

# *Fanny Robin*



an opera by **Edward Harper**

Libretto derived from episodes in Thomas Hardy's  
*Far from the Madding Crowd & Wessex Poems*

Jane Manning   Nigel Waugh   Roderick Horn  
Scottish Opera Chorus  
Scottish Chamber Orchestra - Edward Harper

# Edward Harper - *Fanny Robin*

In contrast with the rest of his output - which includes a challenging Symphony, premièred by the Scottish National Orchestra in March 1979 - Edward Harper's *Fanny Robin* is an entertainment, simply written, simply constructed, conceived in the first place for (mainly) student forces, but with a substantial, ornate title-role inspired by the voice of Jane Manning, who took part in the initial performances by Edinburgh University Opera Club in 1975 and again in the Scottish Opera production in Glasgow in 1978.

Harper, born in Somerset, part of Hardy's Wessex, chose a Wessex tale as the subject of his one-act opera, deriving his libretto from an episode in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* and from the same author's *Wessex Poems*. From the more austere Scottish surroundings in which he now lives, the composer's thoughts travelled affectionately to the countryside in which he grew up. The characters in *Fanny Robin* express themselves in simple country speech, songs and Victorian hymns, which serve as a realistic back cloth to the central tragi-comedy of Fanny herself.

Harper's opera was written as a companion piece to Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, which Edinburgh University's Opera Club had been planning to perform. Recognizing that there were parallels between Hardy's tale and Nahum Tate's adaption of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Harper found himself thinking in terms of the musical parallels. As a result, at the climax of the work, it seemed natural that Fanny should sing a melismatic lament evoking Dido's address to Belinda and that fragments of Purcell's music should appear in the quietly impassioned orchestral epilogue.

As a commentary on *Dido and Aeneas*, Harper's opera is in line with those of his works which make reference to other composers. One thinks of *Bartók Games* - as much a commentary on Lutoslawski as on Bartók - Fantasias II and III\* which allude to Purcell and Byrd respectively, and the Symphony which shows that an Elgarian *nobilmente* theme can be re-heard through ears attuned to the music of Tippett, yet retain an air of Elgarian nostalgia.

Just as Harper's Symphony should ideally be heard directly after a performance of Elgar's First Symphony, so too should *Fanny Robin* be heard directly after *Dido and Aeneas*. But the connection ought not be pushed too far: Harper's is not a Purcellian opera, nor a masque; nor, though it begins with a folk-song, is it a ballad opera. As Sergeant Troy's opening ditty dies away, sustained orchestral discords and a soft rattle of string tone remind us that this is very much a modern commentary on things past. Later there are similar contrasts between simple songs - such as the wedding hymn which opens the ninth of the work's thirteen tableau-like episodes - and disruptive orchestral music.

Nor, in spite of the heroine's fate, is *Fanny Robin* a sombre or solemn work. It moves fast, takes an amused but sympathetic view of Wessex speech, and contains some genuinely funny scenes - not only the drinking chorus but also the church scene in which the townswomen give vent to their feelings in conveniently ambiguous lines in the hymn they are singing. Indeed, in its balance between comedy and poignancy, Harper's little opera shows sure dramatic instinct.

Conrad Wilson

\* A recording of Fantasia III, together with other works by Edward Harper, can be found on METIER's disc of performances by The New Music Group of Scotland, catalogue number, MSV CD92014.

Scene: Wessex in the mid 19th century: a village and a garrison town.

### **Synopsis**

Fanny Robin meets Sergeant Troy of the 11th Dragoon Guards on the road one May morning and, having turned down his offer of marriage, invites him to visit her at her home at night. He does and it is she who now insists on a marriage. Troy's regiment moves north to winter quarters and while the local country folk are otherwise engaged at the malthouse, Fanny manages to slip away in search of her absent lover. She arrives at the garrison town in which Troy is stationed and, being late, finds the barracks' gates shut against her. She locates Troy's window and calls to him. He is evidently none too pleased to see her, particularly when she starts asking him to name the wedding day. He pretends not to recall having agreed to marry her at all but relents when she becomes hysterical. The arrangements are made and the day of the wedding dawns. Troy and two friends arrive at the church during morning service but after a lengthy wait there is no sign of Fanny. Troy storms out and as he reaches the church door meets Fanny who has just arrived breathless: she had gone to the wrong church. Troy is still furious and refuses even to consider Fanny's suggestion that they try again tomorrow. He stalks off and she is left alone to lament her lost love. As she sings, she witnesses in a flash forward Troy's marriage to another woman.

**PRESENTER**

Fanny Robin was a village girl. Her man: one Frank Troy, from the market town hard by, sergeant in the Dragoon Guards.

**ENSEMBLE I - The Courtship**

**TROY**

As I walked out one May morning,  
One May morning so early,  
I overtook a handsome maid  
Just as the sun was rising,  
With my ree rum a day,  
Fal the diddle dol,  
Fal the dol the diddle dum the day.

Her shoes were bright, her stockings white,  
Her buckles shone like silver:  
She had a black and roving eye  
And her hair hung down her shoulder  
With my ree rum a day, &c.

'How old are you, my pretty maid?  
How old are you, my honey?'  
She answered me quite cheerfully:

**FANNY**

'I am seventeen, come Sunday.'

**TROY & BANDSMEN**

With my ree rum a day, ...

**TROY**

'Will you marry me, my fair pretty maid?  
Will you marry me, my honey?'  
She answered me quite cheerfully:

**FANNY**

'I dare not, for my mammy.'

**TROY, BANDSMEN, 2 COUNTRYMEN, then ALL COUNTRYMEN**

With my ree rum a day, ...

**FANNY**

If you'll come to my Mammy's house  
When the moon is shining brightly,  
I will come down and let you in  
And my mammy shall not hear me.'

**ALL (knowingly)**

With my ree rum a day, ...

**TROY**

I went unto her mammy's house  
When the moon was shining brightly.  
She did come down and let me in  
and I laid in her arms till morning,  
With my ree rum a day, ...

**FANNY**

'Now soldier will you marry me?  
Now is your time or never.  
For if you do not marry me,  
I am undone for ever....'

Track 3

**DIALOGUE 1 – By the Churchyard**

**PRESENTER**

I met her once only, chanced upon her one night by the churchyard. I was new to that village, and she, it seemed, just leaving it....  
Good even to you.

**FANNY**

Good even.

**PRESENTER**

I'll thank you to tell me if I'm in the right way for the Malthouse hereabouts.

**FANNY**

Quite right. It's at the bottom of the hill yonder. And do you – do you know, I wonder, how late they keep open the Buck's Head Inn at Market?

**PRESENTER**

Nay, I'm a stranger here. I know nothing of the Buck's Head. Do you think of going there tonight?

**FANNY**

Yes... You won't say anything in the parish about having seen me like this, will you? At least, not for a day or two.

**PRESENTER**

I won't if you wish me not to.

**FANNY**

Thank you. I am rather poor, you see, and I don't want people to know anything about me.

**PRESENTER**

You ought to have a cloak on such a cold night. I would advise you get indoors.

**FANNY**

Oh no! Would you mind going on and leaving me?

**PRESENTER**

Very well, I will.... But, since you are not very well off, perhaps you would accept this from me. It is only a shilling, but it is all I have to spare.

**FANNY**

Yes, I will take it.

(Presenter gives coin to Fanny, holding her wrist briefly as she drops a slight curtsy and turns away)

**PRESENTER**

I still feel the intensity of the pulse in her wrist – a throb, as in the arteries of a farm-creature overridden.

Track 4

**ARIOSO I**

**FANNY**

I go to my love ... love ... o ... Love ... Love ... Love ... Love ... o ... I go to him. Ah!

Track 5

**ENSEMBLE - At the Malthouse**

Joseph Poorgrass, Maltster and Countrymen are chuckling amongst themselves.

**JOSEPH POORGRASS**

I sowed the seeds of love:

'Twas early in the spring:

In April and May and in June likewise

The small birds they do sing.

The small birds they do sing.

## **A COUNTRYMAN**

Next verse, Master Poorgrass.

### **JOSEPH**

My gardener he stood by  
And he told me to take good care,  
For in the middle of the red rose-bud  
There grows a sharp thorn there,  
There grows a sharp thorn there.  
I told him I'd take no care until I felt the smart.  
I pulled and I plucked at the red rose-bud,  
Till it pierced me to the heart,  
Till it pierced me to the...

### **BILLY SMALLBURY**

Neighbours! Neighbours!

### **MALTSTER**

Hold your caterwauling Joseph, 'tis Billy Smallbury back from Market.

### **JOSEPH**

What's the news from the town then, Billy?

### **BILLY**

All the talk runs on our Fanny Robin.

### **JOSEPH**

What's become of her?

### **BILLY**

Well, in round numbers, she's run away to the Soldiers. The 11th Dragoon Guards be gone from town. 'Tis said they pranced down the street playing 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' in glorious notes of triumph. Every looker-on's inside shook to its deepest vitals with the blows of the great drum, and there was not a dry eye throughout the town among the public-house people and the nameless women.

### **MALTSTER**

They're not gone to war?

### **BILLY**

Nay, 'tis to their winter quarters.



**JOSEPH**

But what of our Fanny?

**BILLY**

Our Fanny's young man, Sgt. Troy, was one of the regiment, 'tis said. And she's gone after him!! That's it in black and white, neighbours.

Track 6

**DIALOGUE II – Outside the Barracks**

**PRESENTER**

Later, Fanny wrote to me; but not until she had found her 'young man' again. It seems it was a snowy evening when she found him in a garrison town far to the north of the village – the gates of the barracks shut against her.

**FANNY**

Frank! Frank!

**TROY**

Who's there?

**FANNY**

O Frank, don't you know me? It's your wife, Fanny Robin.

**TROY**

Fanny! How did you come here?

**FANNY**

I asked which was your window. Forgive me!

**TROY**

I did not think you would come tonight. Indeed, I did not think that you would come at all.

**FANNY**

You said I was to come.

**TROY**

Well, I said you might.

**FANNY**

Yes, I meant I might. You are glad to see me, Frank?

**TROY**

Oh yes, of course.

**FANNY**

Can you come to see me?

**TROY**

My dear Fanny no! The bugle has sounded, the gates are closed and I have no leave. We are all of us as good as in the county gaol till tomorrow morning.

**FANNY**

Then I shan't see you till then... Frank, when will it be?

**TROY**

What?

**FANNY**

That you promised.

**TROY**

I don't recollect.

**FANNY**

Oh you do. Don't speak like that. It weighs me to the earth. When shall we be married?

**TROY**

Oh, I see... You have to get proper clothes.

**FANNY**

I have money. Will it be by banns or licence?

**TROY**

Banns, I should think.

**FANNY**

And we lodge in different parishes, so they'll have to be published in both.

O Frank, you think me forward I'm afraid. Don't, dear Frank, for I love you so. And you said lots of times you would marry me ... and I ... I ...

**TROY**

Don't cry now. It is foolish. If I said so, of course I will.

**FANNY**

And shall I put up the banns in my parish, and will you in yours?

**TROY**

Yes

**FANNY**

Tomorrow?

**TROY**

No, not tomorrow. We'll settle in a few days. Good night now.

**FANNY**

Yes, it was wrong of me to worry you. But will you come and see me tomorrow?

**TROY**

I will come to you, my dear.

Track 7

## **ARIOSO II**

**FANNY**

Good night. Good night

**TROY** (addressing unseen soldiers in barrack room)

Damned women!

**CHORUS OF SOLDIERS**

Ho ho ho ho ho ho ...

**FANNY**

Good night. Good night my love, my love.

Marry me, he will marry me, marry, marry me, marry me. He will marry me. My love will marry me. My love, love will marry me, love, my love. We shall be married. My love shall marry me, my love. Good night. Good night. Good night.

Track 8

## **INTERLUDE - The Letter**

**PRESENTER** (Reading from the letter)

"Dear friend, I do not know your name but think these few lines will reach you, which I write to thank you for your kindness to me the night I left home in a reckless way. I also return the money I owe you, which you will excuse me not keeping as a gift. All has ended well, and I am happy to say that I am to be married to the young man who has courted me for some time – Sgt. Troy of the 11th Dragoon Guards, now quartered in this town. He would, I know, object to my having received anything except as a loan, being a man of great respectability and high honour – indeed, a nobleman by blood."

Track 9

**ENSEMBLE III - In Church**

**PRESENTER** (still reading from the letter)

"I should be obliged to you if you would keep the contents of this letter a secret for the present, dear friend."

**TOWNSWOMEN**

The Lord in safety doth preserve  
All those that simple be:  
I was in woeful misery  
And He delivered me.

I said in my distress and fear  
That all men liars be:  
What shall I pay the Lord for all  
His benefits to me?

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,  
One God in persons three,  
All Honour, praise and glory must  
Both now and ever be. Amen.

**CURATE**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with you evermore.

**ALL**

Amen

(Enter Troy and two bandsmen who march to the altar and confer with the Curate)

**CLERK'S WIFE**

'Tis a wedding.

**TOWNSWOMAN I**

Let's wait. Where's the woman? He's a fine looking man. Maybe she thought better of it. &c

Track 10

**DIALOGUE III - At the Church door**

(Troy turns and marches through the congregation in a cold fury, whereupon, Fanny enters.)

**FANNY**

Frank!

**TROY**

Well?

**FANNY**

I made a mistake. I thought the church with the spire was All Saints. I was at the door at half past eleven to the minute, as you said I should. I waited till a quarter to twelve and then I found it was All *Souls*. But I wasn't much frightened, for I thought it could as well be tomorrow....

**TROY**

You Fool, for so fooling me!!!

**FANNY**

The mistake wasn't such a terrible thing, Frank. Dear Frank, when shall it be?

**TROY**

I don't want to go through that experience again for some time.

**FANNY**

Shall it be tomorrow? When shall it be, Frank?

**TROY**

When? God knows.

Track 11

**ARIOSO III**

**FANNY**

Ah! Ah! Ah! &c.

Marry me, marry . O Frank! Ah! O Frank! Ah! O Frank! O Frank!

Ah! Ah! Ah! &c.

Track 12

**ENSEMBLE IV - The Wedding**

**FANNY**

O Frank. Frank. Ah! Ah! Frank! Frank! Ah! (sung over that below)

**TROY**

As I walked out one May morning,

One May morning so early,

I overtook a handsome maid

Just as the sun was rising,

With my ree rum a day,

Fal the diddle dol,

Fal the dol the diddle dum the day.

### **TROY'S BRIDE**

Now soldier will you marry me?  
Now is your time or never.  
For if you do not marry me,  
I am undone for ever.  
With my ree rum a day,  
Fal the diddle dol,  
Fal the dol the diddle dum the day.

### **CHORUS of WOMEN & MEN**

And now she is the soldier's wife  
And the soldier loves her dearly.  
The drum and fife is her delight  
And a merry man in the morning.  
(Troy hesitates as he leaves the scene)

Track 13

### **EPILOGUE**

### **PRESENTER**

Perhaps, long hence, when I have passed away,  
Some other's feature, accent, thought like mine  
Will carry you back to what I used to say  
And bring some memory of your love's decline.  
Then you may pause awhile and think 'Poor jade!'  
And yield a sigh to me, as ample due:  
Not as the tittle of a debt unpaid  
To one who could resign her all to you.  
  
And thus reflecting, you will never see  
That your thin thought, in two small words conveyed,  
Was no such fleeting phantom-thought to me  
But the whole life wherein my part was played;  
And you, amid its fitful masquerade,  
A thought as I in yours but seem to be.  
(On the stage, Fanny remains alone)

# ***Fanny Robin***

by  
Edward Harper

performed by

Jane Manning - *Fanny Robin*

Nigel Waugh - *Sergeant Troy*

Roderick Horn - *Presenter*

Scottish Opera Chorus - directed by John Currie

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra - leader John Tunnell

Edward Harper - conductor



photo: Sean Hudson

Edward Harper

Hear also the METIER recording of other works by Edward Harper:  
Byrd arrangements; Fantasia III; and Ricercari in memoriam Luigi Dallapiccola,  
all performed by the New Music Group of Scotland conducted by the composer.  
Catalogue No. **MSV CD92014**

# EDWARD HARPER

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0:21	<b>1</b>	Flourish - The Presenter	Interlude - The Letter	<b>8</b>	0:49
2:12	<b>2</b>	Ensemble I - The Courtship	Ensemble III - In Church	<b>9</b>	3:11
1:51	<b>3</b>	Dialogue I - By the Churchyard	Dialogue III - At the Church Door	<b>10</b>	0:50
1:52	<b>4</b>	Arioso I - Fanny	Arioso III - Fanny	<b>11</b>	3:51
5:37	<b>5</b>	Ensemble II - At the Malthouse	Ensemble IV - The Wedding	<b>12</b>	1:40
3:13	<b>6</b>	Dialogue II - Outside the Barracks	Epilogue - The Presenter	<b>13</b>	3:14
3:02	<b>7</b>	Arioso II - Fanny			
			Total Time		31:35

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