

Eric Starr: Between the Sandhills and the Sea - A Tribute to Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby

Worldwide Release Armistice Day 2022.

Hannah Holman, violoncello

Michelle Alvarado, piano

Sonya Cassidy, narrator



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ABOUT THE PROJECT:

This recording project honors the lives and work of groundbreaking British authors and social reformers Vera Brittain (1893-1970) and Winifred Holtby (1898-1935). A nurse during WWI, Brittain was also the only woman to chronicle the Great War in depth.

Working near the front lines, Brittain witnessed the devastation of war while caring for both British and German soldiers. Among others, she lost her only brother, a fiancé, and later, her grief-stricken father. Brittain wrote with searing passion about her life-changing experiences, and she eventually became a devoted pacifist.

In her 1933 memoir *Testament of Youth*, Brittain reflected on the "post-war frenzy for memorials—as though we could somehow compensate the dead." But there was no restitution for a generation lost. She wrote of the "stone architecture" that covered the "soil that held so much agony," lamenting, "Only the sandhills and the sea remained unchanged."

Brittain's friend, Winifred Holtby, championed women's rights as well as racial justice in South Africa. Among other achievements, she established the Society of Friends of Africa in 1934, which promoted the unionization of Black workers. In 1940, the Winifred Holtby Memorial Library was built in Johannesburg in her honor. The first library of its kind in South Africa, it was 'equipped solely for the use of non-Europeans...and intended to serve native women as well as men.' Holtby's landmark feminist novel, *South Riding*, was published in 1936.

As activists, Brittain and Holtby campaigned together tirelessly with Brittain summing up their work in three words: "peace, justice, compassion." Their collective message was a cautionary tale, informed by a keen understanding of the horrors of war, and an unwavering desire to promote gender and racial equality.

Each musical movement contemplates the loss, heartbreak, and isolation, as well as the courage, perseverance, and ambition, experienced by the authors. Brittain and Holtby's powerful words are woven throughout the musical passages, which are alternately hopeful and ascending, and mournful and anguished.

The program opens with an homage to Holtby titled *No Mourning By Request*, and it concludes with *Epilogue: Immortal Flower*, a peaceful thought of eternity. The five-movement work *Between the Sandhills and the Sea*, focuses on Brittain's experiences during WWI.

This project was first presented in 2021 on a tour of the American Midwest, including a performance at the stunning Voxman Music Hall in Iowa City.

"Movement I: Time" premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2018.

CREDITS:

All music by Eric Starr, except "L'Envoi" by Edward Brittain. Poetry by Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain, and W.E. Henley. Music recorded at Gurari Studios at The National Opera Center, NYC. Poems recorded at Another Tongue, London. Music recorded, mixed, and mastered by Jeremy Gerard. Cover Art (oil on gesso board) by Amanda Besl. Produced by Eric Starr and Delia Starr.

Excerpts from Edward Brittain's "L'Envoi" are included by permission of Mark Bostridge and T.J. Brittain-Catlin, Literary Executors for the Estate of Vera Brittain 1970. "L'Envoi" excerpt is heard in "Movement V. Refuse to Forget" from circa 1'53" - 3'26".

This recording is intended to be enjoyed in sequence.

Total Running Time: 58 min. 40 secs

UPC Code: 198004851350

Media press kits are available upon request (ericstarr1@gmail.com).

Available at Apple Music, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, Pandora, and more.

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See "Links" section to purchase CDs.

TESTIMONIALS:

(Note: This section will be updated gradually as reviews are published.)

"Starr is after the universal here, with both text and music illuminating the ties that bind us all - loss and dissolution, yes, but also perseverance and the indomitability of the human spirit...The result is a momentous music, redolent of an aching for transcendence and a deep empathy for the subject matter. *Between the Sandhills and the Sea* is an emotionally complex, sometimes challenging but ultimately accessible, inviting and deeply rewarding work."

-Buffalo News, Arts & Entertainment (USA)

"This project is particularly beautiful...incredibly imaginative and superbly performed...Some of the writing is markedly fantastical, some almost chivalrous...This is powerful. There should be more projects that juxtapose performed poetry and music in this way (rather than musical settings). The whole disc is strangely invigorating (given its subject matter). Lest we forget ... and it is clear Starr has not. Compelling."

-Fanfare Magazine (USA) (★★★★)

"A moving musical tribute to two great women of the 20th Century. *Between the Sandhills and the Sea* is a phantasmagoria of shifting emotions. Cellist Hannah Holman and pianist Michelle Alvarado navigate the evocations of loss, heartbreak, and isolation, as well as courage, perseverance, and ambition, with enormous sensitivity and commitment...Actor Sonya Cassidy's readings are pitch-perfect, downplaying any sentimentality while pointing up the underlying emotions, as she so masterfully does..."

-Limelight Magazine (Australia/UK) (★★★★ 1/2)

"This program combines readings of poems by the two authors, sensitively performed by Sonya Cassidy, with music for piano and cello. Eric Starr's music reflects the seriousness of the issue....The dialogue of cello and piano develops sometimes very melancholy, or even downright sad, sometimes fluid and light, but always eloquent and evocative. All in all, it provides a thought-provoking experience, in relation to the strong texts of the two authors."

-Pizzicato Journal (Luxembourg) (★★★★)

"Starr's project is truly valuable in this volatile world, and it's clearly very powerful."

-James Kent, Director of the BBC Films biopic *Testament of Youth*

"Starr's project is the most wonderful tribute to two extraordinary women!"

-Juliette Towhidi, Screenwriter of the BBC Films biopic *Testament of Youth*

"Eric Starr's tribute to Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, *Between the Sandhills and the Sea*, combines readings of the two authors' poems with evocative and moving music for piano and cello. One senses in the work the same powerful themes that animated their lives and their writing, an undertone of sorrow for what was irrevocably lost in the Great War, a new-found joy in their love for each other, and a determination to use their own lives to make the world a better place."

-Elaine and English Showalter
co-editors, *Between Friends: Letters of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*

COMPOSER'S NOTES:

There are three pieces on this recording. The main piece, *Between the Sandhills and the Sea*, has five movements. The recording is intended to be enjoyed in sequence, and without interruption, as it is presented live. A reading of a poem precedes each piece of music.

I wrote this music using an approach that differed from my previous endeavors. In the creative process, I wasn't thinking about chords, scales, rhythms, tempi, or key signatures, etc. Instead, I deeply meditated on the lives of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, as well as Vera's fiancé Roland and Vera's brother Edward. I essentially notated what appeared to me in these meditations and also in my dreams. When I sat at the piano, it was to find the melodies and chords, etc. that were already swirling around in my thoughts. I did not seek to write in any particular style, nor did I try to emulate any period of music.

No Mourning By Request

No Mourning By Request was composed as a companion to the longer five-movement work *Between the Sandhills and the Sea*. Like Winifred Holtby's poem of the same name, my music ponders death as a celebration of life. While contemplative in some passages, this piece is ultimately intended to be radiant and ascending, as well as playful. It does, however, begin ominously with a "wind" sound effect, followed by a mournful cello solo.

Winifred Holtby was Vera Brittain's best friend. They met at Oxford shortly after the war and remained close for 16 years, until Holtby's untimely demise. Without Holtby's support, Brittain may not have recovered from her devastating war-time losses. (Brittain lost her fiancé, only brother, and two dear friends in the war.) Brittain was also grateful for Holtby's help after her grief-stricken father committed suicide in 1935 (just one month before Holtby's own death).

After I finished work on my Brittain tribute, I began to feel that Holtby needed representation in the concert program and subsequent recording. Before long, this piece was born.

Between the Sandhills and the Sea

Between the Sandhills and the Sea is based conceptually on Vera Brittain's life during WWI, the period for which she is most remembered. More specifically, this work focuses on the brief lives of Roland Leighton and Edward Brittain as well as Vera's early adulthood.

This piece attempts to go deep within the fog of war and the slough of humanity. Hopefully, this work shows the timeless connection between generations as it illuminates universal elements of the human experience. All five movements invoke the existential as the music contemplates loss, heartbreak, and isolation, as well as courage, perseverance, and ambition.

Like the ending of *No Mourning By Request*, there is the use of single repeated notes in this movement. This symbolizes the passage of time. There are sound effects employed in each movement too. For example, in Movements I and V, you

will hear the so-called "seagull" effect on the cello, which might also represent the "whizz" of shells fired from German 77mm field guns.

"Movement I: Time" sends us back to Western Europe during WWI. Here, the piano introduction suggests a ticking clock. What will the future bring? I imagine Vera Brittain feeling the uncertainty and anxiety of war. Who will be spared? Who will perish? Will we ever heal from the trauma of war? The pulsating notes of the piano are portentous; the horrors of the first mechanized war are about to be unleashed upon a naive generation. The setting might be Étapes: one of Brittain's five V.A.D. postings.

"Movement II: Love and War" contemplates love and loss. This movement begins with a simple major chord. The unadorned triad symbolizes the purity of young love. However, as the music develops, the mood ebbs and flows, and the harmonies become more dissonant. Although there is a brief, lighthearted gigue in the middle of the piece, death overshadows love's power, and the piece ultimately succumbs to heartbreak as the clock, once again, ticks away.

"Movement III: Dear Roland" imagines the telephone call that brought news of Roland's death. The piece begins with the ominous ringing of a telephone, simulated by foreboding, rolled chords on the piano. The dramatic passage near the end of the movement suggests a tidal wave of shock triggered by the realization that life will never be the same.

"Movement IV: A Plea" begins with the blasts of shelling, played percussively on the lowest strings of the piano. At this point, the war has destroyed nearly everything. This movement focuses on Brittain's appeal to God, as she asks for the gift of a career as an author to compensate for her suffering. The repeated pizzicato cello notes near the beginning of the movement emulate the "dits" and "dahs" of morse code. Perhaps Brittain is telegraphing a plea for help.

"Movement V: Refuse to Forget (L'Envoi)" is centered around Edward Brittain, including his tragic and mysterious end. His short composition "L'Envoi," is featured near the beginning of the piece (after a wistful musical introduction). This final movement remembers those who died in a reckless and gruesome war. It also contemplates a heavenly place, where Brittain may reunite with those she lost.

Epilogue: Immortal Flower

This piece was the last to be composed in the collection. After all the *Sturm und Drang* of the previous works, I wanted to end the program on a peaceful thought of eternity. Here, I return to a poem by Winifred Holtby titled "Invocation to Time (A Prayer)." The piece, like the poem, seeks to resist the ravages of time, and instead, embrace the immortality of the soul.

When writing this music, I also imagined the soldiers coming home after a long and bloody war. Those who survived are now back in England, perhaps on the shire, looking wearily across the open fields at the place they once called home. But can you really go home again?

ERIC STARR - BIOGRAPHY

Eric Starr is a third generation musician from Western New York. A multitalented artist, Starr has worked as a composer, percussionist, pianist, author, and educator for most of his life.

As a composer, Starr has received four prestigious Meet the Composer grants, a Utah Arts Council grant, NEA Foundation grants and more. In 2007, the premiere of his suite for saxophone and strings received a standing ovation at The Lighthouse: Poole's Centre for the Arts (UK) featuring world renowned saxophonist, Iain Ballamy.

In October of 2018 Starr's *Twelve Pieces for Solo Piano* and "Movement I: Time" from *Between the Sandhills and the Sea* were performed at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. Earlier in March of 2018, *Twelve Pieces* was premiered at Kleinhans Music Hall in Buffalo, NY. Both performances featured pianist Michelle Alvarado and "Movement I: Time" was performed by Alvarado with cellist Hannah Holman.

Starr's jazz band, The Eric Starr Group, has released two critically acclaimed albums and his group has performed at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, among other venues. His albums have received international radio play and rave reviews in *Downbeat Magazine*, *The Jazz Journal*, *Jazzwise Magazine*, the *All Music Guide* and over a dozen additional publications worldwide. Brian Morton, publisher of the *Penguin Guide to Jazz* called his album *Such Is Life* "One of my favorite releases of the year." Iconic drummer, Bill Bruford, called Eric "an

extremely welcome new addition to the club [of percussionist composers]" and famed composer Steve Reich wrote, "I'm impressed with the directness of Eric's music and the craft with which he has written it. His music would appeal to a wide variety of listeners."

As an author and educator, Starr has written five books about music for Adams Media, Inc. Two of them have been translated into Spanish. In 2010, Starr was a featured speaker at Loyola University New Orleans' Beaver Guest Lecturer Series. Since 1995, he has also appeared as a guest artist and clinician at colleges and universities throughout the country. Most recently, he was invited to speak at the Center for New Music, University of Iowa.

Starr has also written several plays, including *Ghost Dance*, a dramatic work that centers around indigenous life in the 20th century. Artemis Preeshl's 1999 production at Expanded Arts (NYC) starred Ted Minos, and then up-and-coming Lakota actor, Chaske Spencer.

Starr currently resides in the Hudson Valley with his two children, Iain and Delia.

LINKS:

Composer's Website:

www.ericstarmusic.com

For downloadable, high resolution photos of the cover art, the composer, and the performers see:

www.ericstarmusic.com/featured-project

Media link for free download or streaming:

<https://ericstarr.bandcamp.com/album/between-the-sandhills-and-the-sea-a-tribute-to-vera-brittain-winfred-holtby>

To purchase CDs:

<https://a.co/d/bwbwrAF>

Cellist, Hannah Holman's Website:

www.hannahholmancello.com

Narrator, Sonya Cassidy IMDb page:

www.imdb.com/name/nm3250161/

Cassidy is known for leading roles in *The Paradise*, *Vera*, *Humans*, *Lodge 49*, *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (TV series) and more.

More information about Vera Brittain & Winifred Holtby:

spartacus-educational.com/Jbrittain.htm

spartacus-educational.com/Jholtby.htm