Old Stones Remember

A cantata for

children’s voices, flute, bassoon, cello and harp

Music: Liz Lane
Words: David Lewis
Old Stones Remember

On a slightly overcast day in October 2011, around 160 children and staff from five schools (Gladestry Church in Wales Primary School, Knighton Church in Wales Primary School, Leintwardine Primary School, Presteigne Primary School and Shobdon Primary School) arrived at Pilleth in Mid Wales for the start of the Presteigne Festival’s Singing Histories project; to re-enact The Battle of Pilleth (1402) and take part in a series of workshops in and around the church and surrounding hillside. Following this, I toured the participating schools early in 2012, travelling for two days around the counties of Herefordshire, Shropshire and Powys and taking with me David Lewis’ evocative poems which had evolved from the workshops he undertook at the end of 2011. I received a very warm welcome from the schools, and the enthusiastic response and creative output from the children was both enjoyable and rewarding; memorable moments include the melodies created and sung by the children and many of their ideas have been incorporated throughout the songs.

Old Stones Remember musically follows the arc and structure of David’s poems, reiterating the first song at the end but with different words. All but one of the middle songs reflects dimensions of the battle from the view of various characters; the other, more reflective song lends its name to the title. For the first performance in July 2012, the songs are divided between the schools, with each class performing their respective song from the music workshop, as well as being joined by a class from another school; this too contributes to the overarching structure of the work, starting with all the classes, followed by smaller numbers of singers, building up to a large choir in the middle, decreasing again and finally ending with everyone together.

Liz Lane, March 2012

www.lizlane.co.uk
1. A Welsh Boy’s Song at Dawn

My hands can’t rest, my heart is dry, my mouth with fear is cold
I pray that God will keep me safe and make me stern and bold.

My heart still yearns for father’s fields, the hated chore and round
But I'll do my work for my great lord, high on Pilleth ground.

My sword is old and heavy, my helmet big and scarred
But I sing with the best and hope for the best, a battle short but hard!

2. The English Soldier’s Song

Softly softly fell the ashes
As we marched along the Teme
The woods closed in around us
We marched as in a dream.

Knighton was a town deserted
Left to ghost and wolf and bear
No market place, no welcome inn
Nor comfort found we there.

We marched to catch Glendower
The lies of lords we found
Knighton smoked and steamed and fell
A town burned to the ground.

Softly softly fell the ashes
As we marched along the Teme
The woods closed in around us
We marched as in a dream.

Glendower is a traitor
He sure will burn in hell
And all his gang of outlaw men
We'll hang at Pilleth well.
3. The Knight’s Song

Is this not the day for heroes and glories
Remembered in song, remembered in stories?

Is this not the day for the righting of wrongs
A day to catch rebels and sing the glad songs?

Is this not the day for feasting and laughter
A day for hard riding, some fighting thereafter?

Is this not the day for arming our war steeds
A day for strong fighting, the greatest of spear-deeds?

Is this not the day to end in great singing
A day for our glory and bells’ endless ringing?

Is this not the day for heroes and glories
Remembered in song, remembered in stories?

4. The Farmer’s Song

Farmer Tom he woke one day to walk to Knighton town
He had a fattened pig to sell and hoped to make a crown
He saw the gates a-fallen, he heard the people cry
Smelled the smoke a long way off, saw the flames leap high.

‘A fine fat pig you’re holding there,’ Tom heard above the noise,
‘Give him to the army and feed the soldier boys!
‘Old piggy’s like a child to me,’ Tom hid a manly tear
‘I raised him like he was my son, until I brought him here.’

The soldier smiled a crafty smile, held up a mighty flagon
‘Come and take a drink with me, there behind the wagon,
We’ll play some cards and take a sup upon a seat of stones
Come rest your pig and sit a while, where the soldiers rest their bones.’

Now old Tom liked a sup o’beer and knew his Queens and Kings
His aces, knaves and number cards, and a good few other things.
So he drained the soldiers’ flagon and he drained the soldier’s purses
Left them armed but drunk asleep, a-muttering poor curses.

Long years ago this all took place, but the old ones tell the tale
Tom’s pockets full with golden coin, his head with golden ale
And how the pig ran up the hill, until the farm he found
Far from the smoke and the soldier boys trampling Knighton town!
5. The Warlord’s Song

This is my last war-hill, my last battle-day
The army stands to orders, an enemy to slay

I can tell by the rattle, the pipes and the drums
That something English this way comes

I stand to rouse the army, to fight for you Owain
But this is my last battle, I will not rise again.

6. The Land Remembers The Battle

The silence of horses, the weight of the rain
Old stones remember what old men forget

The wind in their sadness, the hill and the slain
Old stones remember what old men forget

The iron we gave them, the wood that we grew
Old stones remember what old men forget

The bright swords delighting, the treacherous few
Old stones remember what old men forget

The cries at an ending, the blood on the stones
Old stones remember what old men forget

The sleep through the earth of iron and lost bones
Old stones remember what old men forget.

7. The Welsh Boy’s Evening Song

And now the day is over, swords are sheathed and clean
A battle short, a battle fierce, a great day I have seen

Down the hill we thundered, an army’s strong array
Knights and men and banners proud, all were swept away

Tomorrow we march a kingdom to win, with sword and spear and shield
Tonight we broach the flagons of ale, sing songs of Pilleth Field!
Duration: 20 minutes

*Old Stones Remember* was commissioned by
Presteigne Festival of Music and the Arts Limited with funding from the
Arts Council of Wales