

## FAÇADE by William Walton, to Poems by Edith Sitwell

Many of the images in Sitwell's early poetry appear to be inspired by her childhood, lonely and rich, growing up in a huge estate where her mostly absent parents, unhappy with her appearance, made her spend hours locked in an iron brace to straighten her spine. Sitwell had Marfan Syndrome and grew to be six feet tall. She wore voluminous clothing, including capes and coats and huge rings on her fingers, always topped by enormous hats or turbans. Her goal in this poetry was to explore the "effect on rhythm and speed of the use of rhymes, assonances, and dissonances."<sup>1</sup> She used the voice like a musical instrument, rather than as a solo voice, rapping out rhythms which were designed to sound like various dance forms of the day. In the first public performance, in June of 1923, Sitwell recited the poems herself, seated behind a screen with a painted face on it, through a special megaphone stuck through the screen (a Sengerphone, which was made of papier-maché). The effect was to obliterate the personality of the speaker and to glorify the *rhythm* of the words. Walton's music is gleefully "music hall" and full of the dance rhythms Sitwell chose – as well as some sly musical jokes.



### 2. Hornpipe

*This poem is filled with images of the ocean – and, of course, the Hornpipe is a sailor's tune. Sitwell loved the sea and said of herself "I was born by the wildest seas that England knows (Scarborough). My earliest recollection is of the tides, the wild rush of waves . . ."*<sup>2</sup> *In this poem, an indignant Queen Victoria complains to poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, about the attention being given to a "new-arisen Madam Venus" by the exotic rulers of parts of her empire. The opening of this poem is based on the sounds of "om" and "um". William Walton slyly used the rhythm of "Rule, Britannia" in the percussion opening of the song.*<sup>3</sup> *The opening lines of poetry are exactly in the rhythm of the Hornpipe tune. Pamela Martin opines that the Sitwell children were mesmerized by several huge Brussels tapestries in their home, which all depicted exotic scenes, with animals and people from far-off lands. She sees that influence in "Hornpipe".*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer, Christopher, Program Notes to a Chandos recording of *Façade I and II, Complete*; conducted by Richard Hickox, 1990, p. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Lasansky, Enrique Leon, William Walton's "Façade: An Entertainment", A.Mus.D. Dissertation, The University of Arizona., 1991; UMI, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, p. 5.

## 2. Hornpipe

Sailors come  
To the drum  
Out of Babylon;  
Hobby-horses  
Foam, the dumb  
Sky rhinoceros-glum

Watched the courses of the breakers' rocking-horses and with Glaucis,  
Lady Venus on the settee of the horsehair sea!  
Where Lord Tennyson in laurels wrote a gloria free,  
In a borealic iceberg came Victoria; she  
Knew Prince Albert's tall memorial took the colours of the floreal  
And the borealic iceberg; floating on they see  
New-arisen Madam Venus for whose sake from far  
Came the fat and zebra'd emperor from Zanzibar  
Where like golden bouquets lay far Asia, Africa, Cathay,  
All laid before that shady lady by the fibroid Shah.  
Captain Fracasse stout as any water-butt came, stood  
With Sir Bacchus both a-drinking the black tarr'd grapes' blood  
Plucked among the tartan leafage  
By the furry wind whose grief age  
Could not wither - like a squirrel with a gold star-nut.  
Queen Victoria sitting shocked upon a rocking horse  
Of a wave said to the Laureate, "This minx of course  
Is as sharp as any lynx and blacker - deeper than the drinks and quite as  
Hot as any Hottentot, without remorse!  
For the minx,"  
Said she,  
"And the drinks,  
You can see  
Are hot as any Hottentot and not the goods for me!"



## 3. Mariner Man

*The "Mariner Man" is possibly an allusion to Henry Moat, Edith's father's valet, whose family came from a long line of whalers, and whose seafaring stories Edith loved.<sup>5</sup> This poem makes prominent use of "ee" sounds, possibly to mimic the distant whistle of a train.<sup>6</sup>*

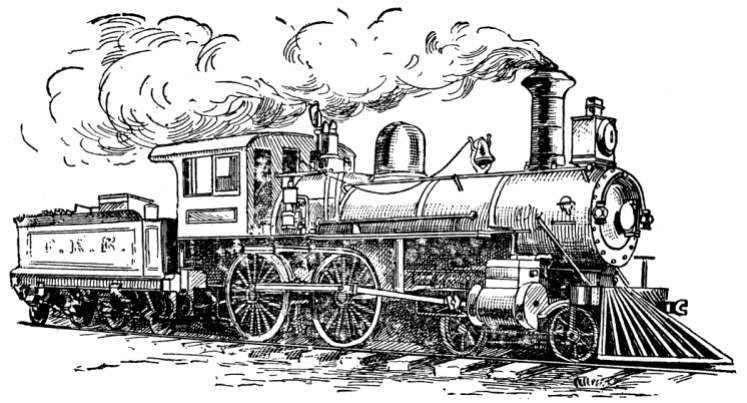
"What are you staring at, mariner man  
Wrinkled as sea-sand and old as the sea?"

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<sup>5</sup> From Pamela Hunter, *Façade* specialist, in notes on a Chandos recording CHAN 6689.

<sup>6</sup> Lasansky, p. 36

"Those trains will run over their tails, if they can,  
 Snorting and sporting like porpoises. Flee---  
 The burly, the whirligig wheels of the train.  
 As round as the world and as large again,  
 Running half the way over to Babylon, down  
 Through fields of clover to gay Troy town ---  
 A-puffing their smoke as grey as the curl  
 On my forehead as wrinkled as sands of the sea! ---  
 But what can that matter to you, my girl?  
 (And what can that matter to me?)"



### 7. Lullaby for Jumbo

*Pamela Hunter wrote that Edith Sitwell traveled frequently by sea, and as a child always imagined the steamer ship to be an elephant, huge and strong, with its horn as the elephant's trumpet and funnels serving as trunks.<sup>7</sup> Lullaby for Jumbo has a "slow-blues" feel, with its use of the flattened third and seventh degrees in the melody and its leisurely tempo. The rhythm rocks slowly, like a ship at anchor. The odd characters of Don Pasquito and his bride appeared in the previous poem in the cycle, Tango-Pasodoble, where they appeared to be vacationing at the sea-shore.*

Jumbo asleep!  
 Grey leaves thick-furred  
 As his ears keep  
 Conversations blurred.  
 Thicker than hide  
 Is the trumpeting water;  
 Don Pasquito's bride  
 And his youngest daughter  
 Watch the leaves  
 Elephantine grey:

What is it grieves  
 In the torrid day?  
 Is it the animal  
 World that snores  
 Harsh and inimical  
 In sleepy pores?-  
 And why should the spined flowers  
 Red as a soldier  
 Make Don Pasquito  
 Seem still mouldier?



<sup>7</sup> Sitwell, Edith, *Façade*, with commentary by Pamela Hunter, London, Duckworth, 1987, p. 45-46.

## 17. Swiss Jodelling Song

*This hilarious Alpine-inspired song is full of both spoken and musical allusions to things Swiss. The opening saxophone solo contains a famous yodeling theme. When the name of Swiss hero William Tell is mentioned, there are two different themes from Rossini's William Tell overture parodied at the same time in the instruments. Edelweiss, mountain djinns (spirits), cowbells; all the ingredients are there for this silly parody of "Alpen-ness". For those who would look to Façade for serious counter-culture musical revolt, this song comes down decidedly on the side of fun, rather than gravitas.<sup>8</sup>*

'We bear velvet cream,  
Green and babyish  
Small leaves seem; each stream  
Horses' tails that swish,

And the chimes remind  
Us of sweet birds singing,  
Like the jangling bells  
On rose trees ringing.

Man must say farewell  
To parents now,  
And to William Tell,  
And Mrs. Cow.

Man must say farewells  
To storks and Bettas,  
And to roses' bells,  
And statuettes.

Forests white and black  
In spring are blue  
With forget-me-nots,  
And to lovers true

Still the sweet bird begs  
And tries to cozen  
Them: "Buy angels' eggs  
Sold by the dozen."

Gone are clouds like inns  
On the gardens' brinks,



And the mountain djinns—  
Ganymede sells drinks;

While the days seem gray,  
And his heart of ice,  
Gray as chamois, or  
The edelweiss,

And the mountain streams  
Like cowbells sound—  
Tirra lirra, drowned  
In the waiter's dreams

Who has gone beyond  
The forest waves,  
While his true and fond  
Ones seek their graves.'

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<sup>8</sup> For all her enfant terrible bravado, Sitwell . . . wished her audience to be entertained. "It has now at last dawned on these people that Façade is a work for the most part of gaiety," she significantly remarks forty years after Façade's premiere and well past her youthful appetite for controversy; "the audience is meant to laugh." Lasansky, p. 108.

## 20. Fox Trot (Old Sir Faulk)

*Sitwell herself seems to have considered "Foxtrot" the most elaborate example of her rhythmic experiments. She describes it as "an experiment in the effect, on rhythm and on speed, of certain arrangements of assonances and dissonances, and of certain arrangements of intertwining, one syllabled, two syllabled and three syllabled words." Obviously, Sitwell was familiar with jazz rhythms and their constant use of syncopation, and this poem is filled with syncopated figures. Many images here are illusions to young childhood: nursemaids, nursery tea, boiled eggs, tea kettles, sitting under the trees. Pamela Martin says that the title character here represents the father of Edith's two best friends when she was 4 or 5. He was "tall as a stork" – and that this is an account of a day when Edith visited them right after their mother died.<sup>9</sup>*

Old

    Sir

        Faulk

    Tall as a stork

Before the honeyed fruits of dawn were ripe, would walk

And stalk with a gun

The reynard-colored sun

Among the pheasant-feathered corn the unicorn has torn, forlorn

    the

Smock-faced sheep

Sit

    And

        Sleep

Periwigged as William and Mary, weep...

'Sally, Mary, Mattie, what's the matter, why cry?'

The huntsman and the reynard-colored sun and I sigh

'Oh, the nursery-maid Meg

With a leg like a peg

Chased the feathered dreams like hens, and when they laid

    an egg

In the sheepskin

Meadows

Where

The serene King James would steer

Horse and hounds, then he

From the shade of a tree

Picked it up as spoil to boil 'for nursery tea' said the mourners

    In the

Corn, towers strain,

Feathered tall as a crane,



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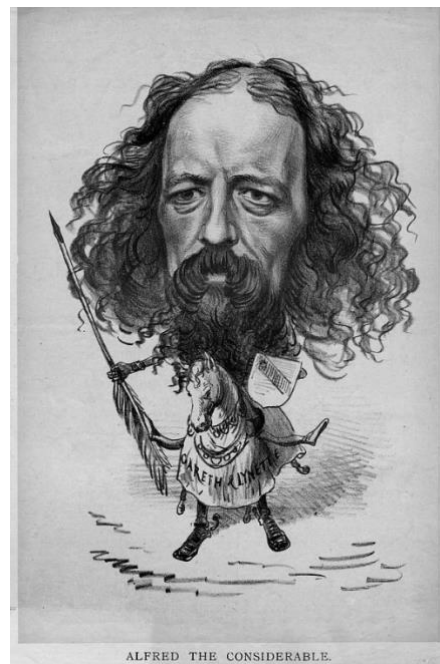
<sup>9</sup> Palmer, p. 6.

And whistling down the feathered rain, old Noah goes again—  
 An old dull mome  
 With a head like a pome  
 Seeing the world as a bare egg  
 Laid by the feathered air: Meg  
 Would beg three of these  
 For the nursery teas  
 Of Japhet, Shem and Ham; she gave it  
 Underneath the trees  
 Where the boiling  
     Water  
         Hissed  
 Like the goose-king's feathered daughter—kissed  
 Pot and pan and copper kettle  
 Put upon their proper mettle,  
 Lest the Flood – the Flood – the Flood begin again through these!

## 21. When Sir Beelzebub.

*Sitwell and Walton chose to end Façade with one of the most hilarious, upbeat items in the entire work. The devil calls for a rum drink at his hotel in hell – which never arrives. Someone who does arrive is the poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose poetry is sarcastically parodied. At least four poems are alluded to: Crossing the Bar, In Memoriam A.H.H., Demeter and Prosephine, and The Charge of the Light Brigade. Sitwell takes delight in plunging all of them into the nether regions, including Sir Alfred himself (in classical metres!). The music-hall atmosphere is as prevalent as ever.*

When  
 Sir  
 Beelzebub called for his syllabub in the hotel in Hell  
     Where Proserpine first fell,  
 Blue as the gendarmerie were the waves of the sea,  
     (Rocking and shocking the bar-maid)  
 Nobody comes to give him his rum but the  
 Rim of the sky hippopotamus-glum  
 Enhances the chances to bless with a benison  
 Alfred Lord Tennyson crossing the bar laid  
 With cold vegetation from pale deputations  
 Of temperance workers (all signed in Memoriam)  
 Hoping with glory to trip up the Laureate's feet,  
     (Moving in classical metres)...  
 Like Balaclava, the lava came down from the  
 Roof, and the sea's blue wooden gendarmerie  
 Took them in charge while Beelzebub roared for his rum.  
     ...None of them come!



ALFRED THE CONSIDERABLE.