successive evenings in November 1992 in the presence of the composer. Its first British performance was given at the 1994 BASBWE national conference in Huddersfield, by the Derbyshire Youth Concert Band conducted by Murray Slater. It is approximately Grade 4, duration about 13 minutes, and is published by Bandleader Publications (distributed by Kirklees Music of Bradford).

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