

# TO KILL REFUSING

## BRISTOL'S WORLD WAR 1 CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

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## A Brief Talk On Frank Merrick

Frank Merrick, the pianist and composer, was born in Bristol in 1886. He had a remarkable childhood because he was a musical prodigy who composed and performed his first piece of music in public at the age of five. When the celebrated pianist Paderewski came to Bristol to give a concert he heard the young Frank play and recommended that he go to Vienna to study with his former teacher, the great Theodor Leschetizky. In 1898, aged twelve, Frank duly arrived in Vienna and joined the remarkable band of Leschetizky pupils. There he met other prodigies who would grow up to become world-famous pianists, such as the young Mark Hambourg from Russia, Artur Schnabel from Germany and Mieczyslaw Horszowski from Poland.

As a teacher Leschetizky was an irascible and demanding man, but he had himself been a pupil of Czerny's and Czerny had been a pupil of Beethoven's – so the trial of being his pupil was offset by the honour of belonging to an apostolic succession. Expert musicologists sometimes say that one can always identify the playing of a Leschetizky pupil. Perhaps it was something Viennese in their touch. Certainly Frank's playing had what the Russian composer Glazounov called "a noble tone" when he heard Frank play in St Petersburg in 1910.

The scene was set for a glittering international career, but then came the Great War of 1914-1918. Frank declared that he was a pacifist. He was an 'absolutist' and was prepared to do nothing to help the war effort whether directly or indirectly. Why did he become a pacifist and go against the patriotic tide of public opinion? He did not act with the support of his family - they were divided. Frank's younger brother Horace, became an army officer who was wounded in the trenches and received the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry. After the war the two brothers hardly spoke to one another, but it is clear that they were both men of resolute character. Frank was imprisoned for two years.

Why does one man go in one direction and his brother in the opposite direction? These things are a mystery. Frank remained firm in his beliefs but never said much about their justification. He was not a polemicist or an ideologue, nor was he an activist, closely involved in day-to-day politics. It was as if his position was simply self-evident to him – something given and beyond argument. If pressed he would sometimes say that he could not tolerate the idea that he might be shooting at Schnabel in the opposing trench. Of course, this was just a metaphor, a way to epitomise his overall stance, but it may shed some light on the source and meaning of Frank's commitment.

In Vienna, and because of his precocious talents, Frank had gained access to something remarkable and almost transcendent in its significance – the great cultural tradition of European music. Many rivers flowed into this ocean: from Germany, France, Austria, Poland, Russia, and of course from England, Ireland and Scotland. Taken together, these contributions transcended national boundaries and fused together in a great bond of diverse but shared culture – a European Union of Music with frictionless national boundaries.

Perhaps it was a direct consequence of belonging to this great tradition, something impersonal and trans-national, that was crystallised in Frank's refusal to take part in a war that was to tear European culture to pieces.

When he was an old man, in his eighties and nineties, Frank would sometimes be asked by family and friends to give impromptu performances. He would slowly sit himself down, a stooped figure, at the Bechstein grand piano in his music room, and then play Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Chopin and Debussy for an hour, and all from his prodigious musical memory. But the truly remarkable thing to witness was the physical transformation that took place. The frailty of age would fall away and a strength would suffuse his body. It was as if all the spiritual power of the great musical culture to which he belonged was channelled through him into his commanding playing. Perhaps it was this cultural force that made it self-evident to him that he was not going to go to war at any price and that gave him the strength to stand his ground come what may.