To the Red Sky (2019) by John Young

Sir Thomas Armstrong, a former principal of the Royal Academy of Music and a veteran of the First World War, once stated that there is a falsity about the reporting of all battle scenes. In the face of the most shatteringly etched images of war in works such as Wilfred Owen’s Dulce et decorum est what hope might we then have of truly identifying with the experience of those subjected to battle?

The stories you will hear in To the Red Sky are extracted from oral history recordings held by the Imperial War Museums. With Sir Thomas’s sentiment in mind, the idea behind the work is not so much to use sound (especially electroacoustic sound) to paint a graphic picture of the First World War, but to create an experience bringing us closer to empathy with the sentiments of these very articulate and reflective veterans of war—seeking a kind of mosaic of collective memory. I have drawn together reflections around a broad range of themes, expressed in ways that do not attempt to justify the war’s means or glorify the outcome, but to gather stories conveying images, events and feelings that have remained with these men and women … some perhaps told many times, some perhaps drawn out of deep memory in the moment.

That these were recorded late in the lives of the subjects is important. Distillation in time gives a quality of concentration and gravitas to their reflections. In some cases they are poetic and in some cynical, with a burning and ardently outspoken frankness—but all very real. This quality of directness must be taken particularly seriously in the elderly: when these oral histories were taken, time was running out for them and the vividness of their memory gives us an urgent message—still—to listen. Their evocation of the past remains with us as very something immediate, very human … disturbing and uplifting in equal measure.

To the Red Sky is an adaptation of Red Sky (2014-15) for alto flute, clarinets, pianos and electroacoustic sounds, created with the support of Arts Council England and Leicester City Council for the Leicester New Walk Museum’s Leicester Remembers the Great War exhibition, April 2015, performed by Carla Rees, Heather Roche and Xenia Pestova.

The oral history recordings are reproduced with the permission of the Imperial War Museums.

John Young is a composer whose music focuses on the use of electroacoustic media as a means to explore the richness, complexity and affective meanings of natural sounds. His output includes multi-channel electroacoustic pieces, large-scale radiophonic work and music combining instruments and electroacoustic sounds. He joined the Music, Technology and Innovation Research Centre at DMU in 2000, where he is now Professor of Composition, having previously held the position of Principal Lecturer in Music at The Victoria University of Wellington. He has received several international awards for his work, including the 2010 Euphonie d’Or of the Bourges International Electroacoustic Music and Sonic Art Competition (France), the 1996 Stockholm Electronic Arts Award, and First Prize in Musica Nova Prague, 2018. He has been a guest composer/researcher at numerous institutions including the Groupe de recherches Musicales (Paris), the University of Missouri (Kansas City), EMS (Stockholm), Musiques et Recherches (Brussels), The University of Montréal and Bowling Green State University (Ohio). www.electrocd.com/en/bio/young_jo/
To the Red Sky

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