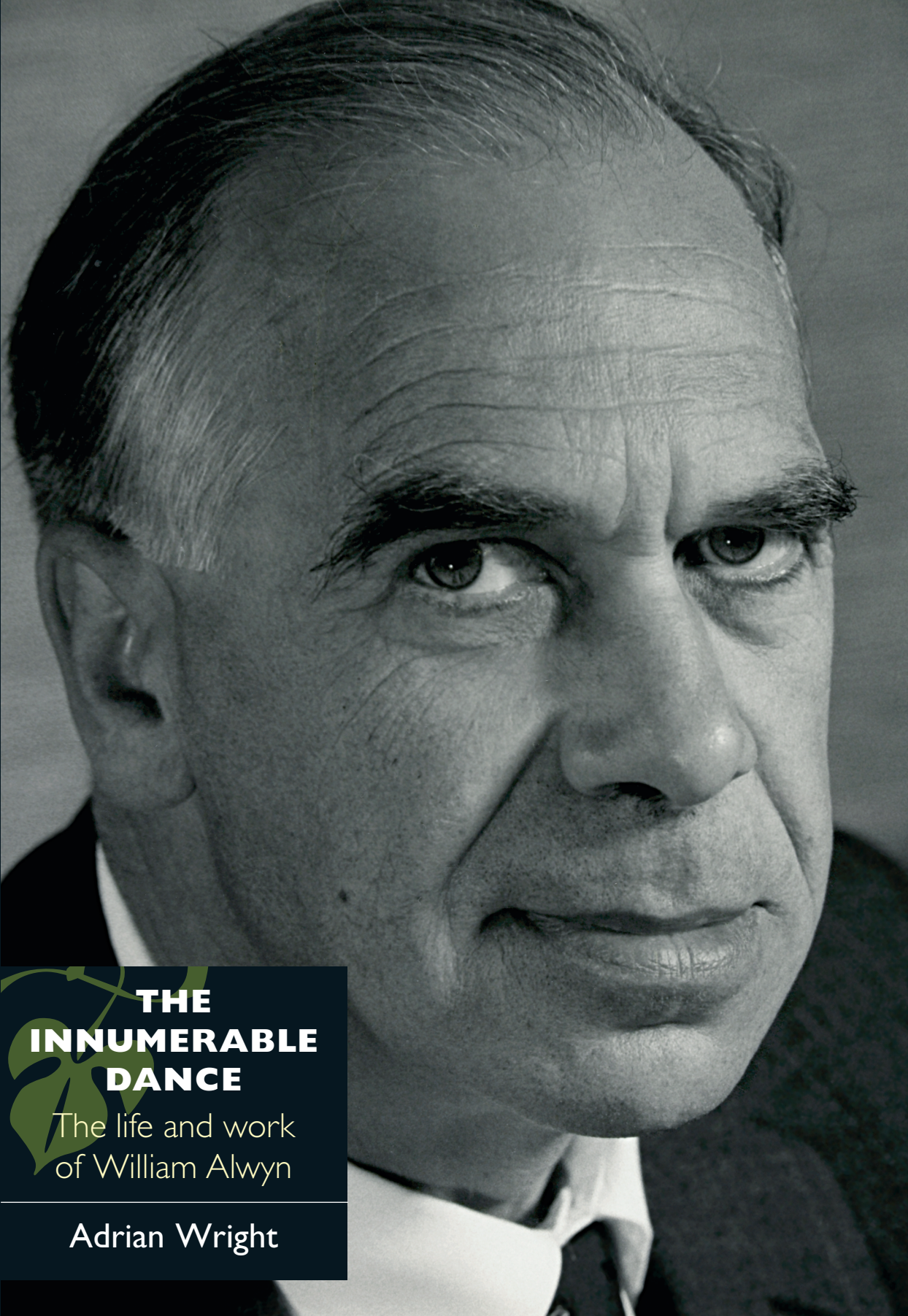

THE INNUMERABLE DANCE

The life and work of William Alwyn

Adrian Wright

The Innumerable Dance

The Life and Work of William Alwyn

This book is the first full-scale biography of William Alwyn since his death in 1985. Alwyn's early life as a flautist was altered when he became a leading composer of the Documentary Film Movement in the 1930s, going on to a prolific career in writing for feature films, including commissions for Walt Disney and Carol Reed. By the mid-1950s his reputation as a concert-hall composer was established, with an extensive output of symphonies, tone poems, concertos, chamber and piano pieces. An habitué of the London film studios and concert halls, and a prominent professor at the Royal Academy of Music, Alwyn underwent a major crisis in his life that precipitated an escape in 1960 to the Suffolk coast, where he turned his back on film music and immersed himself in the writing of operas (including *Miss Julie*), poetry, essays and fiction, as well as taking up painting.

Adrian Wright's book balances detailed analysis of Alwyn's work with a vivid account of his marriages to the musician Olive Pull and the composer Doreen Carwithen, relationships that profoundly affected the course of his career. Using a mass of hitherto unpublished material (including an unexpurgated version of his noted *Ariel to Miranda*) and interviews with prominent figures in Alwyn's life, the volume places his achievements in the musical context of his time, along the way dealing with his relationship with Benjamin Britten, and such hitherto almost unknown works as *Don Juan*, *The Fairy Fiddler* and the radio opera *Farewell, Companions*.

Adrian Wright is the author of the acclaimed *Foreign Country: The Life of L. P. Hartley* (1996) and *John Lehmann: A Pagan Adventure* (1998), and is a contributor to *The New Dictionary of National Biography*.

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The Innumerable Dance

The Life and Work of William Alwyn

Adrian Wright

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In thanking those who have helped me during the writing of this book, some explanation of its beginnings seems necessary. I never met or knew William Alwyn. I was alerted to his music in the 1960s by the Stock Editor (a now defunct post) of Norfolk County Library, Robert Illsley. 'Mr Illsley', as he was known to most – and certainly by a teenage library assistant in his first job – came from Derby, and had not only an astounding knowledge of books and the people who wrote them but a catholic relish in the arts, however humble or self-important. One of the joys of turning up for work was knowing he would appear (rather like a Demon King coming up through a trapdoor) sometime during the morning and expound on subjects he thought might interest me: perhaps the most recent episode of the television series *Z Cars* (he was a keen admirer of the waspish Inspector Barlow), or, a prized favourite of Mr Illsley's, the soap opera *Crossroads*, in whose absurdities he delighted. His knowledge and caustic wit ranged widely over the extraordinary and the neglected, from such ridiculous authors as Amanda McKittrick Ros and the novelists employed by Messrs Mills & Boon (he loved to read extracts from the closing passages of their publications), to the less well-known British composers of the twentieth century. It was then that I heard of William Alwyn, and my first thanks must go to the late Mr Illsley, whose dress always comprised a suit, trilby and Gannex raincoat, but whose appreciation of art was always worthy of serious attention.

It was much later, in the 1990s, when I rediscovered, or perhaps began to appreciate for the first time, Alwyn's music, through the long series of his work recorded by Chandos Records. The booklets to the CDs often included a photograph of the composer's widow Mary, apparently Margaret Rutherford-like in sensible blouse, homely cardigan, plaid skirt and (out of sight in the picture) almost certainly sturdy brogues. She was seen smiling helpfully up at the conductor on his podium. It was now that I began to listen to Alwyn's music and discover the breadth and ambition of his work. I had left it too late to meet the composer, but eventually I sent a letter for Mary Alwyn to Chandos which led to an invitation to visit her at Lark Rise, the Alwyns' home at Blythburgh, a half-hour journey from my home just outside Norwich. It was probably at our first meeting that I told her I was some sort of writer, having already written a biography of the novelist L. P. Hartley, and from that moment she suggested I should write the life of her husband. An easy prey to flattery, I was elated, and hadn't this book fallen into my lap just as my other biographies had, as if there was something fateful about my association with the subjects I wrote of?

I cannot recall now how long it took me to realise that being Mary's anointed

biographer had its problems. Mary was not only extraordinarily strong-minded but revered William and everything he had ever produced – music, poetry, librettos, essays, translations and paintings. It was some months before I finally agreed I would write it, but I was already aware that behind me stood a small army of prospective biographers who had one way and another fallen into disfavour, usually when she suspected a whiff of even the most tentative criticism of Alwyn. Some of these would-be biographers hovered still on the fringes of Mary's life. At every visit to Lark Rise and to the nursing homes where she spent her last years I was quizzed; how was the book coming along? The progress was snail-like, for I knew that any attempt at a meaningful biography was impossible during Mary's lifetime. I was aware by now that the story was a complicated one with three leading characters, and that a proper understanding of Alwyn's personal life was crucial to any appreciation of his career.

Once again, as during the preparation of other books, I felt (as biographers sometimes must) like an Angel of Death waiting in the wings. In those last years of Mary's life I diligently researched Alwyn's archive stored at Lark Rise, and encouraged her to keep notebooks in which she wrote about her life with Alwyn. After her death in January 2003 the future of the project seemed uncertain until the William Alwyn Foundation decided to support my endeavours to produce the biography. I am deeply indebted to the Foundation for its financial support and the ready assistance it has given me. The Administrator to the William Alwyn Foundation, Andrew Knowles, has been tireless in his support and helpfulness, and has made my duties not only easier but also more enjoyable. He has provided the comprehensive list of Alwyn's works found in this volume. The observant reader will note that a great number of works listed there go unmentioned in the body of the book, but bringing every one of the works into the narrative would have resulted in little more than an annotated list of Alwyn's output. Thanks are also due to the Chairman of the William Alwyn Foundation, John Turner and its Treasurer, Tony Chittock, who spoke to me about their association with the Alwyns.

In dealing with the personal side of Alwyn's life, I am indebted to his sons, Jonathan and Nicholas, for speaking to me about their father. Jonathan also supplied me with information about his family's history, provided some photographs and read the final draft of the manuscript. Equally welcome was the co-operation of Mary Alwyn's sister, Barbara Jackson, who tirelessly responded to my pleas for information and dates. Visiting Barbara and her husband Michael at their home in Cheltenham was a pleasure.

I have been fortunate in having the co-operation of some of those who knew the Alwyns in the Blythburgh years (there being very few survivors from Alwyn's pre-Blythburgh period); three in particular. In Sussex, Andrew Palmer, who has done much to bring Alwyn's work to the forefront of British music, invited me to his home to speak about his relationship with William and Mary. It is not surprising that in his book *A Pure Flame* Brian Murphy dubbed Andrew Palmer the

'keeper of the flame'. Brian Murphy's affectionate 'Preface to the Life and the Work of William Alwyn' is an important document for any reassessment of Alwyn, and I thank Mr Murphy for allowing me *carte blanche* in using material and taking quotations from it. In Suffolk, the archivist Anne Surfling, who worked closely with Mary after Alwyn's death, provided encouragement when I began writing the book, and information about some of the key figures in its telling. Her illuminating frankness and enthusiasm gave me an ally on whom I did not often have to make demands, but knowing she was there was a comfort. Above all, of course, Anne Surfling is the person responsible for first setting Alwyn's archive in order, and my debt, and those of future scholars who may dip into its very considerable resources, is therefore considerable.

I have made ample use of the information in Jill Teasley's excellent *Chronicle of the Life and Work of Doreen Carwithen* (alias Mary Alwyn), an essential and warmly written guide to this composer's career. Teasley's assimilation of so much factual information has proved invaluable, and I have drawn on her findings. My thanks are due to the author Ian Johnson for speaking to me about his book on Alwyn's film music; the fact that I disagree with some of his conclusions in no way diminishes my respect for his definitive work. Reg and Marjorie Williamson interrupted their holiday in a remote cottage in Suffolk to entertain me one morning with their recollections of the Alwyns. Kim Hammond was invigorating in her memories of working at Lark Rise, and Margaret Barrell welcomed me to her bungalow in Bungay to tell me of her brief experience of Alwyniana. The late Neil Harrison told me how he turned down Mary Alwyn's suggestion that he should manage the financial affairs of the Alwyn estate. Dominic and Charlotte Cooney welcomed me to their wonderful home in Blythburgh to reminisce about Dominic's father, Tommy Cooney. Lowri Blake reminded me of the details of her birthday concert present at Lark Rise, and Anthony Day told me of Malcolm Arnold's friendship with Mary Alwyn.

A great debt is owed to Margaret Jones, William Alwyn Archivist, Cambridge University Library, for her unending helpfulness, for reading the book in draft and making helpful suggestions. Finding a way into and through (and occasionally around) the archive was made the easier by her organisation and knowledge, and the fact that nothing seemed too much trouble. She suggested that I looked closely at material I might otherwise have overlooked, and I hope I have responded to her passion for the material under her curatorship. My thanks are also due to Richard Andrewes, Head of Music, Cambridge University Library, and the staff of the Anderson Room at Cambridge University Library. I am grateful to Bridget Palmer, Assistant Librarian, Special Collections and Archives at the Royal Academy of Music, for her assistance and suggestions, and to the staff of the London Library, the University of East Anglia, and Norfolk County Library. At the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh, I have to thank Dr Nick Clarke, and the archivist Pamela Wheeler who joined Anne Surfling to give me her pithy opinion of Alwyn and his music. Terry Dunning acted as chauffeur and unofficial

assistant and sounding-board at various times during the writing of this book, and read its first draft. Michael King, as ever, was ready with an invaluable steadying hand, support and guidance.

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Thanks are also due to Bruce Phillips for recommending this book to Boydell & Brewer, to that company's editorial director Caroline Palmer and her staff, and to the tireless editing of David Roberts. Whatever solecisms, errors of taste or unquestionable bloomers remain are entirely my own responsibility.

Above and beyond, the final, and first, acknowledgement of thanks must be to Mary Alwyn, alias Doreen Carwithen. Whatever else it may be, I hope that this book is proof of her devotion to its subject.

Adrian Wright
Norfolk
February 2008

Introduction

William Alwyn's name may bring not a flicker of recognition to most of the British public, but through two or three generations his music has probably been heard by most of them, somewhere. Having a life of its own, it floats into the air through whatever conduit it can, via hi-fi systems, tracked alongside reels of film, out of radios, flooding concert halls. The music may have meant something, even for a moment, but the name of the person who made it goes by. During one of his leaves from the Navy my father probably heard the music on a visit to one of the London News Theatres in the 1940s: there were such places at Waterloo and Victoria and Baker Street and one next to the Empire Leicester Square. The most famous was the Piccadilly News Theatre in Great Windmill Street (handy, too, for a visit to the Windmill Theatre, where Vivian Van Damm's *Revuedeville* offered comedians and nudes with strategically placed plaster in sometimes Grecian attitudes) where an hour might be spent watching newsreels, cartoons, short documentaries and generally keeping track of the progress of the war with Germany. The Woodbine-thick atmosphere of these little palaces was replicated all over the country. In February 1937 the Bijou News-Reel Cinema opened in Newcastle, one of three news theatres to start up in the city that year. A film industry that never missed an opportunity, and was now spurred into action by the necessity of propaganda, began churning out short features, presented by the Ministry of Information or Shell Films (their first feature, about malaria, was shown in 1941) or the GPO Film Unit. A generation of men and women watched the images as they progressed, every one of the raincoat-belted customers probably coming across at least one of the documentaries to which Alwyn contributed a score – perhaps his debut film, *The Future's in the Air* (1936), the music commissioned from him only because the intended composer, Raymond Bennell, was not at hand when needed. Two years later the casual cineaste might have seen one of the nine documentaries for which Alwyn had written the music – *Monkey into Man* perhaps, or *Whipsnade Freedom (Free to Roam)*. Bennell's absence had opened the door on one of the most prolific careers in British film music.

As the war went on, Alwyn turned to another medium that was enjoying a Golden Age – wireless. Listeners tuning to the Home Service may have heard his *Made in Britain* during the Workers' Gala Night, the music performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under Muir Mathieson (both the organisation and the individual would play major roles in Alwyn's career). Alwyn's war effort was obvious among the many radio commissions that followed: *Four Years of War* (1943) written by Louis MacNeice, and *Their Finest Hour: The People of Britain* and *London Victorious* (both 1945). Beside these are a host of other radio

pieces, not least his work for a series of Christmas features, even the titles of which conjure up the solace of home and hearth in a war-battered England. On Christmas Day 1945 listeners were offered *Wherever You May Be*, and there were more seasonal plums in 1946, 1950, 1951 and finally in 1958 with *The Seekers* (with Mathieson now conducting the BBC Concert Orchestra) broadcast on the Light Programme as well as the Home Service.

For the picture-goer of the 1940s there was almost the inevitability that Alwyn's music would flesh out a feature film, a genre in which he enjoyed a prolific adventure. There may be a mystery in its beginning. A giant among British films of this time, *In Which We Serve*, was perceived to be the creation of Noel Coward, Coward as writer, director (with David Lean), star and composer of the score. Coward's omnipotence seems unchallengeable, but manuscript sketches of that score were discovered among Alwyn's papers after his death. There were others who claimed that Coward sometimes passed off their work as his own, among them his amanuensis Robb Stewart, who once told me that some of the music known as Coward's had been his. Could it be that Coward had used the fledgling feature film composer William Alwyn and put his own name to the work?

Such confusion would not occur again. Beginning in the early days of the war, the legend 'Music by William Alwyn' earned its separate billing in a host of opening credits, before Victor Mature or John Mills or James Mason or Anna Neagle began to spin the story. Today, many of these films appear occasionally in the afternoon television schedules, reminding us of another, black and white, world of neatly turned servicemen, provincial tearooms and taffeta-scarfed heroines, a world where you were convinced that Glynis Johns was a mermaid, where it seemed impossible that Margaret Rutherford had ever been young, where Googie Withers made you believe that a British actress might be capable of something sexual, and you could trust John Gregson to be jolly decent. On this long way, Alwyn worked for some of the most interesting directors and studios – Carol Reed, Lance Comfort, Alexander MacKendrick, Ealing Studios, Walt Disney. His reputation clings to a Golden Age of British cinema, the era of *A Night to Remember*, Walter Lord and Roy Baker's remarkable account of the sinking of the *Titanic* that in every department outclasses James Cameron's over-stuffed blockbuster of 1997. At Pinewood, Baker fashioned a film from models, tanks of water and memorable vignettes from little-known British actors. Half a century later, Cameron produced a movie whose effects came from computer trickery and a veering from documentary into banal thriller propped up with star performances. The leading men of each piece seem content each in his own milieu: Kenneth More, polo-sweatered, a symbol for British audiences of something brave and enduring, against the puppy-fat adolescence of Leonardo DiCaprio. Let us put it down to changing tastes. As for the music, Baker's composer (Alwyn) only now and again seems bothered to lift his pen, for of music there is hardly any, while Cameron's composer (James Horner) floods the action with his score, even offering up a song that Celine Dion will turn into a worldwide hit. Faced with the

gigantic tragedy, Alwyn's reticence may be an apt example of his craft, balanced somewhere between sound and silence.

He is more full-blooded in those films that we may see as belonging to his own Golden Age: *Odd Man Out* (1947), *The Fallen Idol* (1948), *The Winslow Boy* (1948), *The History of Mr Polly* (1949), *The Card* (1952) and *Mandy* (1952). That run of films ends in 1963, with another Carol Reed production, *The Running Man*, at which point Alwyn decided he would never again write for the medium. Arriving by default as a pioneer of British film music in the mid-1930s, at the end of this career he had established himself as one of the leading exponents of his art. The availability of music for radio and film – music, as it were, for all – establishes the man's popularity (or if not his industry), but Alwyn would probably have dismissed all this as a rehearsal for a life's work in pursuit of his 'serious' music: five symphonies (four of them conceived as one great bound-together cycle), two piano concertos, orchestral works, concerti grossi, chamber works, song-cycles and four operas. At the other end of his life, he was still struggling with opera – two of them, in fact – *Juan* and *Miss Julie*. These belong to Alwyn's years in the wilderness, for, along with many other twentieth-century British composers, Alwyn came to feel that his work had been undervalued and put aside. The fact that so much of his life was given over to protecting and encouraging other composers may have made the bitterness more severe.

As she grew older, the composer's second wife Doreen Carwithen, like Alwyn, saw her career as a composer of both 'serious' and film music slip from her. Carwithen, as we will see, belonged so completely to Alwyn's world that she became Mary Alwyn, but Carwithen's considerable achievements were hard won in a male-dominated society that did not readily encourage the careers of female composers. Alwyn and Carwithen may be mirror images. As we focus on one, we shift our focus on the other. The ideal would be to bring both into focus. In trying to make sense of why Alwyn's reputation sidled into the margins of British musical history, we should understand why Doreen Carwithen's reputation escaped its moorings. 'I am Doreen', she told me one day when we had gone together for a pub lunch. 'I want to be Doreen, not Mary', she insisted, but the next time I saw her, it felt uncomfortable to call her by the name that hardly anyone knew her by. But this predicament, along with the music, was also of Alwyn's making.

Chapter 1
Early Closing

In a small notebook (the 'Report') he took with him on a trip to Lausanne in 1970, William Alwyn wrote, 'I was born an Englishman of good English stock – and that was my first disastrous mistake.' He was considering writing his autobiography (perhaps this was an opening sentence) and compared himself to other composers who had taken up the pen. 'I am a better composer than Berlioz,' he wrote, 'and certainly a better poet. Perhaps I shall write a better autobiography, who knows?' Another note stares back at the biographer, as if in warning: 'My own musical works are the story of my life, my own autobiography.' No need, then, to look beyond them. And then something that gives an immediate clue to the life:

> I love silence. I love the beauty that lies hidden in silence. For silence in music, said Mozart, is of equal importance to sound. I was born in a time when silence could still be heard …

When William Alwyn boasted that there was no musical background in his family he had overlooked his Uncle Ernest and Auntie May. One of Alwyn's earliest experiences of the power of music was seeing Uncle Ernest perform with his wife May Erne on the music-hall stage. As a solo act May's bill-matter on variety posters was 'Ambi-'Pe'–Dexter,' but after teaming up with Ernest they worked as 'May Erne and He of the Voice' ('Patched Ballads and Pot Shots' was their bill matter).[1] The theatre had turned Ernest Smith, small and bright eyed, into Erne Chester, while Alwyn's Auntie May – he remembered her as full-bosomed and cocooned in furs – accompanied 'He' on the xylophone. The resourceful May had not only struggled for five years to perfect her turn, but patented a portable glockenspiel and (with its separate patent) an instrument with which to strike it. Ernest's voice never broke effectively, enabling him to deliver his 'patched ballads' (whatever they were) in a distinctive manner as May happily hammered away by his side. Together, they played the London Coliseum, the old Bedford in Camden and the London Alhambra.

In time, Alwyn liked to explain that his roots could be traced back to Sir Nicholas Alwyn, a Lord Mayor of London in the fourteenth century, but the family history was rather more prosaic, and few descendants as colourful as Ernest. The family was set in London, where Alwyn's paternal grandfather, variously called Harry Smith and (for some undiscovered reason) Harry Pass, cut a dashing figure, tall, presentable, handsome and well spoken. Appearances were deceptive, for Harry had no profession and was inefficient at providing for his family, leaning on his

wife's ability to earn money by doing piece-work of stitching shoes at home. It may be that he needed the natural charms he possessed to keep on the right side of the law. Home was a slum on London Road (now Maple Street) near Warren Street underground station, and it was here that Alwyn's father, William James Smith, was born on 18 February 1867, into a company of happy brothers. For as long as they lived, they lived with enjoyment of each other's company.

Harry Smith's wife, Alwyn's grandmother, bore the responsibility of bringing up her boys. Alwyn remembered that in her old age she would sit, a bird-like creature in a beaded bonnet tied with a bow below her chin. She would hold a glass of Madeira wine and a plate with yellow cake on it and sing 'Pretty Polly Perkins of Paddington Green'. Each of her sons had more ambition and sense of purpose than their father. The eldest, Frederick, presided over his siblings: William; George and Charlie, who both became landlords of public houses; Gus (a stray from the London streets who was taken into the family) the businessman, and Ernest, who struck it lucky on the music halls. It seemed uncertain what William Smith would make of his life, but he began by selling newspapers in the Euston Road, and discharging errands. Despite this discouraging start and with little education, he had obvious talents, and given the opportunities might have become a professional writer. With three of his brothers he began a Christie Minstrel troupe (the launching pad for Ernest's music-hall career), for which he wrote sketches and lyrics, and contributed satirical pieces to the local newspaper. William Smith might have found a wider audience for such stuff in London, but when the family's fortunes deteriorated, his father decided to uproot and move to Northampton. There is the suspicion that this may have been because he thought his wife would make more money at her shoe-making, for Northampton was a thriving centre of the boot industry. William Smith's literary ambitions dwindled, and with it his 'dreams of Dickensian journalistic success were thrown aside'.[2] He always regretted it, but made the most of what happened in the rest of his life. At Northampton he was soon apprenticed to a local printer in the Drapery,[3] and it was at Northampton that he met and fell in love with Ada Tyler Tompkins. This would change the course of everything.

The Tompkinses had a long history as yeoman farmers, and Ada, born on 5 April 1869 in the village of Heath and Reach near Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire, was put to work on the farms her father oversaw at Tingewick and Sulgrave. At Sulgrave the Tompkinses' farm was next to the Manor, once the home of George Washington's family, and Ada formed a close friendship with Susan Cook, the daughter of the occupant, often making her way into the Manor House through a secret passage. One day Susan's brother Samuel proposed to Ada, who presumably said no.[4]

Ada's father, Grandfather Tompkins, struggled to make a profit from farming, his efforts confounded by falling prices, the shortage of labour, and stock and crops affected by the cheap produce coming into the country from the New Dominions. Turning his back on the land, he moved the family to Northampton,

where he acquired a business on Wellingborough Road, close to the racecourse, and established himself as Grocer and Corn Merchant. Alwyn remembered visiting the premises, 'a derelict little shop', from whose dimly lit interior came the assorted smells of rotten potatoes, ancient newspapers, and of his grandmother's unwashed and blind son Walter who helped behind the counter. Grandmother Tompkins exuded a severity that had probably been necessary to keep the farmhouse at Heath and Reach going, and always stuck to her country ways. Even when motor cars were driving through Northampton, she would wonder at the bicycles, calling out, 'Look at the bone-shakers!' By the time of Alwyn's visits, Ada and Walter's parents had separated, and Mr Tompkins had moved (or been sent) to Coventry. Walter didn't care to inherit his father's grocery responsibilities, and nobody else in the family seemed interested. Ada was embarrassed when Walter took to begging in the streets of the town.[5] Her other brothers didn't help. Ernest died a young and possibly dissolute death, and her other brothers, Horace and Bert, emigrated to Canada.

Ada married William Smith on 19 February 1891, and it was obvious that William and she had the necessary qualities to make the grocery business succeed. Alwyn noted 'the uncongenial trade into which impulsiveness and young love had jolted him.'[6] When Grandfather Tompkins went to the bad (drink), there was no alternative. Under William Smith and Ada's guidance, the shop flourished, and they went on to acquire bigger premises in the town at 54 Kettering Road. The grandeur of the enterprise was expressed in the name William decided on for the shop – 'The Shakspere Stores – The People's Provider'. At Kettering Road he and Ada steadily built up a regular trade, with Walter packing and weighing 'Shakspere' flour (usually from Mr Whitworth's mill at Wellingborough) in the stables at the rear of the premises, while William did his own curing of flitches of bacon, Ada presided at the till, and the assistants, Alfred and his son Albert, and the donkey Kate, all had their duties.

Northampton's workers, after all, needed feeding. In the Middle Ages it was wool that they produced, and, from the seventeenth century, shoes. By the end of the 1800s almost half of Northampton's men worked in the shoe industry, the majority of them in their own homes in the cottage industry at which Harry Smith had looked to make his fortune. By the time William and Ada set up in business, Northampton seemed prosperous enough. The fact that in 1898 Mr Joseph Grose (a local motoring enthusiast) was fined £1 for driving through the streets at 16 mph might even have suggested a native recklessness. The houses, surprisingly with very few slums, poured out their working-class citizens, all in need of tea, of spice and cheese, of oranges and candles and dyes and pins, of sultanas and, not unusually, a little laudanum for the weekend. It was inevitable that they would turn to 'The People's Provider' for such necessaries, more hectically on a Friday night when the wages came home and there was the threat of the men squandering their wage packets at the public house.

To the young Alwyn, the Shakspere Stores was the centre of the world. Looking

back through middle age, he saw the place as 'a Wesleyan chapel topped with a pseudo-Greek pediment and festooned with Christmas hams or strung around with a necklace of dangling tin-baths'.[7] The balcony, reached by a staircase, had been retained, and here could be found the room where teas – Ceylon, China and India – were kept and where William, between curing the bacon and brining the ham, blended them. Passing between the brown pillars that flanked the entrance, customers stepped into a roomy space across a floor thick with sawdust (fresh sawdust, for every night it was sprinkled with water and swept away). The air was thickened by tangs of pepper and spice, by the gold Indian corn and maize that lay deep in sloping wooden bins. Everywhere stood orange boxes, biscuit tins, mahogany drawers filled with strange-sounding luxuries, and egg crates. Here came 'slatternly women in men's cloth caps skewered by hat pins and with shawls or sacks flung around their shoulders who shuffled in their slippers'.[8] In later life, Alwyn insisted, 'I used to hate, *loathe*, the people who came in there.'[9]

After seven years of marriage, Ada gave birth to her first child, Winifrede Vida Smith (named after Lady Winifrede Elwes, wife of the singer Gervase Elwes, but thereafter known as Vida), on 20 December 1898 at Kettering Road. A son and heir to the Shakspere Stores was born on 21 April 1902 – Anthony Ewart Smith (known as Tony). The second son, William Alwyn Smith, was born behind the façade of the shop on 7 November 1905. He weighed 10 pounds. Ada bore two more children, Esme Una (called Una) born 13 May 1907 and James Roland Smith (called Jim) on 30 August 1911.

There is no doubt that Alwyn had a happy childhood. It was one that he was apparently able to recall totally, filling the pages of an unpublished autobiography *Early Closing* ('The memorial of a lost childhood' was its original intended subtitle) with extraordinary detail and vivid if purple prose. The general happiness of course allowed some unhappiness in. The main predicament he faced as he became aware of the family dynamics was the assumption that he would take his place in the family firm, but even this unwanted expectation he met with an even temper. He was always conscious of a deep love of his father. 'He was a wonderful man! He had a serene philosophy of life.'[10] Alwyn's father lived in a constant day-dream of literature and poetry and drama, and when the shutters came down at the end of the day would learn a scene from Shakespeare by heart, to be delivered in the Stores when business was slack. To understand his father, Alwyn claimed that one had to know H. G. Wells' hero Mr Polly. Like Polly and so many of his generation, William Smith owed most of what he achieved to self-education. Quoting whole scenes from Shakespeare was almost a badge that such men might wear. The brown paper bags carried away by his customers at the Stores were even printed with quotations from the Bard of Avon. For a grocer, he had a commendable knowledge of English literature. Gibbons and Macaulay provided stern bedtime reading. 'Muster' Smith, as his customers knew him, liked to share his enthusiasms. To speed things along, he learned shorthand, gaining useful practice by taking down the minister's sermon in chapel each Sunday.

It was at the Congregational Church that William started a Bible class with his friend Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke, a toy manufacturer and builder of model engines. Their austere surroundings do not seem to have discouraged the men from taking their eyes off the Bible. Adolescent boys were invited to give talks on subjects that interested them; one enthused about the joys of horse-racing. After listening, William Smith and Bassett-Lowke led the singing of enlightened hymns 'with modern words to them.'[11] William was ready to give literary guidance, and lectured at the Bible Class on the elegies of Gray and Milton or the poetry of Shelley. When one of the young men showed him some poetry he had written, William said, 'I see you use long words. I see you use words like *crepuscular*. Why don't you say *twilight*? Always say things in poetry as simply as you can.' (There were those in later years who might have hoped that his son's poetry had taken heed of such advice.) According to Alwyn, his father missed no opportunity for aesthetic refreshment. Even when they went on rambles in the Northampton countryside, William would stuff into his pocket a copy of Shelley's *Fairie Queen*, as well as John's *Flowers of the Field*. Alwyn enjoyed such walks, and the escape from the routine of the shop, for his father meant adventure.

> There was something about my father which made a listening child believe in fairies, foundlings, goblins, trolls and giants, and share with him the magic of a hum-drum world transformed by his all-seeing eyes into a wonderland of miracles and poetry. But there was nothing that smacked of whimsy, however faintly; always his bubbling humour would sparkle in a lively sense of fun. He was a rare companion for a child; but as I knew, when I grew in wisdom, he was a man, and held by men in deep affection and respect. But his actions were often unpredictable [this is the claim that Alwyn also makes of his mother] wayward and impish, as though within the solemn garb of a provincial tradesman the irresponsible ghost of an eternal child bobbed up and down like a cork in a bottle.[12]

Sunday visits to chapel were less welcome, for even as a boy Alwyn had a natural repugnance for sitting 'in worship at the feet of gods and demagogues who preach the same one god, the God of Battles'.[13] In his unpublished novel *All Things Corruptible* one of the characters' fathers is of the same opinion: 'to hell with religion. Only narrows the child's mind.' Alwyn's future, he knew, would not take the narrow way.

> I grew up to love another world, a world of beauty, a world of sounds and Visions, the world of Bach, Leonardo, Blake and Shakespeare; to love the flight of birds, the ineffable sky and the vast loneliness of heaving oceans; grew up to search for human kindness, human understanding and all that is meant by the one proud word Humanity and learned, protesting, to repulse the bitter stings of cruelty, pain and disease. I do not seek to know first causes; it matters little, academic speculation. My God is man, my realm a spinning globe of dying glory ruled by

> the one inexorable law of change – the seed, the blossom and the fruit – and that inevitable end, my personal extinction.[14]

Even in childhood the boy's pursuit of beauty expressed itself in ways of which Ada would not have approved. For a time at Kettering Road Alwyn shared his bedroom with a maid-of-all-work whose duties included nursing him. After lunch, the maid would tuck her young charge into his bed, and then move across the room to her own. She spread herself on the eiderdown and pretended to sleep. Around her bare thighs she rucked up her petticoats, exposing the length of her coarse black stockings. After a while, Alwyn would move to her bed, kneeling at her side, feeling and stroking her flesh. Both parties seem to have known she did not really sleep, but she allowed him to play on.

> Perhaps she had tried other experiments with me. I cannot remember; but I know that I took untutored pleasure in the silken resilience of her warm body, as comforting to me as a teddy bear … But she was the last to live in. Perhaps my mother smelled a rat.[15]

He did not remember the maid's name (or did not tell it), but his childhood nurse is perhaps the genesis of Alwyn's obsession with the female form and the sexual pleasure it offered. In another dimension, the maid-of-all-work is Daphne, or the rain-soaked Undine appearing naked at the window of his study, or the heroine of his novel, or the women that were to be his wives, Olive, Peter, Doreen and Mary.

> And her song is the song
> of the song I will write
> of the poem I will write
> of the music I will write
> of all I will write
> till wonder is no more
> and desire is no more
> till time and her song
> have gone for ever
> and I
> am no more.[16]

Chapter 2
The Music of Northampton

Alwyn's schoolbooks described Northampton as a town remarkable only for its boots and shoes, and for the efficiency of the Grand Junction Canal that linked the town with the more imposing London, Birmingham and Manchester Canal, but Northampton's fortunes as a centre of the shoe industry were already declining. The town's Saxon name of 'Hamm tun' described 'the village by the well-watered meadow', and there was plenty for the Smiths to explore. It was his father who introduced Alwyn to Northampton's green places, the search for pimpernel and dewberries, the discovery of birds' nests. Together, they went on excursions to the canal or water-meadows or rivers or to the woodlands and lake of Ashby Park, designed by Capability Brown. William exulted in water. As a young man he had come across naked louts lounging on the towpath beside the canal. Could he swim, they asked? When he said he could not, they flung him into the water. The experience made him determined to become a swimmer, and in childhood Alwyn watched his father 'swim with the ease of the vole'.[1] After attending Sunday chapel (church visits eased off after the Great War), his father would take him to the open-air river baths, although he never taught him to swim, perhaps mindful of Ada's dislike of her husband being at 'them dirty baths with all them men'.

Whenever Alwyn wrote of his mother he could conjure up little more than her general sense of disapproval. She could be niggardly or suddenly extravagantly generous, believed in reading the leaves of her teacup to see the future and graduated to séances. She once told him that he would have 'my bumps read' which he misunderstood as 'have my bum spread'.[2] He described her as 'a country girl … a strange woman',[3] but it was she, not William, who recognised Alwyn's musical talent as significant, and made up her mind that something must be done about it. Alwyn's brother Jim also had an ambivalent attitude to his mother. 'I was a bit frightened of her at times but would run to her if I was in trouble', he recalled. When in later years the time came for Jim to return to university after staying with her for the holidays, Ada would always cry, and she supported him financially. Nevertheless, for Alwyn it was his father with whom the greater bond was forged; with Ada 'it wasn't close at all. But, on the other hand, she was the one who had ambitions for me to be a musician, and Father was not so keen on that. He saw in me his successor in running the business, the grocery store.'[4]

If there were tensions between William Smith and Ada, they may in part have been the result of their being kept so constantly together in the shop. Alwyn remembered that Ada 'developed a sort of jealousy of father – as to what he was doing'.[5] There is no record of Ada having any strong interests of her own beyond grocery and bringing up her family, but 'She was overworked, and [father] was

overworked and there was continual family bickering, which brought a lot of unhappiness into my life. It really made me determined that, when I got married, nothing like that would ever happen: unfortunately, one is not able to control these things, and the very same thing happened with me later on.'[6] This 'bickering' may have clouded William and Ada's relationship but 'Their own marital existence, though often cat and dog, was never vicariously shunted on the children.' It is Ada who works her way into Alwyn's novel *All Things Corruptible* as the heroine's mother. Here, the heroine Anna has a fondness for her father but only coldness for her mother: 'Try as she would she could not love her, or understand her.' Even though it is her mother who fosters Anna's musical interests (as Ada did Alwyn's), no warmth between them comes from it. Anna's mother is 'madly jealous of Daddy'. Father takes Anna to bed (to read to her) much to her mother's disgust.

> 'A great girl like her! In bed together! Keep her out of your bedroom. Bring your lazy body back to my bed where you belong! Do you think I like sleeping alone? Pretending you can't sleep – reading all night; teaching the girl to read at night. Oh, yes! I've caught her at it when she thought I didn't know! One of your dirty books, I shouldn't be surprised. But keep her out of your bedroom! She's too big, I tell you. Haven't you any shame? Haven't you a spark of feeling for me! A great girl like her – and her periods started. Leading her on. Putting ideas in the girl's head. You and your filthy mind! Cuddling in bed with a girl who's old enough to know better – the shameless huzzy!'[7]

Although this is fiction, it may be that Alwyn was here recalling his mother's comments, and that Anna (for the moment) is Vida. There is no doubt that Ada had a sense of propriety, and of social standing. She resisted Alwyn's association with the other, often barefoot, children of the neighbourhood, giving the impression that there was a social difference between them, although Alwyn was obliged to play with them and then to sit beside them day after day on the crowded benches at the Council School. (Anna's mother has a 'snobbish adulation for the rich and successful.') He considered himself one of the children his mother seemed to despise; he recalled that 'We were snivelling snotty-nosed little brats'.[8] 'I roughed it in the streets and soon became as rowdy as the rest … the rough and tumble of the streets changed me into a little hooligan as noisy as the rest.'[9]

School might have offered inspiration and hope for the future, but Alwyn's first experiences of education were unpromising. On his first morning at the Council School, William delivered his five-year-old son to the gates a few minutes late. The headmaster, Mr Langley, taught Alwyn his first lesson: three strokes of the cane across the palm of his hand. This may have been one of the few unhappy moments in his school career. Overworked and ill-equipped as they were, the teachers were considerate and genuinely hoped to improve the minds of their pupils, even if they were 'forced to cloak their kindness with inexorable discipline to control the semi-savage products of harsh and unloving homes'.[10]

Their teachers' duties were onerous, and in the case of Mr Harrison and his wife-to-be Miss Cleaver, extended to a supervision of the Sunday school, at which each child would donate a weekly penny to aid missionary work. 'Hear the pennies dropping, Listen while they fall, Giving them to Jesus, He shall have them all.'[11] Some of this saintliness seems to have rubbed off on Alwyn, for he was soon designated a 'back-row boy' (the disruptive elements sat at the front of the class).

The death of his brother Tony in 1913 was a blow to the family that his father may never have recovered from. 'I see him but I cannot hear his voice', Alwyn wrote of his elder brother half a century later. 'His hair was flaxen and his face was pale. He rarely smiled – or was the memory of his laughter wiped away with death?'[12] Alwyn recalled the last time they were together.

> I am seven years old. I am squatting on the floor in the kitchen playing with a clockwork train. Tony is sitting at the table. He is wrapped in a shawl. His face is very white and strangely twisted; his upper lip is swollen and his eyes are large and bright. Father brings him in a new book but he turns the pages listlessly. The book falls beside me on the floor and I look up. His eyes are staring vacantly in a fixed faraway dream. I call 'Tony!' but he does not answer.
>
> I did not see my brother again. Next day my father came into my bedroom and stood me up on the bed to dress me. Tears were streaming down his face. He told me that I was to be sent away that morning to stay with 'Aunt' Maud. I was excited and pleased, but half-frightened at the same time to see my father crying.
>
> Mother came to visit me next week. She was dressed in black and wore a black veil fastened beneath her chin. She told me that Tony was dead. I was too young to go the funeral and only remember the atmosphere of bustle and subdued excitement in the house where I was staying […] Death has no meaning. It has no meaning for the child; it has no meaning for the adult. Death is oblivion, and oblivion cannot be imagined nor 'nothing-ness' observed. Death is a word; oblivion is a word. No need to be afraid of a word; no need to be afraid of death. Tony was dead. He was there and then he was not there. It all seemed quite normal.[13]

But Tony's death changed everything, for he had been the heir to the Stores, and Alwyn was next in line. In the adult world around him the background of religious certainty must now have come into some sort of focus. Alwyn saw how his father and Ada sought comfort. Everywhere around, God's omnipotence was taken for granted. On Saturday evenings the Salvation Army band gathered across the road from the Shakspere Stores, performing 'Washed in the blood of the lamb' and 'One more river and that's the River of Jordan'. 'I was soaked in religion', Alwyn wrote in his mid-fifties, 'believing it unquestioningly as "gospel truth" until at last in early manhood the bonds were burst and revealed faith shredded away to leave me free to breathe, think and create. Since then the Bible has been my constant companion, comfort and guide, and I have read or browsed in most versions from Wycliffe to Ronald Knox.'[14] Copies of the Bible, along with Thomas

Browne's *Religio Medici* and *Urn Burial* (the source of his final symphony *Hydriotaphia*) would be always by Alwyn's bedside, but his pleasure in religion was aesthetic, informed by the belief that 'My God is man.'[15]

He might with as much truth have said that his God was music. 'I developed an early passion for music', he wrote in his autobiography *Winged Chariot*, 'roused by the Sunday afternoon military band performances in the park, and my ambition was to become one of these gay-uniformed bandsmen.'[16] His interest was stimulated by the martial airs, the selections from the operas of Arthur Sullivan or Sidney Jones, played by the Steel-backs, musicians of the Northamptonshire Regiment. On Sunday afternoons in summer, his hand in his father's hand, he took the tram from Kettering Road that went along Wellingborough Road, past the workhouse and on to Abington Park (it had opened to the public in 1897), with its lake, its eighteenth-century Pigeonry and the church of St Peter and St Paul in whose graveyard lies Shakespeare's daughter (and William Smith must have had something to say about this!), toward their enchanted destination, the bandstand. Today, visitors to the Park still gather around the bandstand to listen to the Rushden Windmill Band or the Abington Wind Band.

If the weather looked good, father bought tickets for two deck-chairs (if wet, the concerts were despatched to the skating rink). Alwyn's favoured spot was just below the bandstand steps. Usually it was his sister Vida who was allowed to accompany her father to the evening concerts, but once a year Alwyn was included in the party for the gala occasion of a Grand Torchlight Tattoo. The boy was so well known at the Sunday shows that soldiers waved at him from the bandstand. Father always took an umbrella, and once when a fierce storm drove away the entire audience he and Alwyn sat on beneath their shelter 'until, to my intense delight and pride, the bandmaster waved to me to come up to his side and I climbed above and stood amongst the crowded music stands and answered shyly to the bandsmen's gentle chaffing.'[17]

On Saturday afternoons Alwyn was making his own way as a musician. By the age of six or seven he was taking music lessons and had his first instrument, a wooden piccolo with six german-silver keys. Ada had often seen him seated at the out-of-tune cottage piano in the sitting room at Kettering Road. Its keys had a habit of sticking, but Alwyn had a solution; he used his father's brass weights from the shop, hanging them from the piano's strings so that they would return after being struck. Perhaps Ada appreciated such ingenuity. Alwyn thought her 'musical without knowing anything about music', and it was she who not only took him to amateur choral and organ recitals but arranged his first professional tuition. Alwyn's assertion that she was 'musical without knowing anything about music' may be misleading. He recalled in *Early Closing* how, after Sunday tea in the parlour

> Mother with much pressing might be persuaded to play her 'Party Piece'; 'The Fairy Wedding March', or 'Donauwellen' waltz and 'Il Baccio' for father – this

> latter tune he whistled interminably under stress – I hear him whistling now – non-stop on Saturday nights in the shop, and down the passage on his way to snatch a hasty kitchen tea. Mother's rendering of 'The Fairy Wedding March' was her *pièce de résistance*. A volunteer would first fetch a silver thimble from her sewing bag and place it on the piano within convenient reach. After a few thumping fanfare chords she cantered into a stirring strain reminiscent of a lively merger of Mendelssohn's Wedding March and the Overture to Zampa. At the climax there was an abrupt and much anticipated pause while mother slipped the thimble on her finger, then, with a violent thump in the left hand, her right would skid madly up and down the keyboard in a brilliant glissando, the thimble clicking over the ivories like a stick on an iron railing; up, then down, then up again, ending with a wild flourish. Another breathless pause as the thimble was adroitly slipped off, then, thump, thump, thump to a triumphant conclusion.[18]

This reminded Alwyn and his siblings of the pianist at the picture-house, and they became the actors using this backcloth of music, crawling around the room, hiding behind chairs, shooting imaginary pistols in a Cowboys and Indians confrontation. Jim recalled his mother playing only one melody, 'Down in the valley where the daisies grow', and playing it with great gusto and speed. But Alwyn never seems to have appreciated his mother's talents, or, more sympathetically, her potential. He dismisses her playing: 'Mother never failed to remind us that had she worked hard and "done her practice" she would have been able to play "like an angel", presumably in some far Paradise where cottage uprights deputised for harps.'[19] It seems that he never considered that his musical talent had its origins in Ada. Even his wish to play the flute may have sprung from her frequently related account of her grandfather, an ex-cathedral chorister who had turned himself into a competent flautist. In the event, Ada's chosen tutor, Mr Law, said the boy's hands were too small for the instrument, and suggested instead a six-keyed piccolo. One of its keys was so stiff that it was to leave Alwyn with a permanent distortion of a little finger.

By day Mr Law was a boot-operative, but he was an ex-army bandsman who lived for his music. At night he played in the orchestra at one of the local cinemas (Alwyn even joined him in the pit on one occasion). Arriving for his lesson, Alwyn would be welcomed at the door by Mrs Law in her man's cap and apron and shown into the kitchen, waiting until her husband came through and took him into the front parlour. 'This was my ante-chamber to the enchanted realm of music, for here in this room I was first instructed in the art that was to become my profession.'[20] Mr Law offered enthusiasm and encouragement. 'His teaching was rough and ready but conscientious according to his lights. His enthusiasm fired mine and I admired and loved him.'[21] The playing of various variations was a staple ingredient of the lessons, variations on *The Ash Grove*, *The Keel Row* and *The Carnival of Venice*, spiced with Continental waltzes and the occasional medley from the operas of Sullivan or Offenbach.

We do not know how many lessons Mr Law had supervised before, one evening at the Shakspere Stores, William and Ada went to a neighbour's house to play cards. Alwyn was eight years old and

> experienced a sensation of intense excitement. I ran downstairs to fetch my piccolo, paper, pencil and ruler, tumbled back into bed and began … I was still working in the late fading light when my parents returned and called up the stairs. I had struggled with the complex mystery of musical notation; the bar lines were there – even a double bar line with repeat dots – and, as in my models, a D.C. al fine. It was a piccolo solo. I called it: *Sparkling Cascades*.[22]

Amateur operatic and choral societies and band concerts may have introduced Alwyn to the more popular classics, but throughout his childhood he was frequently taken to performances at Northampton theatres. His father's passion for music-hall made Alwyn 'a tiny mourner at the bedside of a dying English art'.[23] At the New Theatre opened in 1912 in Abington Street Alwyn saw Marie Lloyd, that toothsome Queen of the Halls, who – exhausted and ill – dragged herself onto stages until her death in 1922 at the age of 52; the 'Coster Laureate' Albert Chevalier, whose oleaginous delivery disguised the quality of the songs he had sometimes co-written such as 'My Old Dutch' and 'The Coster's Serenade'; the apparently hilarious Wilkie Bard (whose skills must now be judged from ancient gramophone recordings, on which he sounds like the sort of uncle one dreads asking to a party), and Little Tich, of the long dancing boots and eerie manner. William told his son he would never see the like of them again, 'and how right he was! What a descent there has been from raucous and irresistible Marie Lloyd to Vera Lynn and the dreary 'pop' singers with their essential and ubiquitous microphones'.[24] Especially welcome was the spectacle of 'Pattman and his Organ'. Pattman allowed the audience to watch his feet work the pedals as he musically recreated a terrifying thunderstorm, punctuated by flashes of lightning across the theatre backcloth. William told Alwyn that Pattman's pipes were made from pewter mugs that had been stolen from public houses and melted down, an explanation the boy readily believed. Much more musically respectable were the Sunday afternoon concerts given at the New Theatre by the Royal Artillery String Band, whose repertoire explored deeper waters, including Handel and Mozart, under the baton of the imposing Major Miller. A highlight of such occasions was when the Major handed up his wife, Madame Gleeson-White, to render Elgar's 'Where corals lie'.

Northampton's Opera House hosted the many touring opera companies that travelled up and down Britain in the early years of the twentieth century, among them the D'Oyly Carte, the Carl Rosa, the O'Mara, and the Moody-Manners, with their constant revivals of Gilbert and Sullivan, Balfe, Gounod and the few Verdi operas then known to provincial audiences. On Sunday mornings, coinciding with an opera company's visit to the town, William would sing his son songs from their repertoires: 'Yes, let me like a soldier fall' and 'I dreamt I dwelt

in marble halls'. Alwyn suspected that the Italian names peppering the cast lists concealed many a Smith and Jones, but the companies were nothing if not brave. On one occasion William and Vida attended a performance of *Tannhäuser* to which Alwyn was not taken. 'The Venusburg scene must have lost something of its abandon within the confines of our Opera House's small stage', Alwyn wrote, 'in fact I think it must have been omitted altogether because neither my father nor Vida mentioned it. Northampton then was hardly ripe for Wagner's voluptuous excesses'.[25] But it was where he saw *Maritana*, *Il Trovatore* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the plots of which confused him, although he could be distracted by the chorus.

> Both chorus and orchestra were recruited from local talent … It was the same short, stout, cross-eyed gentleman who banged the anvil in inaccurate time in *Trovatore* who marched around the stage and back again in *Maritana*; the same tall thin man with disillusioned face and sagging tights who whacked a companion anvil and trailed behind his stouter colleague shouldering a pike. The dragging operatic minutes I would beguile in searching out these two familiar faces, and I welcomed them again when Shakespearian companies visited the town.[26]

At the age of nine, in January 1915, Alwyn was enrolled as a pupil at the local grammar, Northampton Town and County School in Billing Road (the school had opened four years earlier), where he proved to be, in his own word, a 'brilliant' pupil. 'I can't think of any other word', he wrote, 'because I had quite exceptional gifts.'[27] Such precocity seems to have had its penalties. He developed severe migraine, a condition he would suffer throughout life. That year he went through what he called a nervous breakdown, the first of several emotional collapses that lasted into old age, but as many questions attend these early 'breakdowns' as those he suffered in latter years. As with the emotional collapses that would follow, we cannot be sure of its severity, but it was almost certainly Ada who decided that he should go away from the Stores to recuperate. Arrangements were made for him to stay with friends of the Smiths, a married couple – he an ex-postmaster and she a retired teacher.

Alwyn liked it there. In their parlour was a piano, on which the sickly boy picked out notes. At Kettering Road the piano had almost belonged to Vida, learning (with no natural flair) to play the waltz from Ivan Caryll's *The Pink Lady*, or tunes from the supposedly oriental *Chu Chin Chow*. The postmaster's wife said that she would teach Alwyn to play, and propped him on an encyclopaedia on top of the piano stool. Here, he was introduced to *Smallwood's Piano Tutor*, with its clear instructions on 'English fingering', in which crosses marked the places where the thumb was to be used. Within a short time he could play *The Bells of Aberdovey*, and back home he realised the inadequacies of the Kettering Road piano. Nevertheless, he made do with it until he was twelve, working at 'Star Folios', with their collected overtures and 'lollipop' pieces, and especially

enjoyed tackling the works of Brinley Richards, a composer with a penchant for glittering 'Airs and Variations'. Some of this music he may have purchased himself, from the music shop in the town run by the uncle of one of his Northampton contemporaries, Edmund Rubbra. Three years Alwyn's elder, Rubbra began studying the piano when he was eight but, like Alwyn, his destiny seemed to drag him from music, and at fourteen (like Alwyn) he was taken from school and put to work as a railway clerk. If their boyhood friendship was close, it did not remain so, although they were always on good terms. Years later, Rubbra confessed that he had always been in awe of Alwyn, to which Alwyn replied that *he* had always been in awe of Rubbra. As a consequence, their friendship was probably a little nervous.

As his schooling progressed, Alwyn showed a perfunctory interest in his studies, although his strong liking for some subjects was evident, as his school report for the Spring term of 1919 testifies. He was at ease with Art ('He shows considerable promise') and English ('He shows real ability and has done excellent work in English Composition'), but increasingly it was his interest in music that outshone everything else. No matter what academic promise he showed, Alwyn left school at the age of fourteen and at once started work at the Stores. The demands were irksome, as we read in a journal he kept in June 1919. It provides a detailed account of four days in his shop life. The first entry is for 11 June.

> Just back from lesson (piano). I'm afraid I made a mess of my 'Rondo Piacevole' of Sterndale Bennett but scored one 'Back on old Back' [*sic*] (Bach) (ugh! Rotten joke!). Just got to go back to the shop (–––– it!) (sh!) but after that, back to Beethoven's sonatas, Bach's preludes and fugues, Mendelssohn Capriccios etc 'God bless them!'
>
> 10 p.m.
> Northants got badly beaten by Lancashire. [Cricket would be one of Alwyn's abiding passions.] Woolley and Wells were the only ones who hit any in the 2nd innings. I think I shall emigrate if this goes on, or patronise Surrey. Good night! (am writing this in bed).
>
> June 12th (Sat.)
> Had no breakfast this morning, because I went in the shop while the others had theirs. Mother forgot me and I was sworn at because I asked for some. It is not fair! I shall not go in, in the morning, if this happens again. It's the second time this week as well. But there is good in everything it will work my fat off and when I'm a living skeleton I shall walk into the dining room and inform the family that I shall haunt them twice nightly at 7 & 9 (when I'm dead). [The reference to 'twice nightly' suggests Alwyn's exposure to the music-hall. This entry is illustrated by his sketch of two tiny figures, one fat and the other a skeleton.]
>
> Talking of twice nightly, they are having operas at the New Theatre in this way.

Perhaps they'll stop repeating 'Tis he', 'Tis I', etc 50 times, this time. It would be quite a good improvement. But other – Horrid Thought! – 'perhaps I shan't get any dinner!! For kicking up a row this morning'. I must investigate!

5 p.m.
Just come in from the shop dead beat. Found consolation in Chopin. How lovely is that C sharp minor waltz, and 7th etude and that Polonaise in A and – in fact all of them are inspired pictures of elegance and refinement. Tea is ready. Thank goodness!

8.15 p.m.
A thunder storm is kicking up a noise now and my writing is interrupted by vivid flashes of lightning. (I am writing this in the Bathroom while the water is running) (flash of lightning) another hard day (roll of thunder) has just been completed in the shop. Thanks to the storm we have not been so crowded as usual. Dad has not returned yet (thunder, did not see flash) perhaps he has had an accident. But. Away gloomy thoughts! An egg for supper and music for desert (flash) (roll) I have just been turned out the bathroom.) Egg ready. (flash) Good bye diary (roll).

9.15 p.m.
Dad has returned. Was held up by storm at Towcester. Came in looking like a duck out of a pond. Storm is now over. Am just getting ready for my bath.

June 13. (Sunday)
A day of rest at last. The sun has been shining, but it looks like rain. Have just finished reading Mark Twain's book 'The Innocents Abroad'.

1.30 p.m.
Went out this morning with Dadda and Jim. Came across a volume of Schubert's Sonatas at a Second hand dealers. Bought it for 2/6. Good 'biz'. Watched some boys in a punt paddling up and down a very limited amount of river. My early morning forecast was wrong, it is now quite nice out. Am going to Sunday school this afternoon. What a good little boy!

9.30 p.m.
At class, this afternoon Mr Musk Beattie gave an essay on 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Coleridge. It was ever so interesting. Dadda spoke second, quite well as usual. Have just been on the bus to Wellinboro'. Had a very nice ride though slightly marred by rain. Went to the Swan's Pool there; a very pretty garden.

June 14th (Mon)
12.30 p.m.
Another nice day. Went to the Bank this morning and took a telegram to the Post Office. There are some photographs of Northampton, taken from above, in the 'Independent' Office. The Town looks better than it does on land. But

Northampton is surrounded by lovely country and that's everything. What lovely melodies there are in Schubert's Sonatas! I am glad I bought them. I practised on the piano, flute, and organ, as usual, this morning. Two rare natural visitors have come to Preston Deanery this year, of a species now, unhappily, almost extinct, the Hoopoe. It has settled at Mr Albert Marlowe's house.

5.30 p.m.
Weighed up two sacks of soda this afternoon instead of music. Compulsory, worse luck. Another tremendous thunder storm is in progress; worse than the one on Saturday. Vivid, double flashes of forked lightning and crashes of thunder that shake the house. There is a flood of rain swamping down. I'll try to describe how it began. At about 3.30 huge billowy purple clouds began to rise from the east. The wind began to get gusty and increase to a gale, howling through the wires, moaning in the streets and soughing through the trees. People began to glance furtively up at the clouds, which were massing all over the sky blotting out the light and frowning at men and women who began to hurry their steps towards home. Then the rain: first, slowly but gathering speed and strength in an ever increasing downpour. It is clearing fast now, though, and I must to Schubert.

8.0 p.m.
Have just been playing Chopin's 'Marche Funebre!' From Sonata Op 35, in my humble opinion, one of the finest, most sublime pieces of music ever written. In fact he reaches, or, almost reaches, the pinnacle of Beethoven at his greatest. How divine, (near to God, striving to get away from the world,) yet how human. The throbbing chords of the first part, so despairing, culminating to [*sic*] the crashing chords which seem to penetrate to the heartstrings, and to all that is noblest in man, sinking back again into the utter hopelessness of the commencement. Then comes again that yearning melody, singing of the love of Christ for those that he died for, rising; falling like the balmy air of a summer evening. But, again, the lapse into gloom, the gleam of light, and then the dying away of death.

So human yet so divine.

The little diary had been discovered just as he completed the first draft of *Early Closing*, along with other remnants of his childhood: manuscripts of his first compositions for piano – waltzes and marches (no doubt with a whiff of the Steel-backs), even a *Grand Sonata*, all written between the ages of nine and twelve. The discoveries of old age. There was a mahogany escritoire, too, containing the diary, cigarette cards, letters from relatives, and a message from his Grandmother Tompkins. 'Dear Grandson', she wrote, (and it looks as if she was writing carefully, unused to it), 'Just a Gift From Me for the very Many little kindness [*sic*] you have shown me when down at your House. From Grandma – P.S. A keepsake.' There was a stamped receipt for the first flute he had ever bought, and a scrap of tea-wrapping paper on which his father had written

> I secondhand Boehme Flute
> Presented to William on his birthday. Wishing him many happy returns of the day.
> From his loving
> Father and Mother.

We need to turn back to that first diary entry of 11 June to take up the story: 'Just back from lesson (piano).' It was Ada, of course, who had arranged for her son to have weekly piano lessons with the organist at one of the local chapels, R. W. Strickland. It was not long before Strickland and his new pupil conspired together that he should become a professional musician, and it was Strickland who became the willing *deus ex machina*. He called at the Shakspere Stores, ordering half a pound of butter. His moment was well chosen, for the shop was empty of customers. He began by asking William if he would allow him to give his son lessons on how to play the church organ, suggesting that this would provide 'more grist to the mill', a phrase that Alwyn did not at the time understand. William, standing beside the till, his trilby tilted, considered this. Forty years later, Alwyn recalled every detail of the confrontation. He watched his father's face, the jaw beneath his moustache chomping as it always did when William had a problem to think through. Strickland was not called on to do much persuading, for something in William seemed to click, as if a dim bulb had suddenly burst into strong light. 'Yes', he said (with what Alwyn remembered as 'a pathetic sense of frustration in his voice') 'he's a square peg in a round hole', and then, 'You can take a horse to water but you can't make him drink.'

> It was as though his usual irrepressible flow of words had been dammed and thoughts could only filter through in platitudes. I could understand his feelings – only too well I could understand. And I had let him down. Since Tony's death he had placed all his hopes in me. I was to inherit the shop – the shop he had built from a nondescript small trade into the flourishing personal business of The Shakspere Stores. He was 'The People's Provider' and, when he had gone and I was old enough, I was to carry on the business and myself provide the local people with tea and sugar, butter and bacon, Christmas hams and tinned tomatoes.[28]

'You shouldn't put all your eggs in one basket', his father said, almost to himself. Strickland nodded and looked confidently across to Alwyn. What was to happen to the boy, he asked. Was he to work in the shop all his life or be given his chance? Strickland shook William Smith's hand. The best thing was that the boy should be sent to the Academy; his father would never regret it. Mission accomplished, Strickland made what must have been an effective exit through the pillars of the Stores, making the most of his props: the walking stick, the makeshift cloak, the half a pound of butter, leaving father and son in the quiet of the building.

> Father grinned at me, and I knew then that it was all right. I did not know what to say; I was filled half with a singing delight and half with fear – fear of the

> adventure, the venture away from the town, the venture into the void into the uncharted world of music, but *not* fear of the future. I was to be a great musician – a Beethoven, a Bach, a Grieg, or even an Edward German, but, best of all, I was to get the chance to play my flute in orchestras, to earn my living at what I loved, become a bandsman and perhaps at last a black-frock-coated officer-conductor with sword and scarlet sash. My ambitions were vague and muddled, but one word danced through my head –musician, musician, musician! A musician like Mr Strickland with his shock of greying hair and pince-nez strung on a long black ribbon; like my flute teacher, Mr Law, bluff and hearty, blowing his flute at the local picture palace; like Gluck and Berlioz – names I had read about in *Lives of the Famous Musicians*, borrowed from the Public Library, but whose music I had never heard.
>
> The customers began to straggle in and I served the tea and biscuits, scooped the ounces of pepper and weighed the pounds of currants, but my shop jacket had become a frock coat and my hands a pianist's hands and my heart was bursting with excitement. From the other counter came the familiar rattle and ting of the till, and father's cheerful '*And* the next please!'. Only half an hour more and the shutters would be down … today was early closing.[29]

At the age of fifteen Alwyn's links with the Shakspere Stores were broken. Mr Strickland had done it. Although circumstances would force Alwyn's return, his allegiance to the grocery trade, his family ties and love for Northampton was already done with. He was away.

Chapter 3
A Number of Scotsmen

> I went to take the entrance exam. Everything seemed so large. That was my main impression. I wondered how one made one's way in so large a place. Northampton, in spite of its factories, was just a big village. Everybody knew everybody. And going to London was going to desolation. I used to commute from Northampton up to Euston Station and then take a bus or walk along the Euston Road to the Marylebone Road and straight along to the Academy, which was just by Regents Park. The train journey was just over an hour … My father paid for the first term that I was there …[1]

Alwyn was only a commuting student, making the journey up to London twice a week for classes, but the future was promising, especially at a time when there was no restriction as to how long a student might study at the Royal Academy. The student records at the Academy are not particularly informative, but they give the skeleton of the young student's progress. The dates that Alwyn himself attached to various events in his life are often wrong, but the archive shows that, recommended for admission by R. W. Strickland, he began at the Academy in the Michaelmas Term of September 1920. His principal study would be Flute under Daniel S. Wood (brother of the composer Haydn Wood), with Piano as his second subject under Edward Morton and, subsequently, Leo Livins. Under 'Elements' Alwyn chose Harmony under Russell Chester, followed by John B. McEwen and Arthur Hinton. Alwyn recalled that 'my theoretic instruction was deputed to a sub-professor of Harmony and Counterpoint (no one at that time, 1921, was supposed to be capable of actually composing music unless he had first been thoroughly grounded in Thorough-Bass).'[2] In 1922 he received the Bronze Medal for Sight-Singing, and an Honourable Mention from the Examiners under 'Secondary Studies' for pianoforte, as well as the Silver Medal for Flute (no matter that he was the only candidate) and the Ross Scholarship. The following year he won a Certificate of Merit (the highest award of the Academy) for Flute, and the Silver Medal for Sight-Singing and Reading. In 1924 he was the recipient of the Oliveria Prescott Gift for Flute.[3]

Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1847–1935) had been about the same age as Alwyn when he began his studies at the Royal Academy in 1862, and was appointed its Principal in 1888, retiring from the post in 1925. To Elgar, Mackenzie's appointment to the Principal of the Academy made him one of the undoubted fountainheads of music in Britain, and his influence on what was taught, heard and

composed at the Academy was tremendous, as Alwyn soon discovered. 'The old tyrant [Mackenzie] would not allow even Debussy to be performed at Academy concerts on the grounds that this music was ugly, broke all the rules and was unworthy of the art sacred to St Cecilia. But all the same I liked the old man in spite of his Scotch hot-temper; he shewed me much kindness and [was] not entirely blind to my talent.'[4] The shadow of Mackenzie cast itself long across the Academy, which Alwyn regarded as academic in the worst sense of the word. Modern music was regarded with suspicion. Puccini was condemned because of his use of consecutive fifths. Attitudes to music had become moribund in a country where Elgar's contemporaries, Stanford and Parry, 'were so firmly rooted in tradition that these roots were in an advanced state of decay'.[5] Alwyn considered that 'after Beethoven, who gave a new meaning to the development section, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, Dvořak, Tchaikovsky and to a large extent Elgar himself, found the classic forms a convenient mould in which to shape their music', a position entrenched at the Academy, where 'the idea that form in music could conceivably exist in any other shapes was not merely treated with scorn, but condemned out of hand'. Here were attitudes for which Alwyn had a natural repugnance.

Mackenzie was revealed as a tetchy and eccentric conductor when Alwyn was the soloist in a performance at an Academy rehearsal of Beethoven's First Piano Concerto. There were two rehearsals a week, at one of which it was quite common to have a student play the first movement of the Grieg A minor Piano Concerto. 'The poor pianist no sooner began than Mackenzie would turn round and say "Stop, my dear. It's far too fast. *Why* do you all take it so fast? I ought to know how it went. I conducted the first performance, with Grieg himself at the piano, in this country."'[6] Mackenzie's beat got slower and slower as the months went on 'until it finished in a good, steady, eight in a bar'. In December 1923 the score of a suite Alwyn had written, *Peter Pan*, intended for a concert at the Academy the following month, was sent to Mackenzie's home in Regent's Park Road. Mackenzie assured his student that 'I am not writing to pass an opinion on the work itself – the little pieces seem quite nice and delicately conceived – but on the possibility, or, rather the wisdom of submitting it for performance at the Royal College on January the 19th.'[7] Mackenzie was concerned that the orchestral parts would hardly be ready in time, and the inclusion in the programme of two difficult concertos by Delius and Dvořak meant that there would be only one rehearsal at which the new work might be played through. Mackenzie had particular difficulty with one of its movements, 'Captain Hook', a horn-pipe pastiche, and 'with its perpetual changes from 2/4 – 3/8. 5/8 3/4 is not at all easy to do satisfactorily with a hurried rehearsal. In fact, needs knowing well, on the part of conductor and players. Here I may say, on my own part, that the bars of 1/4 are quite unnecessary and very confusing. Why not draw them to-gether and make 3/4 of it? I always advise everybody – including myself – to be practical. You will find that, as you have it, it means sheer waste of time at rehearsal.'[8]

According to Alwyn, at a subsequent rehearsal of the piece Mackenzie scored through the offending passage with a thick blue pencil and cast it aside as unplayable. Shortly after this, Mackenzie gave up conducting the Academy orchestra, handing the baton to Sir Henry Wood, under whose guidance the work was played at one of the Academy's annual concerts at the Queen's Hall. Wood apparently sailed through the waters of 'Captain Hook' with no demur.

Mackenzie's works are seldom played in the concert hall today, but his eminence in Victorian and Edwardian music cannot be questioned. Like Alwyn, he went to the Academy at the age of fifteen; unlike Alwyn, he was the son of a violinist and composer, and had no financial difficulties. Mackenzie's career as child prodigy included being made, at the age of eleven, second violinist in the ducal orchestra at Sondershausen in Germany, an orchestra that was an early champion of Wagner and Liszt (who would become a great admirer of Mackenzie's music and conducting). When he moved to London in 1862 his studies at the Academy went on alongside his career of piano playing at the music hall and in the pit of the Westminster Theatre, but three years later he moved to Edinburgh to teach, perform and act as Precentor of St George's. In 1879, after a personal crisis, he decided to move to Italy, where he would concentrate on composition. It was here that he wrote his most ambitious piece, the oratorio *The Rose of Shannon*. 1888, the year that he became Principal of the Royal Academy, was a particularly fecund year in which he wrote *Pibroch* for violin and orchestra, *Six Pieces* for violin and the overture *Twelfth Night* – a fantasy suggesting the different felicities of Shakespeare's comedy. The good humour that is found there is very much in evidence in his captivating *Overture to The Cricket on the Hearth*, heard in London in 1902. (The opera itself was less lucky, its premiere having to wait until an Academy production in 1914.) Mackenzie was naturally sympathetic to the demands of stage music, as in his splendid incidental music to the 1901 Lyceum Theatre *Coriolanus*, Henry Irving's final Shakespearean production. The grandness of the occasion was accentuated by the fact that Mackenzie, Irving and the designer Alma-Tadema had all been made knights, a gift to a stage-hand who after one of the rehearsals exclaimed, 'Three knights! That's about all I'll give it!' In all, Mackenzie might have been as much inspiration to Alwyn as were (in their various ways) Wood, Wallace and McEwen, although it was Mackenzie the administrator that Alwyn knew, rather than Mackenzie the composer. It may be, too, that Alwyn knew little (if any) of Mackenzie's music, with which he would surely have found much sympathy.

In Henry Wood (1869–1944) Alwyn found a champion and an inspiration, radically altering his musical outlook. For the young student, Wood's command of the orchestra was 'a revelation. He was still in his prime, and his vitality and grace, and above all the sheer love of the music he was performing (and his repertoire was adventurous and exceptional for those days. He was equally at home in Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Sibelius as he was with the classics – indeed he it was