Small Miracles: Vernon Elliott's music for *Ivor the Engine*

By Joanna Wyld

A bubble emerges, coalesces and floats – an ascending bassoon arpeggio, as though overheard. We eavesdrop on a world that seems to have existed forever. The bubble bobs into a neat motif before tracing a lively pattern in the air, and then it bursts – a chromatic interruption, a mischievous dissonance. Resolution comes as a final gesture leads us down into the depths – the dark subterranean Welsh landscape from which the melody first sprang.

Vernon Elliott was a celebrated British bassoonist who, in the late 1950s, was approached by writer, animator and puppeteer Oliver Postgate to write music for *Ivor the Engine*, one of his creations with fellow puppeteer and artist Peter Firmin. Together, Postgate and Firmin created the Smallfilms production company, crafting intricate worlds that have since become some of the most beloved children's programmes ever broadcast. Partly inspired by Postgate's wartime friendship with the Welshman Denzyl Ellis, who had worked as a fireman on the passenger train, the Royal Scot, *Ivor* is about a green railway engine who communicates with his driver, Jones the Steam, through the happy 'psst-koff' of his funnel, the notes of his whistle – and meaningful silences. Together, they work at the Merioneth and Llantisilly Rail Traction Company Limited alongside characters such as the fastidious station master, Dai Station. The enduring pleasure brought by this animated series, which began in black and white before graduating to colour – all beautifully rendered in muted ink – is rooted in the evident love of Wales shared by its creators. Ivor's setting, Llaniog – situated in the 'top left-hand corner of Wales' – is populated by familiar but rounded figures. These are not caricatures, but affectionately drawn types who, in the context of sometime farcical adventures, explore issues of greater emotional depth. Loneliness and isolation, prejudice and fear are faced – but with no attempt to preach at the audience, who are trusted to understand.

So successful was this first collaboration, that Vernon Elliott went on to compose music for other Smallfilms productions, including *Noggin the Nog*, *The Seal of Neptune*, *Pogles' Wood*, *Pingwings* and *The Clangers*. Neither Elliott nor Postgate and Firmin hailed from Wales themselves yet, starting from a position of deep reverence and respect, they seem to have understood and communicated the essence of the place so vividly that *Ivor* has virtually been adopted into contemporary Welsh folklore.

And if you listen to the whole of the Elliott's main theme to *Ivor the Engine*, you realise that this simple, memorable tune really does emerge from darkness. The full conception begins with something much more sombre than the famous shortened version, providing material that in the programmes would be used for moments of drama.

That ascending arpeggio is first heard in a minor key and at a slower pace than its more familiar major-key counterpart. In the recording released in 2007 on Trunk Records, we hear Oliver Postgate's familiar voice announcing Elliott's theme, a moment described in the liner notes by label founder Jonny Trunk: 'As the reels spun into life a small Oliver Postgate

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introduction of "Ivor the Engine, Second Series, Main Theme" was followed by one of the loveliest opening tunes you could ever wish to hear.'

It is also almost heartbreakingly melancholic – Trunk later refers to the 'wistful sadness of the *Ivor* tunes', articulating the unusually profound nature of music ostensibly composed for children. The bassoon is answered by plangent clarinet and wistful piano chords, after which Elliot's technical skill really starts to show. An ominous bassoon line sets off echoing canonic writing for the trio, each part entering and embellishing the original line in neat counterpoint. In the process, thin rays of sunshine start to peek through the Welsh clouds, the piano's harmony edging us towards major-key optimism. Within this brief framework, Elliott introduces a wealth of material and develops it from darkness to light with incredible concision. And before we know it, the clouds have parted, the rain has started to evaporate, and that bubbling theme (later popping up as 'Ivor's Short Theme' on the album) begins.

It is certainly not an obvious way to write music for a children's programme, especially as an opener. But then the Smallfilms productions have endured partly because they weren't obvious – because they explored the murky shadows as well as the light, acknowledging that for children the world can be bleak and confusing and complex, and taking them seriously enough to reflect that in these stories. Llaniog is adjacent to Llareggub. Oliver Postgate was powerfully drawn to *Under Milk Wood*, Dylan Thomas's vision of Wales, which in turn was inspired by the townsfolk of Laugharne, conjuring up their paraffin-lamplit secrets. Thomas's language is music, its lilting combinations chosen for their aural qualities – this was a radio play, after all. Postgate echoes these rhythms in the Ivor stories and in his delivery of them (one of his sons, Simon, recalls that when they went on family holidays to Wales, Oliver would adopt a Welsh accent in his interactions with the locals, possibly unconsciously – to the endless mortification of their mother).

From 'Mrs Organ Morgan's general shop where everything is sold: custard, buckets, henna, rat-traps, shrimp-nets, sugar, stamps, confetti, paraffin, hatchets, whistles', to Llaniog's snowdrift shortage of 'rice, treacle, butter, jam, biscuits, potatoes', is but a brief trip across the Welsh landscape. Postgate emulated the most resonant aspects of Thomas's style with remarkable precision: rhetoric, imagery, intonation. *Under Milk Wood* brims with musical references, its atmosphere spilling over into *Ivor* and creating a rich seam to be tapped by Vernon Elliott's imagination. In this context, that dark-hued opening theme makes perfect sense.

Postgate wrote of the 'small miracle' of Elliott's music for *Ivor* in his memoir, *Seeing Things*: 'Vernon Elliott was a bit diffident about composing music for a Welsh railway engine because he had never done anything like it before. I explained that I had never made a film about a Welsh railway engine before, so we were both in the same boat.' A couple of days after their initial conversation, Elliott played Postgate the now-famous theme. 'The tune was short and simple and absolutely right, a beautiful, marvellously evocative theme that brought Ivor and his world instantly to mind'.

Then Postgate remembered that voices would be needed for the local Llaniog choir, the 'Grumbly and District Choral Society', asking Elliott if he happened to know a Welsh choir.

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The response: ‘There’s a choir in North London I work with sometimes. They aren’t all Welsh but I’m sure they’d love to sing for a Welsh railway engine.’ Elliott went on to record the instrumental soundtrack, after which Postgate ‘recorded the choir singing *Cwm Rhondda* in a Catholic church hall in Hampstead… Little did I know how significant the effect of that recording of *Cwm Rhondda* was to be, nor did I realise that Vernon and I had just begun a collaboration that would bring us both years of delight.’ It was one of a number of evocative Welsh hymns recorded by the choir and deployed to moving effect across the series.

Postgate could also not have realised how precious the ‘reels of tape’ he describes carrying away from these recordings would become. In the liner notes to the Trunk Records soundtrack recording, sound engineer Jon Brooks described the moment Jonny Trunk ‘picked a tape at random and I loaded it onto the tape machine. It was the opening bassoon theme from *Ivor the Engine* (an out-take, at least), followed by some work-in-progress sound effects. We both stood there speechless. This was the first time that anyone had heard these tapes in about 40 years.’ Brooks adds: ‘I found it rather odd that outside, people were going about their daily business, completely oblivious to the fact that history was being unravelled at seven and a half inches per second’.

Jonny Trunk still has ‘a bee buzzing in my bonnet about Vernon Elliott’s music’, and the meticulous process of preserving these tapes – with minimal mastering to reflect as much of the original sound quality as possible – enables us to listen with clarity to each section of Elliott’s music for *Ivor*. The ‘Cruising Theme’ is another instance of Elliott’s interweaving of several connected ideas in an apparently effortless stream, creating the impression of momentum without any sense of rush – a brisk journey on a sunny day. The music is propelled along by a four-note rhythm (a triplet followed by a single stressed beat) that evokes the noise made by a railway engine on train tracks, and it sets off with a jaunty clarinet theme underpinned by the four-note ostinato in bassoon and piano. The piano then takes over with an answering idea, the clarinet picking up the ostinato rhythm, before the opening theme is passed between the instruments. The bassoon’s Ivor arpeggio bobs up, linking this material with the main theme, after which Elliott deftly shares his motifs between the instruments, briefly exploring new key areas to accentuate the sense of travel.

Take the first few bars of the ‘Fast Theme’ out of context and they could be the opening of a piece of minimalism or post-minimalism by the likes of Steve Reich or John Adams. Elliott uses churning syncopation to create inexorable forward motion. But rather than splintering these ideas into fragments as a minimalist might have done, he uses this rhythmic foundation as the basis for another energetic tune, unfurled by the clarinet. There are just hints in these syncopated rhythms of the jazz Elliott enjoyed playing in his spare time, but the pulse is foursquare and what unfolds is more of a scherzo (which literally means ‘joke’), with rapid, demanding writing for the woodwinds especially. Elliott’s knowledge of scherzo movements and instrumental studies – he performed extensively in orchestras and as a teacher – comes through here: intricate, trilling figures give the fingers of both clarinettist and bassoonist a thorough workout. The whole is threaded through with the opening motif which recurs, most often in the piano, to stop the virtuoso running figures running away altogether.

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One of the wittiest and most memorable parts of Elliott's *Ivor* score is the 'Donkey Theme'. Bluebell the Donkey is Ivor's loyal friend and is owned by Llaniog's resident redoubtable eccentric and fashion icon, Mrs Porty. Elliott chooses a rather sturdy pace for this piece, as befits the determined gallop of the animal in question, and the music is full of humorous gestures, particularly the braying motif preceded by a distinctive, descending, whole tone-inflected scale. He'd have been familiar with the most notable precedent for this, the braying 'Wild Asses' of *Carnival of the Animals* by Saint-Saëns. And surely Saint-Saëns's 'The Elephant', a theme heard on double basses, influenced the similarly comically plodding 'Elephant Walk' for the woodwind equivalent, the solo bassoon – another melody that exactly captures the nature of what's being portrayed.

And then comes 'Land of My Fathers'. The original recording is enchantingly simple – that church choir in a church hall, a textured mixture of timbres rather than the smooth homogeneity of a professional choir. To this, Elliott added a simple accompaniment, with a romanticism in the choir's harmony not heard in every rendition, adding a depth and poignancy to his arrangement. In the 'Dragons' episode, Idris the Welsh Dragon asks the Grumbly and District Choral Society: 'Do you know "Land of My Fathers"?' What follows is a brief, understated rendition accompanying Peter Firmin's paintings of an industrial-rural Wales, gradually shifting perspective further from the choir and Ivor and Idris to reveal the undulating green hills punctuated by ascending coils of smoke.

It's a moment that's reprised at the very end of the very last episode, produced in 1977, called, simply, 'Retirement'. The dragons have gone into hiding for their own safety; their home, Smoke Hill, lies cold and dark. But their voices are occasionally heard piping a descant during choir practice. And so, the whole series ends, with a particularly rich Vernon Elliott arrangement of 'Land of My Fathers' as we pan out once again to that distinctively Welsh vista of an industrial town framed by hills. It is a moment that epitomises hiraeth: a Welsh word evoking the sense of missing a place – even a place one has not lived. We are hit by a great sense of loss: a farewell to childhood, to these familiar figures, to this landscape. Elliott's arrangement, in its romantic raw sincerity, encapsulates the essence of Postgate and Firmin's vision: a deep, affectionate celebration of the very particular nature of Welsh community and landscape and history. Anyone watching with love is pulled into its orbit, is welcomed home, but with the underlying knowledge that its sense of safety is also remote and of the past – so that, even as we enter this world, we must prepare ourselves to leave it again.

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