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GLORIOUS ALBION

The RVW Society's *Vision of Albion* Opera Festival exceeded all expectations in establishing Vaughan Williams's operatic compositions as an important aspect of his life's work. Playing to near capacity audiences at every event, critical comment was generally favourable and sometimes extremely complimentary. Typical of the favourable reviews was Brian Hunt in the *Daily Telegraph*. Writing about *Sir John in Love*, he said: "Let's be quite clear: this is music that must be heard because it is superb, enriching, captivating... All praise to the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, to Radio 3, and above all to the indefatigable Richard Hickox and a marvellous team of singers and musicians for mounting this concert performance (part of the *Vision of Albion*, festival of VW's operas). Given on the 125th anniversary of the composer's birth, it did him proud."

Preview in *The Times*

The Times also did VW proud with a major preview of the opera festival which appeared on October 9th 1997. Under the heading *Glorious Operatic Albion*, Ursula Vaughan Williams, Michael Kennedy, Richard Hickox and Stephen Connock were all quoted in support of the operas. The article began: "The 20th Century has not been over-kind to the operas of Ralph Vaughan Williams. But this year, the 125th anniversary of the composer's birth, some amends are being made... with all five main operas receiving an outing".

Pilgrim

Pride of place in the festival went to *Pilgrim's Progress*. At a time when the Royal Opera was rarely out of the headlines

- invariably negative - the two performances of *Pilgrim* were widely praised. Gerald Finley made a deep impression as Pilgrim, and the orchestra of the Royal Opera played superbly. The recording by Chandos was made immediately after the Barbican performance and, by all accounts, will be something to cherish. It should be available in the late Spring of 1998.

Poisoned Kiss

Amongst other highlights of the Festival, the performance of highlights from *The Poisoned Kiss* was a revelation. The musical standard was high, and by omitting the spoken dialogue, the words were not too intrusive. We need a first recording of this *comic extravaganza* urgently. Any member with a spare £50,000 should contact the Society's Chairman as soon as possible!

The future

The success of both the VW symphony cycle in London in 1995, and now the opera festival, should give arts administrators more confidence in programming Vaughan Williams in future. A Choral Festival is being planned for 2000, including a performance of rare works such as the *Six Choral Songs (In Time of War)*. Further details will appear in the RVW Society Journal during 1998.

See also:-

- * *Vision of Albion* concert reviews on page 16
- * Interviews with Donald Maxwell and Anne-Marie Owens on page 23

Gustav Holst: an evaluation

by Michael Short

Some years ago I applied for a job as a teacher of conventional harmony, and when I heard that I had been short-listed for interview, I hurriedly tried to brush up my rusty knowledge by browsing through some textbooks and playing four-part hymns at the piano. Opening a hymn-book at random, I played a hymn through: the melody was rather good, but the harmony seemed quite crude, and while avoiding traditional procedures, it was not at all inventive; in fact harmonically the hymn was rather poor stuff. I glanced at the name

Such a paradox is typical of Holst, and indicative of the problems involved in evaluating his work. In fact, it throws into question the whole notion of evaluating a composer's output: what criteria should be used in making such a judgement, and should we in fact be making a judgement at all? Would it not be better simply to draw attention to what a composer wrote, perhaps helping to elucidate any problems of understanding which might arise, but without attempting to allocate his work to any particular level of importance? Also, are we justified in comparing one composer with another? Is it at all helpful to try to construct a kind of league table of who may or may not be the most important composers of the 20th century? Surely each composer has his (or her) own qualities? Perhaps we should just sit back and enjoy the music for its own sake, rather than passing judgement upon it? However, sometimes we are obliged to make an evaluation, possibly to redress an imbalance or perhaps to refute preconceived ideas or myths which have grown up around a particular composer's work.

So how in fact do we evaluate the work of a composer? Is it measured by the number of CDs sold; that is, by the impact of commercial marketing techniques; or by the number of people attending concerts, or according to the opinions of enthusiasts, or those of critics, or of academics, or of conductors or performers, whether professional or amateur, or even the views of the general public? Can there ever be a consensus of all these

diverse factors? Moreover, can a composer whose work consists to a large extent of quite short pieces be considered truly great: i.e., does greatness really lie in the production of a quantity of works of large dimensions?

The Planets is so well known that there is no need to describe it here, and by the criterion of sales of recordings, the work must surely be one of the most popular pieces of 20th-century music, constantly recorded and re-recorded by a wide range of conductors and orchestras, and brilliantly reproduced by the technology of digital recording. Although concert attendance in Britain seems to be gradually declining, sales of recordings have increased enormously, and for the vast majority of listeners the main source of music is the CD and stereo reproduction. Indeed, *The Planets* had to wait for the

invention of the CD to make its true impact as a sound recording, particularly in dynamic range and in playing time: even with LPs we had to turn the disc over halfway through, but now the entire work can be heard without a break. Searching for other works with which to emulate this success, record companies have ventured into other parts of Holst's output, but with nothing like the same result: *The Planets* remains head-and-shoulders above anything else he wrote in terms of sheer popularity.

However, if we seek the opinions of enthusiasts, the situation is much less clear, as their views often seem distorted by their keenness to promote the work of their idol. The greatest enthusiast for Holst's music was of course his daughter Imogen, who, despite bending over backwards to avoid hagiography in some of her earlier writings¹, devoted much of her life to tireless promotion of her father's work. But even she had her blind spots. She was rightly doubtful about the wisdom of performing and publishing some of Holst's early efforts, most of which sound like half-baked Wagner and have no trace of the composer's mature voice, but in her enthusiasm she sometimes seemed to lack judgement regarding certain later works. Were pieces such as the *Capriccio* really worth retrieving from the limbo into which they had fallen? This so-called 'jazz-band' piece has nothing to do with jazz, which Holst himself detested, and isn't much use to 'straight' musicians either, as its bizarre mixture of modal folksiness and crude march rhythms is a mere hotchpotch, and the piece ends so abruptly as to suggest that Holst himself didn't care one way or the other. What the American jazz musicians for whom it was commissioned thought of it is not recorded, but the bandleader Nathaniel Shilkret quickly found a feasible excuse for not playing it.

Another problem piece is the *Lyric Movement*, which Imogen edited for publication after her father's death; an excellent example of the composer's later style, but rather ineffective in performance. None of its ideas really develop: they are simply juxtaposed without culmination, and the solo viola part is awkward, difficult to play, and never breaks free to display the essentially lyrical nature of the instrument. Imogen Holst considered this work to be 'warm', but others might consider the words 'bleak' and 'dull' to be more appropriate. But she was right to pressurise Holst's publishers into bringing out a reprint of

¹ *Gustav Holst: a biography* (OUP, 1938+); *The Music of Gustav Holst* (OUP, 1951+).

BECHSTEIN HALL.

Mr. R.

Vaughan Williams

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Violinist—Madame HARRIET SOLLY.

Accompanist—Mr. HAMILTON HARTY, Mr. GUSTAV von HOLST

Sofa Stalls 7/6, Area Stalls 5/-, Area 2/6, Balcony 2/-

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A London concert programme from 1904

of the composer, expecting to see some nonentity printed there, and was surprised to see the name of Gustav Holst. In the event, I didn't get the job, and I don't think Holst would have got it either, as in his early years he had to take extra coaching in theoretical subjects to be able to scrape through the Royal College of Music entrance examination, and few of his compositions show any sympathy for conventional academic routines. Yet this same composer wrote what is probably the most popular piece of 20th-century orchestral music, a standard item in the repertoire of major conductors throughout the world. Moreover, I have no doubt that, despite its poor academic credentials, Holst's little hymn would be quite effective when sung, for he had the knack of placing the few notes which he had chosen in exactly the right place for maximum effect.

Egdon Heath - this piece really is bleak, but with a purpose: a work of Holst's maturity with a mysterious atmosphere and great expressive power, which grows on the listener each time it is heard (Vaughan Williams later revised his initial critical view of this work, as he came to realise that Holst's original judgement had been correct all along)².

As regards the attitude of critics to Holst's work, I have discussed this a few years ago in my own book on Holst,³ but latter-day critics seem to fall into similar categories; i.e. those who think that he was a great genius who has not yet received the recognition he deserves, and those who dismiss him simply as an amateurish member of a so-called 'cow-pat' school of English pastoralism. Both are wrong of course: the music of Holst is now widely known, and his achievements are recognised by listeners who are able to make their own judgements, and although there is undoubtedly an element of pastoralism in his music, much of it occupies a completely different creative world. As for amateurism, the claim recently made by a distinguished commentator that Holst was an intellectual is contrary to the facts. Holst was certainly not an intellectual in the accepted sense, nor even a serious 'symphonic' composer in the same way as, say, Sibelius: he was a practical musician, a composer and teacher, and if some of his music sounds amateurish, it is because, as Imogen Holst put it, he insisted on making his own mistakes in his own way, but he was nevertheless professionally committed to what he was trying to achieve in his work.

For academics, Holst's music must be something of a disappointment, as he was quite empirical in his technical procedures, did not belong to any artistic school or coterie, and was reticent about his methods and intentions. To be faced with a major and popular composer from whose work little can be gleaned must be frustrating: much more academic fodder can be extracted from picking over the works of little-known serialists, and despite attempts to find deeper meaning in Holst's work,⁴ there must come a stage at which the researcher must concede that there is little else one can do but simply sit back and listen to the music.

Moreover, for both critics and academics, Holst's career does not fit into any expected mode of development. He was quite inconsistent in the type of works he wrote, and there is no evidence of any steady progress towards greater heights of

achievement. Writing in 1920, Vaughan Williams speculated about the development of Holst's career: 'What the future may have in store we cannot say - whether he will become simpler, or whether he will lead us into new paths where it will be difficult to follow',⁵ but in fact Holst fulfilled both of these prophecies in his later works, some of which are clear and accessible, and others offering something of a puzzle to his old friend and colleague. But Holst was not travelling intentionally in any particular direction, as he was not concerned with progress: in fact he thought that few things in human life actually progressed at all. He was not interested in making history, only in making music, which he did by any means which happened to interest him at the time. He did not follow any particular artistic philosophy or creed, and as he himself said, he had "no conscious principle, no 'ideal', no axe to grind."⁶

In addition to *The Planets*, conductors have often programmed other orchestral works such as *A Somerset Rhapsody*, *Beni Mora* and *A Fugal Overture*, but these do not offer the same wide range of drama, colour and expression as are found in the famous suite. A similar kind of performance problem is evident in Holst's concertos: the *Double Concerto* and *A Fugal Concerto* are not heavyweight showcase pieces, and provide no opportunity for virtuoso soloists to show off their skills to an admiring public.

Much of Holst's music is well-loved among choral singers, especially the shorter part-songs such as *This Have I Done for My True Love* and the groups of folk-song arrangements, but certain later works, such as the *First Choral Symphony* and *A Choral Fantasia*, are difficult and unrewarding to perform, and can only be tackled by the finest choirs. But when done well (e.g. the Guildford Choral Society's recording on the Hyperion label), these pieces reveal great expressive power and artistic vision. The simpler settings such as the *Two Psalms* and the *Three Festival Choruses* have always found favour with amateurs - they are simple, direct and unpretentious pieces which give great pleasure to performers and also to ordinary listeners who would perhaps have no interest in more 'serious' concert works.

Amongst the wind band fraternity, Holst's work is admired world-wide: the two *Suites* are classics of their kind, and are still enjoyed by players and listeners alike, continuing to sound fresh and effective more than eight decades after they were written. And where would the brass band world be without the *Moorside Suite*? But *Hammersmith* has always met with some resistance. It is difficult to perform, even for the virtuoso BBC Military Band of the 1930s for which it was commissioned, and its concept and style probably lie outside what the average wind band enthusiast really wants to hear.

But ordinary orchestral musicians generally like to play Holst's music. He himself was originally an orchestral musician (perhaps the only important composer in the history of music to have been a trombonist), and he always wrote his scores with the players' point of view firmly in mind. For professionals he wrote what musicians like to play; for amateurs he never wrote down, but was able to produce pieces which contained just the right amount of challenge for players of moderate ability without venturing too much into realms of difficulty which might provoke discouragement. Moreover, he was capable of writing music such as the *St. Paul's Suite* which is just a suitable for professional performance as it was for the schoolgirl orchestra for whom it was written.

Holst was not a natural song-writer, and apart from early pot-boilers for the parlour-song market, his two main works in this genre are the *Four Songs* for voice and violin, and the *Twelve Songs* to words by Humbert Wolfe. Both of these are essentially simple in technique, but in different ways: the first deriving from the simplicity of the mediæval poems, and the other using just sufficient notes to create an individual modernistic atmosphere of its



*Holst and VW on a walking tour near Malvern
Their friend, W G Whittaker was with them;
it was he who took the photograph.*

² *Royal College of Music Magazine*, vol. 30 (1934) no. 3.

³ *Gustav Holst: the man and his music* (OUP, 1990).

⁴ Richard Greene: *Gustav Holst and a Rhetoric of Musical Character* (Garland, 1994).

⁵ *Music and Letters*, vol. 1, nos. 3 & 4.

⁶ *Gustav Holst: a biography* (OUP, 1938+); *The Music of Gustav Holst* (OUP, 1951+).

own. He also wrote several operas, perhaps surprisingly, as English opera was not really a viable commodity during Holst's lifetime, but of these the chamber operas *Savitri* and

(continued overleaf)

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The Wandering Scholar have achieved something of a niche reputation in this specialised sphere. Perhaps he might have been much more widely known to instrumental musicians if he had written more chamber music, but such a genre was not his natural mode of expression, as the arid *Terzetto* and the discarded string quartet *Phantasy on British Folk Songs* demonstrate.

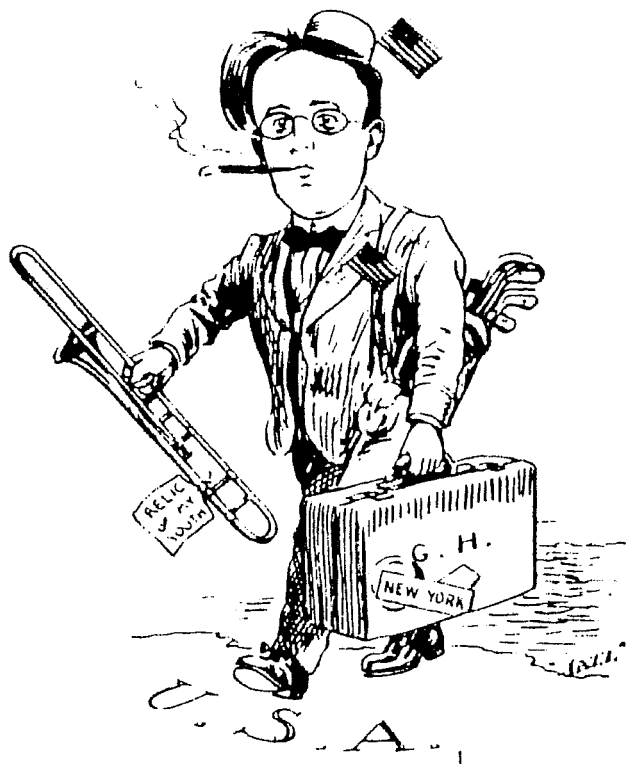
As for the general public, they would probably recognise parts of *The Planets* without having any idea who wrote it; the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* is well-known and sung in churches throughout Britain every Christmas; and *I Vow To Thee, My Country* has become a kind of national hymn, although this 'Jupiter' melody was originally intended by Holst to express a completely different mood of contented self-satisfaction.

So how can we reconcile these various viewpoints on Holst? It is true that if he had not written *The Planets* he would have been a very minor composer. It is also true that his music varies considerably in effectiveness, particularly some of the later works. But amongst his work are pieces of extraordinary individuality, some of which are direct and accessible, while others are somewhat difficult to perform or to appreciate at first hearing, or sometimes both! Although many pieces are quite brief and therefore cannot stand comparison with the great masterworks of the classical

repertoire, some are individual gems of their kind. The first movement of the *Brook Green Suite* is as perfect an example of elegance as could be hoped for: beautiful, clear, expressive, and above all completely simple, besides being within the capabilities of amateur performers; the kind of music which grabs hold of the listener and drags them into its own world willy-nilly. On the other hand, a piece such as *The Evening-Watch* needs much more effort to appreciate: its steady processions of fourth-chords are difficult to sing, and at first rather wearisome to listen to, but the piece certainly has a strange atmosphere of its own and is well worth closer acquaintance. In much of Holst's later music, one has the feeling that he is feeling his way toward something, but it is not altogether clear what that goal is, and the music therefore has a rather intriguing quality. The listener therefore has to make an effort, and for some people, that may be asking rather too much.

It is pointless to speculate about what Holst

might have written had he lived as long as, say, Vaughan Williams. He wrote what he could in the time that was available to him, and all we can do is to try to understand and appreciate it for its own sake. What immediately strikes one most about Holst's most successful music is its combination of expressive power and technical simplicity. This is of course most evident in *The Planets*, in which he used the minimum number of notes to the maximum effect, not just for violent or dramatic moments but also in passages of mystery and of gentle lyricism. But this essential simplicity appears in many of his other compositions: for



Gustav Holst arrives in America in 1923

example the 1912 setting of *Psalm 86* for amateur performers, in which the simple device of employing a Neapolitan triad in the harmonisation of a 16th-century Dorian melody produces effects of poignancy and immense emotional power. This tonal clash of a flattened second chord over a tonic pedal anticipates the violent effects Holst subsequently used in *Mars*, and points the way forward towards the abrasive dissonance of Stan Kenton, some 30 years later. Recently, I heard a performance of my own wind band transcription of Holst's ballet music from *The Perfect Fool*, and I sat transfixed throughout: although I had laboured long and hard over its details and knew the score well, the power and vitality of the music was so strong as to force the listener to forget everything else and be carried along by its sheer drive and dynamic momentum. This is surely what great music is all about!

Michael Short

Michael Short (b. 1937) is a composer whose works have been much influenced by Holst's musical outlook. He has held various academic posts, but now devotes his time entirely to composition.

⁷ Bandleader Publications, London.

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Holst out of context

by Colin Matthews

I have been closely associated with Holst's music for something like 25 years, and have known much of it for much longer, but he remains something of an enigma for me, and a composer whose life and work I find occasionally disconcerting. My growing appreciation of the whole of his output has

Holst's potential to be so great, and the high points on such a level, that I am let down when the music falls short of what it might be. And its also because I don't have a conventional perspective on Holst. Although I worked closely with his daughter Imogen for over 12 years, I did not share her

view (and to some extent Holst's own) of the early music as 'horrors'. It was not easy to persuade her - although she enjoyed changing her mind as much as anyone I've known - that a good deal of it was worth hearing.

The influence of Wagner, which Imogen Holst decried, was crucial to his early development, but it was certainly not wholly bad, nor was it all-pervasive. One of the most striking of the works of his twenties, the *Elegy in memoriam William Morris* from the *Cotswolds Symphony* is closer to the harmonic

world of Scriabin's early piano music than to anything else - and is a remarkably accomplished and deeply-felt piece. (Faber Music has just published the full score: let's hope that someone notices, as it still awaits a professional live performance). For all the archaic Wagnerisms of its libretto, *Sita* contains some remarkable music - the (recorded) Interlude from Act III is to my ears moving in the direction of the Schoenberg of *Verklärte Nacht* and *Gurrelieder* - as too is much of *The Mystic Trumpeter*. (Schoenberg was teaching in Berlin when Holst visited there in 1903: they could have met).

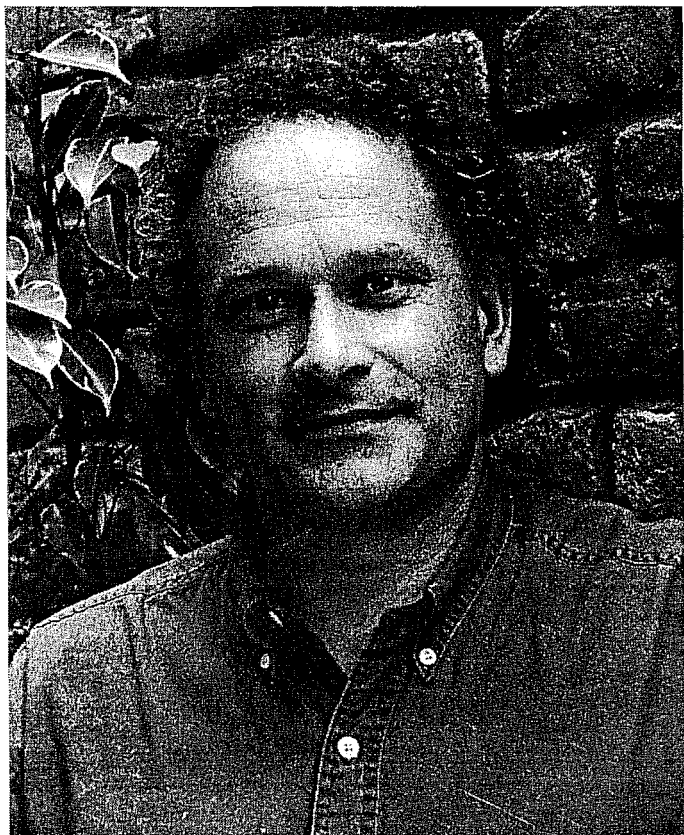
Would Holst have been a better composer had he remained more open to European influences, not so affected by the folk-music revival? Anathema in the pages of this journal perhaps, but then I am not convinced that folk-music was as beneficial for Holst as it was for Vaughan Williams. While RVW found in it a means to expand, to become a symphonist, it seems to have

reinforced Holst's miniaturist tendencies (for all the breadth of *The Planets* - for which, I should say, I'm as much an enthusiast as anyone - it shouldn't be overlooked that none of its movements lasts more than about 7 minutes). When in later life he attempted the larger scale - as in the *Choral Symphony* - he tended to overreach himself. The *Scherzo* of the Symphony he began in 1934 is a tantalising might-have-been.

Arguing for a different kind of Holst is more than a little pointless, and would have met with short shrift from the composer himself, who once remarked that a composer must 'turn out a lot of stuff which isn't really of any value. Every fourth production will probably be the best he can achieve.' As at the very least every second or third work by Holst is of outstanding quality, he certainly can't be accused of falling short of his own criteria. And what matter a few failures when among the successes are the *Ode to Death* and *Egdon Heath*?

Colin Matthews
London

(Colin Matthews is a composer and writer and has closely studied the life and music of Holst. He arranged the *Twelve Songs, Op. 48* as *The Dream-City*, and this was recorded by the CLS under Richard Hickox in 1983 on Hyperion A66099).



Colin Matthews. Photograph by John Carewe

led to revelations at the beginning and end of his life - the maturity and conviction of *The Mystic Trumpeter* and the austere beauty of the *Lyric Movement* - as well as in the middle - what a remarkable achievement, against the odds, is *At the Boar's Head*. (Against the odds, since, including early works, Holst wrote no fewer than eleven operas, as well as four or five other works for the stage, and yet hardly any of them holds a place in the repertoire).

With a knowledge of all the works comes an awareness of his failings: few great composers around the age of 40 can have written such a dud as the orchestral suite *Phantastes*, or as feeble a string quartet as Holst's only contribution to the repertoire in 1916 (a 'guilty secret', in his own words). And reading the librettos of the operas *Sita* and *The Perfect Fool* is a pretty depressing experience.

Why emphasise this, when there is so much good music? I think it's because I find



VW and Holst on a walking tour near Malvern.

Gustav Holst at Thaxted

by his daughter, Imogen Holst

It was in 1914 that my parents came to live in Thaxted. Their landlord was the well-known Essex writer, S.L. Bensusan, and the cottage at Monk Street that they rented from him had been built in 1614. It stood on a high bank, with a view that stretched across fields and meadows to the tall spire of Thaxted Church in the distance. The cottage had a thatched roof, small lattice windows, and large open fire-places. Many years after we had left, one of the chimneys caught fire and the whole building was burnt to the ground. Nothing except a small heap of bricks is left to show where it stood, and the garden is so thickly overgrown with brambles that I find it difficult to recognise the seven greengage trees that were once a small orchard.

In those days Monk Street was an extraordinarily quiet place in which to live: the only sounds were the singing of birds, the buzzing of insects, the sighing of the wind in the trees and the occasional creak of the pump outside the back door. We were surrounded by farm land, and it was enthralling to watch the seeds being scattered by hand and the meadow grass being cut with a scythe. The only public transport was a carrier's cart that covered the distance from Thaxted to Dunmow and back every Wednesday.

This was where my father began writing *The Planets*, working at weekends and in the school holidays, which were the only times he could get away from his teaching in London. His small music room at one end of the cottage was more than half filled with the ancient grand piano he had recently bought for £13. The furniture removers had almost been defeated by the piano when they tried to get it into the cottage. They had to leave it in the garden during the first night and unfortunately there was a thunderstorm: on the following morning the long-suffering piano had to be turned upside down to empty the rain-water that had collected inside it! But it survived the ordeal and lasted for the rest of my father's life. (In fact it is still playable: after his death in 1934 it was given to the Museum at Cheltenham, where he had been born in 1874).

Among my memories of that cottage at Monk Street I have a clear recollection of one summer day when I was eight or nine: standing in the sunny garden, just outside the music room window, I heard my father trying out the chords which belong to the opening of *Venus*, the second movement of *The Planets*. I can also remember the only

interruption that got in the way of the music. It was provided by the goat my mother had been persuaded to buy. It was tethered to a long chain, which allowed ample nibbling-ground in the lush grass. But the goat's protesting 'maah-haa-haa-haa' only ceased when it triumphantly succeeded in pulling its stake out of the ground and moving within reach of my mother's rose bushes. During the intervals of quiet munching my father used to get on with *The Planets*.

Our neighbours must have been puzzled by a man whose only 'work' consisted of sitting and writing hour after hour and then playing short fragments on the piano. The Essex suspicion of 'furriners' is notorious, but in this case our neighbours may well have thought that we were foreigners in the orthodox, non-Essex sense of the word. For my father had the outlandish name of Gustav von Holst. (It was only at the end of the 1914-1918 war, when he was appointed Y.M.C.A. music adviser in the Near East that he gave up the 'von'). Our ancestors, who were a mixture of Swedish, German and Russian had left their home in Riga at the end of the eighteenth century, and had settled in England. My father was as English as he could possibly be: but how could our neighbours have guessed this from the sounds coming out of the music room window? I was too young to hear the muttered rumours about German spies. But I was old enough to recognise the warmth of friendship that greeted him when he began helping the choir in the parish church. The Vicar, Conrad Noel soon became a close friend, and my father was able to teach the singers motets by Byrd and Weelkes. In June 1916 he organised and conducted the first Thaxted festival of music. This was not a festival in the late twentieth-century meaning of the word, with international celebrities playing and singing to audiences that had paid for their tickets. Nor was it a competition festival. It was a long weekend of amateur music-making. The performers were his own pupils from schools and evening institutes in London, who combined with the Thaxted choir: the audiences were the members of the congregation at the church services. A brightly coloured banner was carried in procession, proclaiming Bach's words: 'the aim of music is the glory of God and pleasant recreation.' No one who heard the Thaxted performance of the Bach cantata *Sleepers Wake* will ever forget it.

My father's description of that festival has survived in a letter he sent to a friend: 'It was a feast - an orgy. Four whole days of

perpetual singing and playing... In the intervals between the services people drifted into church and sang motets or played violin or cello. And others caught bad colds through going long walks in the pouring rain singing madrigals and folk songs and rounds the whole time... I realise now why the Bible insists on heaven being a place where people sing and *go on singing*. We kept it up at Thaxted about fourteen hours a day'.

For the 1917 festival he wrote several works for them to sing and play, including *This have I done for my True Love* and *Turn back, O man*. By the end of that year we had left the cottage in Monk Street and had gone to live in the middle of Thaxted, next door to the Recorder's House. (There is now a plaque between the front door and the music room window, commemorating the fact that my father lived there from 1917 to 1925). He still had to spend most of his time teaching in London, but in 1924 he lived in this Thaxted house for months on end, while he was recovering from the delayed effects of concussion after a bad bout of overwork. As soon as he was well enough he began composing there: it was the first time in his life that he was able to spend all day, every day, writing music. He was working at his *Choral Symphony*, and in a letter to a friend he said: 'It has been wonderful to sit all day in the garden and to watch the symphony grow up alongside of the flowers and vegetables, and then to find it is done'.

After 1925 we left Thaxted and lived for a time in Easton Park. But my father never lost touch with his Thaxted friends. He still took occasional choir practices, and every Christmas he used to play the organ for them. (An old gardener living only a few hundred yards from where I am writing these words, once said to me: 'he made that organ *speak*').

Today, there are still members of the church choir who sang under him in 1916: they join with their children and grand-children in the music he wrote for them fifty years ago. And his pupils from London who came to the first Thaxted festival have passed on the tradition of his kind of music-making to their pupils and their pupils' pupils, carrying to all five continents the message of that brightly-coloured banner that is still propped up against one of the pillars in Thaxted church.

Imogen Holst

(First published in *Essex Journal*, Volume 1, No. 4 - September 1966. Submitted by Michael Goatcher, and reprinted with kind permission of the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford).

Interpreting *The Planets*

by Sir Adrian Boult

Something like 60 years ago there was a story going the rounds in Leipzig that the enterprising firm of Peters had decided that one of the hardy annuals of the German opera houses of that day (I think it was Flotow's *Martha*, which reappeared every few months almost everywhere) needed a new edition, and they engraved a beautiful new score. They then sent it in turn to all the great musicologists of Leipzig which, having a very strong university faculty as well as the Konservatorium, could boast a large supply of suitable professors. One after another, they read the proof, found anything up to 200 mistakes, and each said they thought the score was now faultless. The next man did exactly the same, and after about a dozen of them had done this, the firm decided to issue the work, but to make no pretensions about it.

An opera full score is a bit more complicated than an hour's symphonic music, but it is interesting that Messrs. Curwen should know of so many mistakes in *The Planets* that they have decided to issue a further revision. The new score is well got up, a little small for actual conducting, but considerably bigger than the miniature which appeared soon after the full score was first engraved in 1921. The careful notes which the composer put into the first reprint of the full score have all been reproduced here, but I always regret that the precise directions which appear at the opening of *Neptune* as to the management of the hidden choir have not been shown also at the opening of the whole work. I should perhaps here point out that the composer sanctioned a modification of the instruction to close the door separating the chorus from the hall. This was in Canterbury Cathedral, when we had the choir in the triforium, where there were no doors, and so we made the choir itself move into the distance until it could be heard no longer. I usually now adopt this practice in concert halls. It is more difficult for the singers, but much more effective.

Messrs. Curwen have issued a list of the corrections which appear in the new score, and I would venture to add a few more, most notably one that has always been the worst misprint in the work and has escaped all revisions: the note for the first horn on page 55, one bar before figure IV in *Mercury*. This should be E natural (sounding A natural); the flat is wrong.

I would like to warn conductors about the balance in *Mars*: at 3 after VIII, page 24, the composer has reduced the strings to *forte*. He was always careful to keep the strings quiet enough at similar places in the movement - page 8, 4 bars after II, and page 12, figure IV for instance, any gradual involuntary *crescendo* would bring the strings back to their former level. These are not marked in the score.

An important point affecting the organ at the

end of the movement can be told later in the composer's own words. On several occasions the composer found it

effective to prolong the organ *glissando* on page 159 of *Uranus* (one bar before VIII). He used to suggest that while the player made his *glissando* with the right hand, it should be followed by the whole left forearm sustaining the scale until the end of the bar. This could be added to the score, but I think Miss Imogen Holst (with whom I discussed the point) was right in her feeling that, as the composer had never seen fit to mark this, it should be left to the performer to make the scale as effective as possible.

When I conducted the work in Vienna, I was surprised to get a protest from the horn department at the spacing of their range in the various movements. The highest parts are horns I and IV in *Mars*, but I, III, V in *Venus*, *Jupiter*, *Saturn* and *Uranus*. In *Mercury* and *Neptune* there are only four, distributed as usual. English players are accustomed to either part, and I never worry about it in this country, but the Viennese players exchanged the parts so that a high player could take IV in *Mars*.

I feel that it is important to give here some quotations from a letter which the composer wrote me after the first (private) performance. He left the country immediately after that well-remembered Sunday (September 29, 1918), and wrote on YMCA Expeditionary Forces' notepaper about it all.

*

On Active Service
YMCA,
With the British Expeditionary Force.

Dear Adrian,

We are stranded here waiting for a boat. 'Here' being an out-of-the-way little port in South Italy where we get English papers ten days old. I believe the censorship still holds good so I won't mention its name.

I want to try and collect all my ideas for Jan 30 into this letter¹. Probably you will get postcards containing all the things I forget now.

1. *Mars*. You made it wonderfully clear - in fact *everything* came out clearly that wonderful morning.

Now could you make more row? And work up more sense of climax? Perhaps hurry certain bits? Anyhow it must sound more unpleasant and far more terrifying.

In the middle 5/2 make a lot of <. In the last 5/2 in the second bar the brass have to shorten the note of the first phrase (F in treble and bass) in order to take breath. The organ chord should also have been shortened - it was careless of me to have made it a minim. Would you make it a crotchet followed by a crotchet rest so that the organ and brass finish

the phrase more or less together?

Whenever there are semiquavers it *might* be well to pull back a little so that they come out clearly and heavily, but I leave this to you to decide. The end must be louder and heavier with much more *rall*.

3. *Saturn*. In the opening some instruments are quite 'dead'. Others have <. Make the latter as emotional as possible. You get the quicker time just right - all that part goes all right.

The 4 flute tune, tempo I, was soft enough, but try and get the timp, harps and basses also down to nothing. This part must begin from another world and gradually overwhelm this one. That is the nearest verbal suggestion I can give you. Of course there is nothing in any of the planets (*my* planets I mean) that can be expressed in words.

Make the climax as big and overwhelming as possible. Then the soft ending will play itself as long as there is no suggestion of crescendo. *The organ must be softer*. It dominated all instead of merely adding depth. Use fewer and softer stops - perhaps 32ft alone or 16ft alone instead of both. Let it be too soft rather than too loud.

4. *Jupiter*. As long as he gets the wonderful joyousness you gave him he'll do. I hope you have Gyp as 1st trumpet!

At the recapitulation this part (tutti in unison)



did not come out clearly. Perhaps it should be broadened out. Do as you like.

And accept my blessing and thanks.

I have been writing this while serving at the canteen with intervals for playing to the men.

We have about 60 British sailors here, also this place has been inundated with 300 Serbian refugees. They are dear people, far nicer than these natives, but there is not enough food for us all in the town. Also they - like us - are taking the first boat to Salonica. It will be certainly overcrowded and probably filthy and there is a gale blowing! However I presume that there will be more than one first boat.

This evening was most interesting. One of the Serbians was a musician. He got a piece of YMCA paper like this one and ruled some lines and wrote out the Serbian national anthem and two dances for me and I played them and they all sang.

Yours ever,
GUSTAV

(Reproduced from *The Musical Times*, March 1970, with permission).

¹ the date of the first public performance.

YOUR LETTERS

We are always pleased to
receive contributions for this page



VW & Shakespeare

May I add a footnote to Professor Byron Adams's excellent account of Shakespeare and Vaughan Williams in the October 1997 issue of the Journal. Concerning the symphonies, there is a third Shakespearean connection in addition to the reference to *King Lear* in the F minor symphony and to *The Tempest* in the *Sixth Symphony*.

In the *Pastoral Symphony* the origin of the third movement emanated from sketches for a setting of the scene of Falstaff and the fairies in Act V, Scene Five of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* which of course he was later to set in *Sir John in Love*.

K D Mitchell
Chislehurst

Intense Experience

I have just arrived home after attending the Birmingham performance of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

It was an occasion during which I was alternately exultant then brought to tears.

The whole wondrous work was overwhelming in its cumulative impact and will, I think, constitute my most intensely recalled musical memory

J Westhead
Preston

Coastal Command

I do agree with Richard Young about the impressiveness of the *Coastal Command* music. As it happens, I had just borrowed the score from Oxford University Press (it seems only to be available on hire) when the October Journal arrived including his detailed article. I would like, however, to offer some differing comments about the individual movements in terms of themes, tempo/metre, and instrumentation.

Themes

The opening theme of the *Prelude* could perhaps be thought of as a motto theme, since it returns in movements 4, 5, 7 and 8. In 5, it is alluded to in the dotted rhythm rather than precise pitches, just before the theme recalling *A Sea Symphony*, but in the other movements is restated more obviously and in fact it finally rounds off the whole suite. It is also actually this theme that provides the contrast in the first part of No. 7, rather than the *Sea Symphony* theme.

Attention should also be drawn to the rather swaggering theme which follows the 'motto' theme in the *Prelude*. This one comes back, in a more unsettled context at the start of the *Finale*. The 'Sea' theme thus only comes back later in this movement.

The 'cheeky' theme from the *Prelude* quoted in the article recurs twice in the third movement but unlike the other themes from

the *Prelude* does not reappear in the *Finale*.

Tempo/Metre

Presumably due to the composer's wish to bring together different sections of the film music to form a concert suite, there are considerable changes of tempo within the movements e.g. Moderato - Allegro - Moderato in the *Prelude* and Allegro - Poco piu mosso - Maestoso in the *Finale*. In particular I think it should be mentioned that No. 7 *The Battle of the Beauforts* is in two distinct parts, the first being Allegro and the second Lento, with the two separated by a pause on a muted horn chord (and could therefore possibly be mistaken for two separate movements by the listener).

No. 3 *U-boat Alert* is interesting for the simultaneous interplay between duple and triple time rhythms. I'm very glad that Christopher Palmer included this extra movement in the suite.

Instrumentation

I would like to draw further attention to the brass writing, especially for the four horns and the tuba. In some major RVW orchestral works there is actually rather little quiet solo music for the horns (in *Job*, for example, I think there is only one brief but delightful example). In *Coastal Command*, however, there are poetic passages for one or more horns in several movements, of which I would like to single out the *Finale*, just before the return of what I call the motto theme, for the passage partially quoted in the article. It is a very telling two note fanfare, first fortissimo for all four horns, then quietly on solo horn, and finally echoed with the horn muted. I feel it is unfortunate the way the full orchestra breaks in after this - a longer pause might help at this point. (By the way, this full final section is not marked Grandioso in the score, though it might sound so for a few bars.) Of course, the very next year the composer would be using just two horns to great effect in his *Fifth Symphony*!

The energetic writing for tuba, admittedly often doubled by other bass instruments, puts one in mind of the *Fourth Symphony*. The *Finale*, for example, contains powerful rising augmented 4ths or diminished 5ths underpinning the Allegro section to considerable effect; and *U-boat Alert* includes several prominent tuba passages.

Finally on instrumentation, just to put the record straight, it should be mentioned that in movement 4, the string effects are for violas and cellos, not violins and cellos; and in movement 6, when the full strings take over the theme, a wonderful moment, they are actually doubled by the two clarinets (not perhaps easy to distinguish).

As Richard Young says, some works do not make a great impression to begin with, and this was true for me too with *Coastal Command*. I saw the film on TV some years ago but only now with repeated listening got he suite does it really strike home, and I hope my comments may provide a further guide to its enjoyment.

Robert Allan
Birmingham

Tea Caddy!

—bartone.
After the *Magnificat* Anne Hodges and Ian Caddy will be the soloists in Vaughan Williams' *A Tea Symphony*. It uses the poetry of Walt Whitman yet reveals influences of Elgar. It was Williams' first full-scale choral symphony.

(Submitted by Jonathan Pearson)

'... A Caress From A Sunnier World'

I have often wondered whether, in 1943, Jean Sibelius had been aware of the dedication to him - 'without permission' - of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Fifth Symphony*. It might not now be generally realised that RVW would not have found it that easy to seek the Finnish master's permission in any event since, at the behest of the Soviet Union, Britain had declared war on Finland in December 1941. (Having previously lost territory to the Russians in the Winter War of 1939/40, Finland had taken advantage of Nazi Germany's attack on the USSR in June 1941 not only to regain its lost lands - which it was subsequently forced to cede again at the end of World War 2 - but, more rashly, to establish a buffer zone on what had always been Russian soil. Inevitably, world opinion linked this action to the concurrent German assault on Leningrad [St. Petersburg], wholly negating the Finns' wish *not* to be seen as a full ally of the Third Reich.)

The answer to my musings has at last been provided by the long-awaited final part of the monumental study of Jean Sibelius by Erik Tawaststjerna, who was given unrestricted access to the composer's private papers by the Sibelius family. The English-language edition, translated by Robert Layton, was published in November 1997 (Faber & Faber, ISBN 0-571-19085-5).

In the last 20 years or so of his life, Sibelius confided precious little to his diaries, but from the late summer and autumn of 1943 there is a spasmodic series of bleak reflections on the unhappy position Finland then found itself in - essentially dependent on the goodwill of a co-belligerent with its own loathsome racial agenda. Sibelius evidently feared that the poison could take hold in his native land. And then, on 30 September, the dark introspective mood lifts for an instant:

Yesterday, a great moment - like a caress from a sunnier world. Heard the symphony that Vaughan Williams has dedicated to me. Listened to it from Stockholm under Malcolm Sargent.¹ Civilised and humane! Am deeply grateful. Williams gives me more than anyone can imagine. A tragic fate has befallen my country. We have to live

¹ Sargent was in neutral Sweden under the auspices of the British Council to conduct a series of concerts. He had flown there in one of the seven high-speed Mosquito bombers diverted to the British Overseas Airways Corporation from the RAF. Rudimentary accommodation for a single passenger was provided by a mattress in the erstwhile bomb bay.

with barbarism [the Nazis] otherwise we will go under [the Communists].

Charles Long
Leatherhead

Will we ever hear the music of John Ireland again?

I write to congratulate you on a superb Special Edition of the Society magazine. I am currently involved in the setting up of The J B Priestly Society, based in Bradford, and I am going to show this Edition to our prospective Journal Editor as a model to which we should aspire!

Michael Kennedy's article is of particular interest and admirably sums up the current state of play, so to speak, as regards RVW in particular and other 20th Century English composers by extension. (In 1997, as distinct from 1958, does Delius still edge out Walton for the 'Number 4' spot? I would suggest not.) As I survey both local and other concert programmes I wonder whether we shall ever see, for example, another performance of Ireland's music! As a devotee I cannot for the life of me understand why the *Piano Concerto*, *A London Overture* and *Concertino Pastorale*, to name only three of his works, are thought to be beyond the pale. Similarly, Bax, Bliss and Holst apart from *The Planets*. Thank goodness for the smaller record companies like Chandos and Naxos.

In this regional capital with its great musical tradition (and, *à propos* my article) the current 'International Concert Season' manages to find room for just one RVW performance: on 28 March Hickox and the BBC Philharmonic are doing the *Fifth Symphony* in an all-British programme which, praise be, includes a Delius work. (Other scores for the Season: Elgar 2, Britten 2, Walton 0). Over in Bradford, not a sniff of RVW (Elgar 3, Britten 1, Delius 1 (also on 28 March!), Walton 0).

I was naturally interested to read Terry Barfoot's somewhat qualified assessment of the Naxos recording of *Job* and *The Lark Ascending*, which I have, of course, purchased. The current issue of *Gramophone* contains a very favourable technical review of this recording, referring to it as 'a delight in every way: rounded, full, wide-ranging and beautifully detailed... everything is... marvellously coherent'. Performance-wise this may not be the best version (although I find *The Lark Ascending* magical) but at around £5.00 it is a tremendous bargain. If only one could hear *Job* live!

Michael Nelson
Leeds

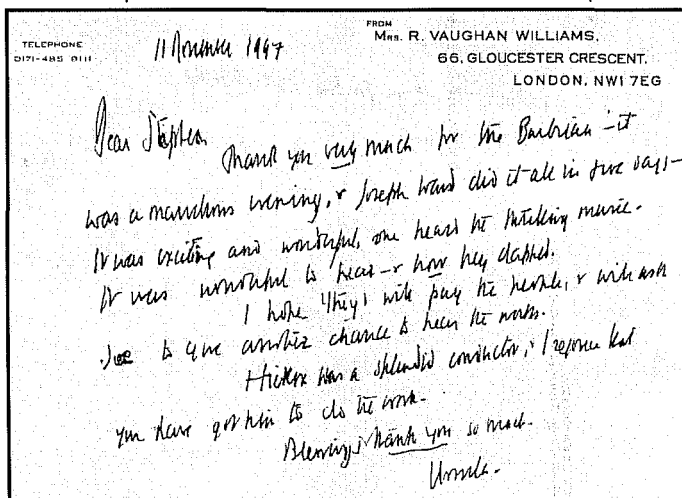
Brightness of the new Dorking Halls

I was sorry to read - in your 125th Anniversary edition - of Mr. A Milne's disappointed reaction to the refurbished Dorking Halls. It was my good fortune to be able to conduct the opening concerts - on the

three nights of the 1997 Leith Hill Musical Festival - and from a performer's point of view, things certainly feel a lot better than he describes. The new catering arrangements perhaps above all seem infinitely more comfortable than they used to be - as are the back-stage facilities. There is a new brightness to the hall itself which many of the festival-goers - performers and audience alike - generally seem to enjoy. And remembering that when the hall was built, it was RVW who insisted that the dance floor should be interior-sprung in order to make "jitterbugging" more comfortable, then I'm not sure he would have evoked the sentiments of Ebenezer Scrooge when reacting to the tremendous efforts made by those responsible for the current refurbishment. Many of those I've spoken to find the acoustics as good as they always were - perhaps they were luckier in their choice of seats. I do hope Mr. Milne will give the Halls another try - particularly during the 1998 Leith Hill Musical Festival on April 16th, 17th and 18th.

Brian Kay
Burford, Oxon.

Letter from Ursula



Letter to Mr. Kenyon

This letter from C. Seller is typical of many sent to BBC in 1997:

"I was delighted to learn from the BBC 'Music' Magazine that we are to have a Vaughan Williams feast in Radio 3's Composer of the Week series at the beginning of November. It would have been nice to have had such a celebration during the week of his birthday - October 12 - but we must be grateful for some celebration during this 125th anniversary year of the birth of one of our greatest composers.

Which brings me rather neatly to a grumble. The 'Proms' this year were, as ever-varied and exciting, with a mini Britten 'festival' and a large dose of Bartók. But only one Vaughan Williams - his *Sixth Symphony* - unless I have missed something! You said in your introduction to the BBC Music Magazine Proms programme that Brahms, Bartók and Britten 'all had their roots in popular culture, and were influenced by the folk music they heard around them'. One could argue that all composers were similarly influenced, and it has been said of RVW - at times in criticism - that the folk influence was too strong. All

admirers of RVW would not agree and would share the views of Alain Frogley in his fascinating article in the October Music Magazine.

I hope that you will be able to make amends for the absence of an RVW festival at this year's proms, by marking his death 40 years ago on 26 August 1958. I trust the entire Prom will be RVW! And why not make it *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of his later and arguably finest works - and somewhat neglected. I am sure The Royal Opera would be glad to perform it as they are on November 3rd at the Barbican, and on November 30th at Symphony Hall, Birmingham under Richard Hickox. Perhaps you already know about these and are recording for subsequent broadcast.

Above all, can we please have much more Vaughan Williams at next year's 'Proms' and at every Prom season in future."

Christopher G Seller
Leeds

... and his reply

Dear Mr. Seller

Thank you for your letter of 21 September. I am sorry you feel Vaughan Williams was under-represented in this year's Proms Season. As I'm sure you can imagine, there is a difficult balance to strike when it comes to choosing repertoire for the Proms, and the final results are dependent on a combination of orchestras, conductors and soloists involved. However, I am pleased to be able to tell you that in addition to the forthcoming *Composer of the Week* series, Vaughan Williams is also featured predominantly in our September-December *Sounding the Century* series of concerts on Radio 3. I enclose a brochure for your interest.

Thank you again for taking the trouble to write.

Yours sincerely
Nicholas Kenyon

Ella Mary Leather and gypsy children

I would just like to say thank you to Simona Packenham and to you for her article in the June RVW Journal about Vaughan Williams and Ella Mary Leather. I was very struck by the whole article, the way the whole compelling story was set out, and especially by what Simona wrote about the King's Pyon Choir singing at our Tribute to Ella. There is just one small correction. At the Gypsy Wedding on the Saturday in Weobley Church which Ursula Vaughan Williams attended, I did not seek to banish the gypsy children. I simply announced to their parents that if any children were getting restless and they would like to use a side room in the church for part of the wedding, they would be very welcome to do so. I do believe that weddings belong to children just as much as anyone else, and I was delighted to see so many there throughout. I have never found them a problem!

Rev'd Richard Birt
Weobley

Record Reviews



Sir John in Love

Raimund Herinx, Felicity Palmer, Elizabeth Bainbridge, Robert Lloyd, Gerald English and others. New Philharmonia Orchestra Meredith Davies
CMS 5 66123 2 EMI Mid Price. 2 CDs

Vaughan Williams's operas have for long been less well regarded than the symphonies and other major works. Ursula Vaughan Williams in her biography noted that throughout 'his life and through the times of his greatest success as a writer of symphonies Ralph longed for his operas to be taken more seriously and to be given professional performances. Had they been, he might well have written more for the stage, which had always fascinated him.'

The importance of the operas in English musical life can be gauged by the fact that four of them received their first performances in student productions - only *The Pilgrim's Progress* was given a professional première (at the time this was deemed to be a failure!) - and though these were largely successful they tended to limit their appeal. *Sir John in Love* therefore had to wait seventeen years after its performance in 1929 for a professional production, at Sadler's Wells. Student performances, however good, gave the erroneous impression that the operas were only suitable for amateurs.

Thus, with this background the operas have had to make their way slowly in the recording studio - yet now only *The Poisoned Kiss* awaits a complete recording - for of late they are now being more favourably considered (as was evident by the recent success of *The Vision of Albion* festival) and therefore the timely reissue on CD of *Sir John in Love* is to be greatly applauded.

The opera is a rich, lyrical setting of a libretto largely based on Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a play which had been soaking in RVW's mind since at least 1913 when he had worked at Stratford-on-Avon with the Benson company and came to fruition in 1928 when the work was completed.

Vaughan Williams knew that his work would be compared to Verdi's opera (and those of Nicolai and Holst) but went ahead in his own way as he did not consider that Verdi's work had exhausted 'all the possibilities of Shakespeare's genius'. His opera is therefore a very different affair from the Italian's and more faithful to the play in its presentation of plot and character.

As Michael Kennedy writes in his excellent notes for the CDs: 'It is pointless to listen to Vaughan Williams with Verdi in mind, and *vice versa*'. It is good that we can enjoy *both* works.

Falstaff's portrait is a rounded one - he is not simply comic nor the tragic figure of Elgar's Symphonic Study - he has warmth and tenderness, a genial romantic figure even, so that the concept of his being 'in love' is believable. Sir John is not always the centre of attention and as Shakespeare wrote of a 'community' so VW pays attention to the incidental characters - the lovers Anne Page and Fenton, Dr. Caius and Sir Hugh Evans, Ford and Slender - and develops them so that we become interested in them.

For Vaughan Williams, tune - melody - mattered more than anything else in his music and this work is filled with a ravishing array: 'Weep eyes, break heart' for Anne Page, 'Have you seen but a bright lily grow' for Fenton; 'Vrai dieu d'amours, comfortez moy' for Dr. Caius and 'Sigh no more ladies' for Mrs. Quickly; 'O that joy so soon should waste!' Falstaff's splendid love song in Act II, 'See the chariot at hand here of love' for chorus and 'Alas my love, you do me wrong' sung by Mrs. Ford to the tune of *Greensleeves*.

These are just some of the splendid melodies which adorn this high spirited and wholly delightful work. For it was VW's intention to fit the 'wonderful comedy with... not unpleasant music' and in this he succeeded magnificently for the music darts and bubbles, swells and glides in a constant, rich, glowing stream of invention - the tunes stay embedded in the mind.

As is to be expected, traditional folk tunes are appropriately and skilfully interwoven into the texture and though they occupy a small part of the score they embellish it as they are naturally integrated with VW's own spontaneous style.

Does this recording do justice to the composer's intentions? Most certainly, yes! The singing cast form a strong team led by Raimund Herinx as a warm passionate Falstaff, Robert Lloyd as an impressive and powerful Ford and Gerald English as a memorable Dr. Caius with his exaggerated French accent. Helen Watts shines as Mrs. Quickly as do Felicity Palmer and Elizabeth Bainbridge as Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford. The wives who are pursued by Sir John. Their reading of Falstaff's letter in Act II is delightful as is the singing of the waltz setting of 'Sigh no more, ladies'. Robert Tear and Wendy Eathorne as Fenton and Anne Page convey the tenderness of their love and John Noble with Rowland Jones make a fine contribution as Page and Sir Hugh Evans. In fact, the singing throughout is of a very high standard as is that of the

John Alldis choir who comprise the chorus.

What is paramount is the sheer sense of enjoyment which all the cast vividly convey, none more so than the conductor Meredith Davies who gives a brisk, rhythmical and loving interpretation, paying careful attention not only to the crisp cross-rhythms but also to the rapt, radiant sections of the score which point the way to the *Serenade to Music* and the *Fifth Symphony* and which are an integral part of Vaughan Williams's best music.

The CD reissue of the 1974 recording is exceptionally bright and clear with a sparkling sound - the offstage effects and movements on and off stage are finely done and add to the spacious atmosphere of this recording. The engineers have achieved an excellent natural balance between soloists and orchestra.

Ursula Vaughan Williams has stated that RVW 'wrote it for his own enjoyment.' He achieved what he set out to do. The more I have listened to this rich, splendid score the more I am convinced that this is indeed a masterpiece. Written at the same time as *Flos Campi* and *Sancta Civitas* with *Job* and the *Piano Concerto* soon to follow, with the *Fourth Symphony* on the horizon, Vaughan Williams was at the peak of his powers and this is reflected in all aspects of this masterly stage work.

As must be clear from the above I cannot recommend this set too highly and if you know this opera you will not hesitate to purchase these CDs. If unknown to you, buy them - the Society was instrumental in prompting this reissue - for you will not be disappointed. Once in the bloodstream, this is a work to cherish!

K D Mitchell
Chislehurst

Fine EMI re-issue

The Wasps - Overture, Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis, Oboe Concerto in A minor, Symphony No. 4 in F minor.

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra,
 Royal Philharmonic Orchestra,
 Constantin Silvestri: Paavo Berglund
EMI Mid-Price CDM 5 66539 2

Constantin Silvestri's bustling, brisk performance of *The Wasps Overture*, although at times a little scrambled, provides an exhilarating opening to this fine CD of re-issues from EMI's store. This is followed by his resplendent, rich account of the *Tallis Fantasia* which captures both its sombre, brooding atmosphere and its incandescent string writing. The sinewy central climax is passionately compelling and the highly charged atmosphere of the work is superbly caught in the spacious acoustic of Winchester Cathedral which is entirely right for this work of ecstatic, grave beauty. This powerful and thoughtful interpretation

should not be missed.

The mood is lightened by John Williams's beautiful performance of the delightful *Oboe Concerto* - it is not such a minor work as some commentators have considered - and the instrument's best qualities are highlighted here.

The final work is Paavo Berglund's urgent account of the *Fourth Symphony*. Something of the tenor of his performance can be understood from his tempo for the crucial first movement, for he is faster even than the composer in his astounding 1937 recording - 7.55 compared to 8.02 for RVW. Yet the movement, even at this pace does not sound overcharged but evolves naturally - you sense that he is not concerned with the labels which were once attached to this music, being an alleged portrayal of 'the State of Europe' in the Thirties - but sees it, correctly, in purely musical terms. The opening *allegro* is full of propulsive power which only fades at the end in preparation for the slow movement and here, Berglund fully reveals its Sibelian textures and fragmented themes. The sharp, brittle rhythms of the *Scherzo* are clearly defined and deftly played with élan and precision. In the spirited finale, again Berglund's tempi almost match the composer's - 7.45 compared to 7.48 for RVW - and this provides a splendid, clinching conclusion to the piece. The RPO play brilliantly and this performance is indeed a *tour de force*. This disc is strongly recommended and I cannot praise too highly this scintillating performance of the symphony.

K D Mitchell
Chislehurst

A Major Disappointment

Vaughan Williams: Sinfonia Antartica (No. 7), A Pastoral Symphony (No.3)
Patricia Rozario (sop) BBC Symphony Orchestra/Chorus Andrew Davis. Teldec 0603 13139 2 (77' 27" full price)

This CD concludes Andrew Davis's survey of VW's Symphonies and selected Orchestral works. I found it a great disappointment and could not recommend the interpretation of either of these symphonies to members. Very ponderous opening bars of *Antartica* set the tone for what I would consider a performance lacking preparation of, or indeed, understanding of this powerful work. Only the 3rd, *Landscape* movement has any of the terrifying power of say Boult and Haitink, the rest is lacklustre.

The *Pastoral Symphony* fares no better. I was unmoved by a performance that lacked mystery and a sense of flow of the musical themes one in to another and onwards. For example the trumpet cadenza in the 2nd movement is a disaster, the soloist is far too distant and indistinct and so the emotional heart of this music, the composer's reaction

to the horrors of the Great War is totally missed. This is by far and away the worst rendition of this most poignant music I have heard, just compare it with the way this passage is played in the Previn, Handley or two Boult recordings. The symphony is concluded with very matter of fact playing, suggesting that Davis was rounding off this cycle without much insight into the music and as quickly as possible so as to complete a tight recording schedule. What a shame, since it started so well with an excellent interpretation of the 6th.

Robin Barber
Ilminster

Early one Morning

Linden Lea, Loch Lomond and Greensleeves, together with folk-songs, spirituals and airs.

The Choir of New College, Oxford, Edward Higginbottom. Erato 0630 19965 2 (full price)

What a delightful CD! Every song is a winner, from the beautiful, wordless *Londonderry Air* to the marvellous Grainger setting of *Brigg Fair* and the timeless spirituals *Steal away* and *Swing low, sweet chariot*. What is it that is so moving about hearing the American song *Shenandoah*? To me, it conjures up simpler values in a world grown complex, straightforward virtues in a world of politics and ambition. The use of trebles and altos lends a pure quality to the glorious melodies - just listen to *The Ash Grove* or *My love is like a red, red rose*.

And what of the Vaughan Williams? This is not the first recording of the choral version of *Linden Lea*, but certainly the best. *Loch Lomond* and *Greensleeves* are equally memorable. Strongly recommended.

Stephen Connock
Colchester

MUSIC YOU MIGHT LIKE

Gustav Holst
Seven Partsongs for Female voices and strings, H 159 (Op. 43 No. 1)

This work is a setting of Robert Bridges' words whose elusive poems appealed to Holst, a close friend of the poet and who often set Bridges' texts. These poems immediately struck the composer who wrote, 'I did the first of the Bridges' poems the moment I caught sight of the words. Since when I've been wondering what they mean'.

He composed *Assemble, all ye maidens* and *Love on my heart from heaven fell* in 1925 completing the remainder of the set the following year. After finishing two more settings they were given a trial run at St. Paul's Girls' School in the summer of 1926. Host reported to Bridges that he had 'written them at odd moments and it has been difficult to decide the order.' Two final songs were written in the autumn.

The first public performance of *Assemble all ye maidens* took place on 24 May 1927 with the Bach Choir conducted by Vaughan Williams. One critic found it to be a 'very beautiful and distinguished example of Holst's latter style' and another that it 'conjures up a vision of a group of Burne-Jones maidens...'

In July, Holst took some of his singers and players from St. Paul's to Oxford so that Bridges could hear the entire set. Afterwards, Bridges wrote to Holst: 'I did not understand any piece well on the first hearing, but liked it at second hearing and came in the end to full pleasure... Our gratitude is enormous... I really liked them very much: and want to hear them again.'

The first partsong, *Say who is this?* is a quiet, brooding setting about a sinister, mysterious visitor, which never rises above *piano* and is followed by the brisker *O Love, I complain* written in a neo-classical style. Warmth and emotion are to the fore in *Angel spirits of sleep* after which comes the delightful, deceptively simple round *When first we met. Sorrow and Joy* an 'allegretto' contains the Holstian fingerprints of an ostinato accompaniment and a 7/4 time signature, which leads to the glorious, ethereal setting of *Love on my heart from heaven fell* - it is a perfect jewel.

The final part-song is the most extended, wonderful setting of *Assemble, all ye maidens* being an 'Elegy on a lady whom grief for the death of her betrothed killed'. The atmosphere of death is evoked at the start by a lone soprano with a cold E pedal in the violins and as the voices enter, the music becomes more passionate as the key moves to A flat. As the lady is borne away Holst provides suitable processional music to be followed by another stanza for solo soprano. The conclusion builds to noble, tragic farewell as the lady is 'oared across to her new home'. This is one of Holst's greatest settings and fittingly concludes this neglected masterpiece.

There is a fine recording by the Holst Singers, the Holst Orchestra and Hilary Davan Wetton on Hyperion CDA66329 with other choral music by Holst. Do seek it out.

K D Mitchell
Chislehurst

Mr. Von and Dr. Vaughan

by Michael Goatcher

'I believe very strongly that we are largely the result of our surroundings and that we never do anything alone. Everything that is worth doing is the result of several minds playing on each other'¹

The county of Essex has played a significant role in the life and work of both Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst. VW heard his first folk song in 1903 at Ingrave and Holst discovered Thaxted during a walking tour at the end of 1913.

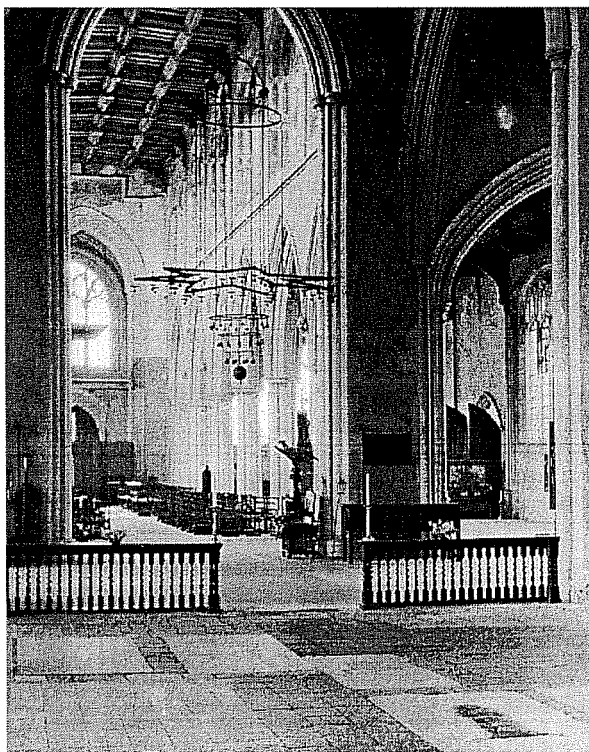
In 1914 Holst and his family moved to a cottage at Monk Street 1½ miles south of Thaxted where he found the necessary peace and quiet to begin writing *The Planets*. *Mars* was written there and at least some of *Venus*. That same summer was immortalised in the novel *Mr Britling sees it through*² by H G Wells who was then living only 3 miles away across the fields at Little Easton.

After the outbreak of World War One in August 1914, VW and Holst both volunteered for military service. Holst was rejected because of his neuritis and poor eyesight. VW joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. In 1915 this brought him into Holst's part of the country when in May he was stationed at Audley End near Saffron Walden and later, until early 1916, at Bishops Stortford. Both places were within 10 miles of Thaxted. It is known from Ursula Vaughan Williams's indispensable biography that VW found time to play Bach on the organ of Saffron Walden church. It seems most improbable that he did not manage to see Holst at Thaxted. Possibly the first opportunity was 26th June 1915.

One of the many changes to the form of worship at St. John the Baptist, Our Lady and St. Lawrence church, Conrad Noel had made after he became vicar in 1910 was to introduce a 'Feast of Faith' or Midsummer Festival on or near 24th June, the Feast Day of St. John. Also, after the outbreak of war,

he had made a shrine in the south isle of the church with the flags of all the allied nations arranged round a picture of St. George fighting the dragon. During the 1915 Festival, soldiers from Saffron Walden carried these flags as part of the church procession through the streets of Thaxted. Could one of them have been VW? Or at least he may have come as a spectator, especially if there was a chance to see Holst.

After the Festival, Noel replaced the flags in the church and later added a red flag to symbolise the unity of nations, with the



Interior of Thaxted Church

inscription 'He has made of one blood all nations'. This was later seen to represent bolshevism by Noel's detractors and what became known as 'The Battle of the Flags' ensued. Writing about this in 1939, Noel made his intentions very clear:

'And if Variety in Unity, the rich harmony of Being, be indeed our source, it is no dull world of uniformity that we shall be building, it is most accurately called the International, although internationalists often ignore the word of their own coining. In the New World Order then, there will be an infinite variety of types, of persons, of families, of nations - no longer divided and disharmonious, but expressing themselves through their different

instruments in the great orchestra of God's will.'³

It is interesting to compare this with VW writing in 1942:

'I believe that political internationalism is not only compatible with cultural patriotism but that one is an essential concomitant of the other. When the united states of Europe becomes a fact, each nation must have something to bring to the common stock of good. What we have to offer must derive essentially from our own life; it must not be a bad imitation of what other nations already do better.'⁴

This might be an example of great minds thinking alike, but in a broadcast, VW sounds even closer to Noel:

'Variety leading to unity, this must be our watchword, we all wish for unity but we shall not achieve it by emasculated cosmopolitanism. When the union of nations is complete we must be prepared to offer to the common fund that which we alone can give.'⁵

At this distance in time it is not possible to find out for certain whether VW attended the festival. What is known is that he managed a visit in late 1915. The late Arthur Caton of Thaxted could recall that when he was a boy and pumped the church organ for Holst he remembered VW walking round looking at the interior of the church, while Holst was taking a choir practice. At one point, Holst stopped and called VW over to look at the score - after some discussion Holst continued. This must have been in the autumn/winter of 1915 as VW was wearing a long leather motoring coat which buttoned up to the neck - this may have been a very short visit as transport was limited. Conrad Noel was there too and delighted in calling them 'Mr. Von and Dr. Vaughan'. (Holst was Von Holst until 1918).

Conrad Noel would have been delighted to see the musical editor of the *English Hymnal* in his church. It is possible they had met as Noel knew both Percy Dearmer and Cecil Sharp. It was Sharp along with Canon Scott Holland who suggested VW to Dearmer as editor. Noel had been Dearmer's assistant curate at St. Mary's, Primrose Hill in London from 1904 to 1909, where he developed many of his ideas regarding church ritual and church decoration, which he put into practice when he arrived at

¹ From letter No 44, 19/7/1917, in *Gustav Holst, Letters to W G Whittaker*. Edited by M Short, Glasgow University Press, 1974. p. 27.

² Herbert Howells thought highly of this book. See C Palmer: *Herbert Howells: A Celebration*. Thames Publishing, 1996. p. 67.

³ C Noel: *Jesus the Heretic*, Religious Book Club, London, 1940. p. 179.

⁴ R Vaughan Williams: *National Music and other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1963. p. 155.

⁵ Radio broadcast. No date known.

Thaxted. Noel also knew Cecil Sharp when he was director of the Hampstead Conservatoire from 1896 to 1905. He invited Noel to lecture on Ibsen and Shakespeare.

The *English Hymnal* was introduced into services at Thaxted when Noel arrived in 1910. VW would have been surprised if he had gone into Walter White's shop opposite the church for some pipe tobacco to see copies of it for sale along with Goss china and picture post cards. It is difficult now to imagine that the *English Hymnal* could have been the subject of much controversy. Some Bishops took exception to it introducing 'direct invocation' of the Saints into public worship. Presumably, *For All The Saints* came into that category. But Noel did not think Dearmer had been radical enough and criticised him because he "bowdlerized Blake's poem" *Jerusalem* by altering 'These dark satanic mills' to 'Those'. He said Dearmer 'had listened to the clamour of manufacturers who wanted to whitewash the present industrial system.'⁶

When Holst had settled in the parish, Noel had hoped that he would help with the music in the church. One Whitsunday (probably 1915) Holst and his family had come to church. After the service, Holst spoke to Noel about the music 'he did not want to push in in any way, but that it was a pity that the singers, who were chanting such good music, were in danger of losing their voices through wont of training. Would I let him help me with the choir?'⁷

George Chambers, Noel's first curate at Thaxted from 1910 to 1912, had taught the choir plainsong. During this time he also developed his life-long interest in folksong and dance. In 1911, assisted by Clive Carey, he collected many songs and dances in the Thaxted area. It was for his book *Folksong - Plainsong. A Study in Musical Origins* that VW wrote the preface for in 1955. Chambers was also present at the 1915 Festival.

Two other people present at the Festival were the actor Franklyn Dyall and Dodie Smith, a friend of Noel's daughter Barbara. Franklyn Dyall lived in Thaxted and was a keen supporter of Noel. He would often read the lesson at services. It was said by Noel that people would leave the pubs and come in to church just to hear his beautiful voice. His son Valentine (1908-1985) became an actor and in 1945 was the speaker in the BBC performance of VW's *Thanksgiving for Victory*.⁸

Barbara Noel met Dodie Smith at the (not

yet Royal) Academy of Dramatic Art. After leaving St. Paul's Girls' School where Holst had been her music teacher, Dodie Smith had trained for a career on the stage, but gave up acting for writing. She had a number of very successful plays staged in the 1930s and went on to become a novelist. Her first novel *I Capture the Castle* was VW's book of the year in 1949, when invited to make his choice by the *Sunday Times*, to the author's great delight.⁹

The Holsts' landlord at Monk Street was S. L. Bensusan (1872-1958), who later became well known for his short stories in Essex dialect. These were admired by Thomas Hardy and others. Bensusan began his career in journalism and was at one time music critic for the *Illustrated London News*, *The Sketch* and *Vanity Fair*, he was then living at nearby Duton Hill. He and his wife were members of Lady Warwick's circle of literary and theatrical friends who lived in the district.

Bensusan's short stories, written in Essex dialect were usually set in the Essex coastal marshland area and are peopled with characters who have a great suspicion of foreigners. That is to say anyone from the neighbouring counties 'the shires', or worse still, London! In 1914, he was asked to write an Essex dialect play to be performed in Lady Warwick's Barn Theatre at Little Easton. He used his usual short story characters and setting and the play was called *The Furriner* (The Foreigner). It was performed in June 1914. Within a few months life was to imitate art.

After the outbreak of World War One, Holst, or Von Holst as he was then, became involved in something like the plot of a Bensusan story. His name provoked great suspicion and he was often referred to as 'the German'. While out for a walk near his home he stopped to talk to some women who were drawing water from a well at the nearby hamlet of Holders Green. He asked them how deep it was and if it was the only one in the area, he also referred to some maps and sketches he had with him. These innocent questions were viewed with great suspicion and eventually someone from another village reported the matter to the police. Enquiries were made but the police could find nothing against him. In their report, he was described as 'a German hymn writer who had removed to the country for the sake of his health'. Eventually, the Dean of Birmingham was asked to vouch for him, and there the matter rested. All this caused by a question from the ever practical Holst who had no doubt just become aware of the unreliability of rural water supplies, as his own home only had a pump.

No doubt Conrad Noel and S. L. Bensusan would have helped Holst see the funny side of it. Noel too had his critics for being high church and a socialist, as recalled in Noel's autobiography. Holst had asked a neighbouring farmer if he could rent some ground for a tennis court for his family and friends to use. He was met with the stern refusal 'Think I'm going ter see Beelzebub and the Pope o' Rome playing lawn tennis on my ground on the Sabbath? No fear!'¹⁰

At this point, it is worth noting that during the period 1908-1920 Holst was thinking about his opera *The Perfect Fool*. It is tempting to imagine that he had the episode at the well in mind when he was writing the libretto. There is a scene where 3 women are drawing water from a well and singing a round 'water clear, water pure...', but it may just be coincidence as wells were still in common use then.

In the printed score of *The Perfect Fool*, there is a note by the librettist/composer saying 'The author asks that the spirit of high comedy shall be maintained throughout.'¹¹ Why did VW feel unable to show Holst his opera *The Poisoned Kiss*, saying he would not have understood his wanting to write a comic opera?

In May 1918 Holst must have written to VW, who was still in France, to tell him about the third Whitsuntide Festival in Thaxted church. Holst's *This have I done for my true love* and *Diverus and Lazarus* had received their first performances there. He must also have told him that he was hoping to get some sort of work with the YMCA abroad, which would mean leaving Morley College and Thaxted. In his reply, VW said 'it would be interesting to see if you have established a tradition and if it will carry on without you.'¹²

It did, because of another regular visitor to Thaxted during World War One, a young London bank clerk called Jack Putterill (1892-1980). He too had discovered Thaxted on a walking holiday and returned most weekends. In his autobiography he recalls meeting Holst who was:

'playing the organ in Thaxted church. He stopped playing, and leaning over the back of the organ he asked me my name, did I sing, what instruments did I play and where did I live?

When I told him I lived in London at Bedford Park and that I worked in the head office of the Midland Bank in Threadneedle Street he asked whether I
(continued overleaf)

⁶ Conrad Noel: *An Autobiography*, edited by Sidney Dark, J M Dent, London, 1945, p57.

⁷ Conrad Noel, *Autobiog.*, p. 101.

⁸ Issued on CD, Intaglio INC7571 (no longer available)

⁹ For summary of correspondence see V. Groves *Dear Dodie*, Chatto and Windus, 1996, p.187-189.

¹⁰ C Noel, *Autobiog.* p.103.

¹¹ Note in *The Perfect Fool* score, Novello & Co. 1923.

¹² Ed. U Vaughan Williams and I Holst: *Heirs and Rebels*, OUP, 1959, p.46.



Thaxted, c.1914

(continued from previous page)

knew the Waterloo Road and Morley College and could I be there the next evening for his orchestra.

I not only found Morley College the next evening but ended up in the orchestra, in his choir, and in his harmony and composition class as well. It was altogether a very thrilling musical experience. In fact we learned all this and instruments besides for about ten shillings a term!¹³

Jack Putterill took part in the Whitsuntide Festivals of 1916 and 1917 where the *Missa Brevis* of Bach, *Come Holy Ghost* by Vittoria and Holst's arrangement of the 3 part Byrd *Mass*, of which Holst was particularly fond, were performed.

'Gustav Holst was indeed a unique person. Completely dedicated to his music, he was not interested in small talk. He said he did not want to talk about music but to do it. He was always more interested in what people sang or played.

After the choir practices at Morley he would usually concern himself how people would get home and he would often see them on the right bus stop. He would himself go home via the Underground from Waterloo changing at Charing Cross for Baron's Court.

He always carried a large brown leather music case from which he might produce a new composition - or maybe a banana.

We, his pupils, heard very little about his latest compositions. He seldom talked about himself and said no-one should have their own music played unless it was specially asked for. With the choir we did do some of his own

music - the setting of the *Rig Veda* - but we had specially asked for it!

He was the most humble artist one could ever meet and the greatest teacher, always giving every encouragement, especially when the exercise submitted was quite dreadful.

He seldom talked about his own music and when *The Planets* appeared, we were as surprised as others.¹⁴

Holst's lasting influence on the music in Thaxted church was also recalled:

'He made several special settings for the choir at Thaxted which in fact are



Holst's home in Thaxted from 1917 to 1925.
The blue plaque is on the wall of his music room.

still sung. He had a rare gift of choice and easy settings of Tudor music - The *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* of Byrd, the Palestrina setting of the *Jerusalem* of Tenebrae and part of the *Three Part Mass* of Byrd, which is still sung. He had a real passion for Purcell, loved

Bach and Haydn as well as the madrigals of Weelkes and Gibbons.

Holst became a great friend of Conrad Noel and obviously fell in love with the church and the lovely old organ which he called 'his organ'.¹⁵

In 1920 Jack Putterill was ordained in Gloucester Cathedral and became Curate at Coleford in the Forest of Dean, where he was able to continue music making when he met:

'...Mr. Pope who lived in the centre of the little town. He was a skilled musician and violinist and had an orchestra in Coleford. He and I struck up a partnership. I formed a choir of all denominations and we combined forces to give concerts. Ben Pope did not go to church but we gave a concert in church which the Vicar greatly appreciated. I was able to introduce Ben Pope to Gustav Holst at Hereford Three Choirs Festival (8 September 1921) where we went to hear him conduct his *Hymn of Jesus* in the Cathedral. Holst was very taken with Ben and later sent him a lot of music.'¹⁶

In 1921 Jack Putterill returned to Thaxted to marry Conrad and Miriam Noel's daughter, Barbara. For a time, they returned to Coleford before moving on to Abertillery and Coventry. In 1925 they returned to Thaxted when Jack Putterill was appointed

Conrad Noel's Curate. Soon after settling in Thaxted he started to form a small string orchestra to augment the flourishing church choir. He started teaching them works by Bach, Purcell and Laws. The orchestra later gained some brass and woodwind players

¹³ J Putterill: *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*. Precision Press, Marlow, 1977. p.20.

¹⁴ J Putterill: *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*. Precision Press, Marlow, 1977. p.21.

¹⁵ J Putterill: *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*. Precision Press, Marlow, 1977. p.22.

¹⁶ J Putterill: *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*. Precision Press, Marlow, 1977. p.29.

and timpani. He also taught the choir madrigals by Morley, Weelkes, Gibbons and Ford. They were then able to give frequent concerts in the church which included music by Tallis, Palestrina and Byrd.

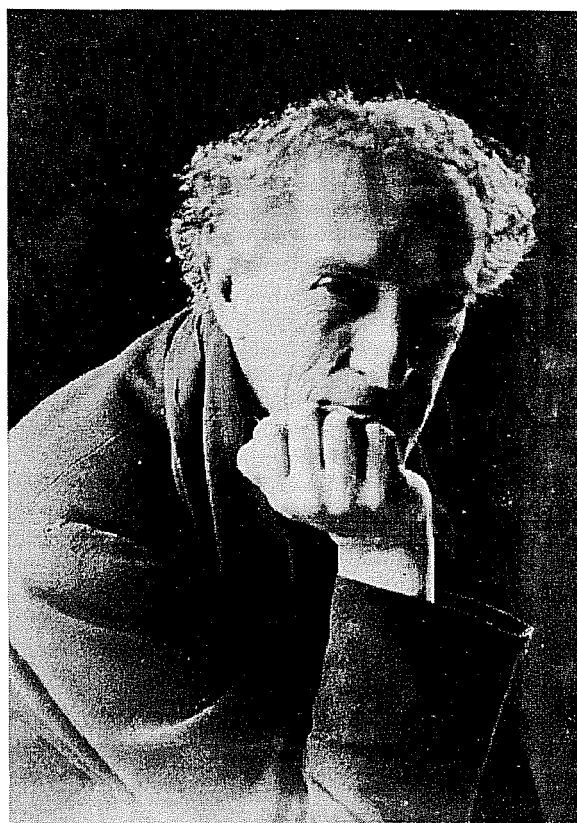
By this time the Holst home was at nearby Little Easton, but Holst would often return to play the organ at services, especially at Christmas. After Holst's death in 1934 he would always include a performance at Whitsun of *Our Churchbells at Thaxted* one of the *Three Festival Choruses*, Op. 36 written in 1916, the words by Clifford Bax are set to the tune *St. Denio*. Jack Putterill himself took part in the first performance at the 1917 Whitsuntide Festival. VW also used the tune in the second movement of his *Household Music*. These performances would end with the tune being rung on the church bells. After 1950, there was a further Holst connection when four of the church bells were recast. The 4th bell, now named 'The Fellowship Bell' carries the inscription 'I ring for the general dance'.

In 1937 Jack Putterill was appointed vicar of St. Andrew's, Plaistow. While living in London he was able to continue his interest in folk dance and song, which had begun in Thaxted. He became a member of the Executive Committee of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

'I found the committee very interesting especially as one of the members was none other than Dr. Vaughan Williams, who was often there. He was deeply concerned with all folk music and he took a lively interest in the dancing.

be more highly regarded than many of the speeches of Winston Churchill. I think this rather shocked some of the other members but it was his way of emphasising the great value of current documents and that we should be very careful what we threw away.'¹⁷

When Conrad Noel died in 1942, Jack Putterill was appointed vicar of Thaxted in order to continue the tradition of preaching the 'Social Gospel'. The musical tradition also continued. By the 1950s, larger concerts were being given in the church. The first to come was the London Philharmonic Orchestra, followed by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the Hallé Orchestra have also performed in the church and so have Yehudi Menuhin and Sviatoslav Richter. In 1963 Sir Adrian Boult made another visit, where in the company of Holst's widow Isobel, daughter Imogen and Ursula Vaughan Williams he unveiled a blue plaque on the wall of the music room of the Holst's former home in Thaxted.



REV. CONRAD NOEL, VICAR OF THAXTED.

Festival was started by Michael Snow with Sir Robert Mayer as President of the Thaxted Festival Association. In 1984 a series of concerts were given to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Holst's death. There was also a concert to commemorate the life and work of Imogen Holst, who died in the spring of that year; several of her works were performed at that concert.

Since 1987 the Festival has been run by The Thaxted Festival Foundation which has continued to run the annual season of concerts during June and July. In 1995 VW's *The Lark Ascending* was performed in Thaxted church as part of the Festival in a concert given by the Royal College of Music Symphony Orchestra. This work was also performed in Saffron Walden parish church in a concert given by the Saffron Walden Choral Society and the Walden Sinfonia, the main work was *Hymnus Paradisi* by Herbert Howells. The performances unconsciously commemorating the eightieth anniversary of VW's visits to both churches.

In Thaxted church the music banner made for the 1917 Whitsuntide Festival has now witnessed 80 years of music making and still proclaims Holst's choice of J S Bach's words 'the aim of music is the Glory of God and pleasant recreation'.



North Transept and St. Joan Shrine, Parish Church, Thaxted

His contributions were always to the point and full of interest. I remember on one occasion when we were discussing whether some papers should be destroyed, he said he was sure that in fifty years time these papers would

Jack Putterill retired as vicar of Thaxted in 1973, but the tradition of concerts in the church has continued. In 1980 the Thaxted

¹⁷ J Putterill: *Thaxted Quest for Social Justice*. Precision Press, Marlow, 1977, p.40.

Michael Goatcher
Thaxted

Concert Reviews

Vaughan Williams in perspective

This title was given to the Victorian College of the Arts' contribution to RVW's 125th year - a series of three concerts given by the Voice Dept. which presented a number of RVW's works for solo voice and voice plus one instrument. The concerts were arranged by Head of Voice, Brian Hansford and featured 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate singers and instrumentalists. All concerts were given within the VCA School of Music but were open to the public.

The first concert (22 April) was enhanced by a display mounted by John Waterhouse, Australian Regional Co-ordinator of the Society. (John's display also graced the Melbourne Concert Hall during the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's presentation of the *London Symphony*). Students and members of the public were able to view photographs and memorabilia of RVW's life and works.

In this first concert, baritone Adrian Dwyer sang *The House of Life*, baritone Andrew Bingham sang *Watchful's Song* from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and mezzo Teresa Fanning sang the *Four Last Songs*. (All accompaniments were played by the School's resident accompanist Angela Dhar).

The second concert (20 May) featured baritone Andrew Jones with *Songs of Travel*, soprano Jodie Curran singing *The Water Mill* and *The Bird's Song* (also from *Pilgrim*), and mezzo Simone Spring with three songs: *Linden Lea*, *The Sky above the Roof* and *The Call*.

The final in the series (16 Sept.) presented the works for voice and one instrument. The *Ten Blake Songs for Voice and Oboe* was split between soprano Lisa Robinson and baritone Adrian Dwyer, with oboists Sam Sellens and Nadia Johnson. Andrew Bingham and Rachel Kim (violin) performed *Two English Folksongs*; while Lisa-Marie Charalambous (soprano) and Melissa Hughes (clarinet) performed *Three Vocalises*. The finale was provided by Danielle Calder (soprano) and Marianne Rothschild (violin) who performed the rarely-heard *Along the Field*, RVW's setting of 8 Housman poems.

For many of these students it was their first contact with the music of RVW and their performances were very creditable. I know from speaking to some of them that they had to grapple with an idiom unfamiliar to them and work on the rhythmic and harmonic challenges that the songs threw up. However, none shirked the task and perhaps the most gratifying result of all was that nearly all of them carried their RVW pieces forward and re-performed them in their final recitals during October-November.

It is probably the best proof of all that a

younger audience is ready to discover RVW, as students choose their solo recital material with great care. The series as a whole went down very well with performers and audiences alike and Brian Hansford (himself a keen RVW fan) is to be thanked for programming it.

Paul Sarcich
Melbourne, Australia

'RVW Rarity'

Concert - British Music Information Centre - London 6th November 1997

In the same week as Richard Hickox celebrated a mighty triumph with *The Pilgrim's Progress* at the Barbican, a small-scale work was given at the British Music Information Centre in Stratford Place, London.

Catherine Langdale, a fine singer, sung two movements from RVW's *Three Vocalises for Soprano and B^b Clarinet*. She was ably accompanied by Lone Widahl Madsen.

They performed the *Scherzo* and the *Quasi Menuetto* which are the last two movements of a three movement work. The *Prelude* was not sung. The work was written in 1958 for the great singer Margaret Ritchie. They were part of the composer's swan-song, being written during the final year of his life. It was first performed, after the composer's death, by Margaret Ritchie and Keith Puddy in Manchester on 8th October 1958 and was published in 1960.

The recital at the British Music Information Centre was the first time I had heard this work and I could not fail to notice the similarities to the last movement of the *Pastoral Symphony*. Having been 'brought up' on the Boulton/London Philharmonic recording of this moving work, complete with Miss Ritchie in the last movement, it was wonderful to hear reminiscences of that recording in Miss Langdale's performance.

There have, of course, been a number of 'vocalises' written for soprano and piano - one need only consider Rachmaninov's final song of his *Fourteen Songs*; *Opus 34* or Ravel's *Vocalise en forme d'habanera*. Yet RVW's offering is different. Not here the structural contrasts between singer and piano but a partnership of equals. The part writing is similar. The clarinet is involved in figuration and expression not unlike the soprano. In my opinion it worked well, providing a fitting 'epilogue' to the composer's career. Yet A. E. F. Dickinson¹ was led to write that this piece does not work and that "these slight pieces hardly justify the combination [of clarinet and piano]". Perhaps the similarity between singer and instrumentalist obscures the formal structure of the piece? However, I feel there is something deeper to consider. Here was an elderly composer, exploring new ground and

¹ Vaughan Williams A. E. F. Dickinson, Faber and Faber, London. 1963 p.477.

harking back to past triumphs. Already he had succeeded with the *Ten Blake Songs for Voice and Oboe* (1957) and the *Vocalises* move even further in this developmental process.

In these two pieces given at Stratford Place we glimpsed something of the world of the *Pastoral Symphony* yet saw also a willingness to experiment. They reveal a composer, aged 86 who seemingly showed no decline in his powers and was capable of writing fresh music until his death.

The concert also contained music by Fauré, Berkeley, Howells and Rebecca Clark. Of interest was a first performance of a new song cycle by William Lewarne Harris entitled *The Secret Kingdom*.

John France
York

Sir John in Love

The second concert of the *Vision of Albion* festival was a delight. A remarkably well-filled Barbican Hall heard a ravishing account of *Sir John in Love* with all the main parts strongly cast and beautifully sung.

Semi-staged performances are never ideal but VW lovers must be grateful to see any of his operas and on this occasion, there was plenty of movement to offset the liveliness of this lovely score. Written between 1924 and 1928, and first performed in March 1929 under the baton of Malcolm Sargent, *Sir John* looks back to *Hugh the Drover* in its confident mixing of romantic music with more boisterous episodes. Richard Hickox confirmed his reputation as a choral conductor without equal, emphasising the folk-song and Elizabethan roots of the opera. VW based his text on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but significantly, he added settings of words by Middleton, Jonson, Campion, Fenton and others, as well as folk-songs, including *Greensleeves*.

The main parts were splendidly sung. Donald Maxwell as Sir John, Anne-Marie Owens as Mistress Quickly and Matthew Best as Ford were all on top form, while Nancy Argenta, Pamela Helen Stephen and Stephen Varcoe gave performances brimful of character as Anne Page, Mrs. Ford and Sir Hugh Evans. The backing of the Northern Sinfonia and the Joyful Company of Singers gave an enthusiastic audience an afternoon that will live long in the memory. Hopefully, *Sir John in Love* will be recorded using these same artists.

Simon Coombs
Swindon

The Poisoned Kiss in Brighton

On Thursday 2nd October last year I realised a long-term ambition when I heard (and saw) a complete performance of *The Poisoned Kiss* at the Gardner Arts Centre, University of Sussex. I am indeed grateful to the RVW Society for

publicising this event.

The June RVW Society Journal invited 'budding reviewers' who attended the production to submit articles for possible future publication. Although I would not dignify what follows as a proper review, it contains my impressions of the performance. It cannot be a truly critical review as I, in common with almost everyone else on this planet, am not familiar with the work; and even if I had a score, I couldn't read it rapidly enough. Thus, any possible deficiencies in the performance were more than outweighed by my undying gratitude that someone, at last, has 'put it on'.

All I had previously heard of RVW's 'Extravaganza' was the *Overture*, in the old performance by George Hurst and the Bournemouth Sinfonietta. I have had this disc for over 20 years. It has always struck me as being so full of good tunes, that the opera itself could not be as bad as some critics had alleged. True, the characters' names are confusing and the plot does seem rather silly, but since when has that been sufficient reason to condemn an opera? (I'm afraid I find many serious operas almost laughable when translated into English). So the opportunity to judge for myself was most welcome.

I was not disappointed by this performance by the Wandering Minstrels and the Mid-Sussex Sinfonia, under Michael Withers. The opera (and I'll continue to refer to it as such for convenience, although it has much in common with pantomime), is full of delightful tunes. The production was enormous fun from start to finish. The performers seemed to enjoy doing it, and to project their enjoyment to the audience. Incidentally, the night I attended, the hall was only about 60% full - a great pity. Some occasional wayward intonation from the orchestra strings hardly detracted from the enjoyment of the proceedings. The performance did not lose my attention for a second, something I cannot say of most concerts I attend! When the final curtain fell, I wished to hear the whole thing over again. The tremendous final chorus ran around my head for days afterwards. What a pity tape cassettes of the performance were not available.

The singers all performed splendidly. It is perhaps unfair to single out any, but I think Dorothy Thompson (Angelica) deserves a mention. She has a great deal to do and seems to me to be a key character holding it all together; and I still cannot believe that Tim Crouch (Amaryllus) has been singing for just a year.

I never thought I would ever witness an RVW tango sung and danced by three ladies pushing vacuum cleaners! Incidentally, one of them looked the spitting image of Joanna Lumley in *Absolutely Fabulous*. Were the hoovers included in RVW's instructions? Even if they weren't, I have no doubt he would have approved, in this mood. Nor had I ever imagined an operatic heroine singing a serenade to a large rubber snake! The snake is in the stage directions.

The costumes and presentation were striking and humorous. I would guess that this is just what this work requires to make it more accessible to the public. Dipsacus looked like a cross between Einstein and Tommy Cooper. Amaryllus was graced with an oversize cod-piece, discarded later in the opera after he fell in love with Tormentilla (please don't misconstrue this!). Angelica was accompanied by a toy lamb on wheels, and the poisoned kiss itself took place on a hospital bed, standing up.

The music needs no apologies at all. Why then has it been neglected? I now have a theory that the critics were and are simply non-plussed that a serious composer like RVW could come up with something as light-hearted as this - a cross between operetta and Christmas pantomime. RVW obviously had great fun writing it and the music could be by nobody else. All it needs is an imaginative presentation like this, and it could, and should, be part of the regular repertoire along with the Savoy Operas.

You will have gathered from the above that I thoroughly enjoyed it. My wife did too. It was well worth the 170 mile trip. I would go 500 miles to hear it again. Please, can somebody produce a professional recording soon?

**Michael Gainsford
Burbage, Leics.**

The Poisoned Kiss ~ a real smacker

It is not every day that one gets the opportunity to attend a very rare performance of an opera written by a composer born 125 years ago, with his widow, writer of the libretto. Consequently, it was a great thrill to escort Ursula Vaughan Williams to a performance of *The Poisoned Kiss*, at the Gardner Arts Centre near Brighton. It was made even more thrilling for me, by the fact that to all intents and purposes, it was a premiere - so rarely is this wonderful work performed.

I must confess that I did not really know what to expect, with such a weird libretto that clearly pokes fun cheekily at Wagner, and music full of satire, high spirits and high-powered lyricism. If I described the result as containing a singing Tommy Cooper, whizzing vacuum cleaners, singers flying through the air, an heroic singing Blackadder and music described by one performer as "G & S on speed", you might be hard pressed to imagine this as Vaughan Williams. The effect though, was amazing, bouts of happiness and laughter ringing around the theatre, exhilarating moments of exquisite harmony and tender peace mixed together.

From the arrival of Hob, Gob and Lob, whimsically loping onto stage to open the book of the drama, to the absolutely fabulous trio of mediums, the performance was charmingly handled with wit, élan and masterful skill. The chorus managed a seemingly endless series of costume changes

that bewildered and awed the happy audience as the ever-wonderful music spun a web of joy over all. I was amazed to discover afterwards that Tim Crouch, the heroically-voiced Amaryllus, was new to the world of singing; his powerfully clear voice carried the day, with an equally sweet Sally Wilson as Tormentilla and a delightful Angelica in Dorothy Thompson. Dipsacus in the form a Fez-wearing Tommy Cooper was an inspired idea brought ably to life as being more than just a caricature magician, by fine voiced Stephen Hargreaves. We must not neglect either David Carverhill, completing the main cast line up as a confident and able Gallanthus; the group as a whole superbly pointed up in fact the relation of the opera to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an inevitable influence. I felt by the end of the night that this was a far more successful work in fact than Britten's version of that play - more cheerful, more infectiously happy and the final hornpipe seemed to send everyone out with a bouncing step.

It seems totally invidious to mention so few out of an amateur cast that has drawn upon so many talents - the lighting crew and costumiers deserve special mention for their skills.

Pride of place must inevitably go though, to the skill, dedication and enthusiasm of Roger Clow as producer for having such an inventive and imaginative vision for this work, and for Michael Withers, who conducted The Wandering Minstrels and the Mid-Sussex Sinfonia into unknown territory. I spoke during the interval to some of the musicians, who did not know the work before, and their uniform report was of sheer pleasure in the felicities and delights of this charming score. Certainly all of us who experienced this rare gem, were blessed and cheered by this noble and strangely neglected opera. My only regret is that the same team could not secure enough funding to produce a full professional staging. The imagination, drive and enthusiasm of this team is amazing.

This was certainly one of the key highlights of 1997. Mrs. Vaughan Williams herself was thrilled by this encounter. The next step? Let us hope and pray for a professional recording as soon as possible!

**Richard Mason
Oxford**

The RVW Film Festival

As part of the *Vision of Albion* festival in October 1997, the Barbican Cinema Manager Robert Rider, with Andrew Youdell of the British Film Institute, agreed with me as far back as in November 1996, that it would be good to excavate some of the rare films with music specially composed by Vaughan Williams.

Tracking down some of the prints was a long task, but the results as shown were truly marvellous.

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The only familiar film for many of us was *Scott of the Antarctic*, shown in a brand new print, with searingly bright visions of bleak sea scapes and coldly blue skies. By contrast, it was noticeable just how little of the noble music you could actually hear in films like *The England of Elizabeth*. This was a point brought out time and again in fascinating film clips arranged by Andrew Youdell. Very rare glimpses of the war movies shown both with dialogue, and without, pointed out how music, now familiar to us on CD, was swamped by sometimes inane dialogue. Time and again it was marvellous to hear powerful music that evoked the noble man himself so clearly. We were even treated to a short and rather humorous clip of the composer himself at work in Elstree, no sound alas, yet he was there, rather irately thumping a desk to make a rhythmic point.

The highlight for me, was a screening of *The Vision of William Blake*, the source of the *Blake songs for oboe and tenor*. The film was an almost claustrophobic examination of Blake manuscripts and poems, under a deathly red wash that lingered in the mind long afterwards. It was fascinating to see the original source for these refined and masterful songs.

Andrew and Robert sincerely deserve thanks for agreeing to organise this, adding such colour and extra interest to an already marvellous day which included *Sir John in Love* as well. Our next step must be to bridge the gap between RVW research and television. Some of our members in the USA and Mexico have already produced 1997 memorial programmes, and the BBC are actively considering a Vaughan Williams programme for 1999; so, let us all hope!

Richard Mason
Oxford

Savitri and Riders to the Sea

Shortly after the death of Gustav Holst, Vaughan Williams wrote an eloquent obituary for his friend which contained the following words: "Some years ago I had the privilege of writing about Gustav Holst. I remember saying then that 'perhaps he will lead us into regions where it will be difficult to follow'. He may now have found in new regions that which his music ever seemed to be seeking... Art is the imperfect human half-realization of that which is spiritually perfect. Holst's music seems especially to be quest after that which in earthly life we can only partially fulfil." While such words convey both his sense of loss and his admiration for Holst's inimitable accomplishment, a careful reading of this passage calls to mind some of the tactfully expressed reservations concerning Holst's style that Vaughan Williams had articulated in an earlier article. In that essay, Vaughan Williams wrote: "Holst's weaknesses are the defects of his qualities... Sometimes, he spoils the noble simplicity of his work by an unnecessary piece of elaboration; at other times the very individuality of his thought

which requires such a personal technique causes a flaw in his work; in his earlier music especially, we do not always find a complete unity of idea and expression; the *mot juste* fails him for the moment and he falls back on the common stock of musical device." While not as stringent as some of Imogen Holst's criticisms of her father's music, this passage does imply that despite his affection and admiration for Holst and his music, Vaughan Williams was aware of the limitations of his colleague's expressive range, for Holst often seems to reach for the sublime at the expense of human emotion.

Both of these passages rang through my mind after attending the performance of Holst's *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* and his chamber opera *Savitri* that preceded Vaughan Williams's one-act opera *Riders to the Sea* on 19 October 1997 in the Corn Exchange at Cambridge. This fascinating evening was part of the highly successful *Vision of Albion* series, sponsored by the RVW Society, which celebrated the 125th anniversary of the composer's birth by focusing on his unjustly neglected operas. That one of Holst's operas was included in this series was more than fitting, given his close personal and professional association with Vaughan Williams. But the juxtaposition of the two operas served to illuminate the profound differences between the two composers, whose names are so commonly and casually linked by critics and historians.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of Holst's style are encapsulated in *Savitri*. Holst wrote the libretto himself, having studied Sanskrit in order to penetrate to the essence of the Mahabharata, the epic from which he drew the episode of Savitri's redemption of her husband Satyavan from the grasp of Death. The story is told with an admirable concision overall, even if Holst occasionally lapses into self-consciously flowery and "poetic" language. The opening music is expressive, but austere: the opening exchanges between Savitri and her husband are formal rather than affectionate. Holst created such linear and ritualistic music in order to articulate his unusual dramatic intentions, for neither Savitri and Satyavan are meant to behave as psychologically convincing characters, but rather as archetypes in a cosmic allegory. Satyavan represents uncomplicated strength and virtue, while Savitri embodies the faithful spouse. Oddly enough, the most complex and ambivalent character in the opera is Death, who comes to claim Satyavan and is outwitted by Savitri. (I wondered afterwards how Death - who presumably knows every trick in the book - allows himself to fall for Savitri's rather transparent stratagem). Unfortunately, the moving restraint that the composer skilfully maintains through most of *Savitri* is compromised by an inexplicable lapse of taste at the climax, when Holst reverts to a debased Wagnerian idiom, complete with "Liebestod turns" and all. Such ersatz warmth is all the more unconvincing for being borrowed, and I recalled Vaughan Williams's canny insight, quoted above, that "the *mot juste* fails him for the moment and he falls back on the common stock of musical device."

Riders to the Sea offered a profound contrast to *Savitri*. Vaughan Williams was at the height of his powers as a dramatic composer when he distilled this moving opera from Synge's harrowing one-act play. Vaughan Williams's music brings Synge's characters vividly to life: the fatally stubborn Bartley, last surviving son of a doomed family; the two daughters, at once fearful and quarrelsome; and Maurya, the old woman who is bowed by fate but cannot be broken. Vaughan Williams had the courage to face Maurya's awful destiny without flinching, for, unlike Savitri, Maurya knows that there is no haggling with Death, who comes in the guise of the implacable deadly sea to take her final son. Maurya redeems herself by embracing the ineluctable fate of all things, knowing well that "No man at all can be living forever, and we must all be satisfied".

Despite its setting in the Aran Islands, Vaughan Williams allows neither local musical colour nor "Celtic twilight" atmosphere to distract from the stark humanity of Synge's drama. At the same time, Vaughan Williams does not slight the symbolic import of Synge's play, for the archetypal level of the drama is always articulated through characters who are delineated by music of consistency and psychological power.

The Corn Exchange in Cambridge is hardly an ideal venue for opera. Director Stephen Langridge surmounted most, if not quite all, of the dramatic challenges presented by two disparate works in such an unsuitable space. I regretted the lack of even a vestigial hearth in *Riders to the Sea*, as well as the dripping dead body of Bartley being carried in and placed on the kitchen table, for the mummified object brought on in Cambridge was less than fully convincing. Due to its less complex dramatic structure, *Savitri* fared rather better in its staging than *Riders to the Sea*, with Death making a chilling entrance circling ever closer around the terrified Savitri as she cradled the stricken Satyavan in her arms.

The musical performance was superb: Richard Hickox conducted the excellent City of London Sinfonia with uncanny insight. By paying careful attention to pacing and balance, he maximised the many virtues of Holst's score while minimising its blemishes, while his conception of *Riders to the Sea* was searing in its emotional impact. The singers all acted and sang with skill and conviction. Special mention must be made of Stephen Varcoe's haunting embodiment of Death in *Savitri*, and of Anne-Marie Owens's heartrending portrayal of Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*. Holst had suggested that *Savitri* be preceded by his *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda for women's chorus and harp*, Op. 26, No. 3; this, as well as the wordless chorus of keening women in *Riders to the Sea*, was beautifully performed by the women of the Cambridge University Chamber Choir.

Byron Adams
University of California, Riverside.

BOOK REVIEWS

Ralph Vaughan Williams: an essential guide to his life and works by Michael Jameson.

'Classic fM Lifelines' series, published by Pavilion Books Ltd. (26 Upper Ground, London, SE1 9PD), paperback, ISBN 1-86205-021-X, £4.99.

According to the publisher's blurb, the composers represented in the 'Classic fM Lifelines' series have been chosen as the 'most popular' in the radio station's own audience surveys. While it will doubtless be reassuring to members of this Society to learn that Ralph Vaughan Williams enjoys such a high profile among Classic fM's listeners, one cannot avoid a sneaking suspicion that, for the majority, knowledge of RVW's music is likely to be restricted to a relatively small handful of works. But maybe that would also be true of many other composers.

It would be foolish to expect a brief study of this kind to break any new ground, and the present book is clearly indebted to the authoritative complementary memorials of Ursula Vaughan Williams and Michael Kennedy - and to the more compact 'Master Musicians' monograph by James Day. In general, the RVW story is well told and well paced - but (and, sad to say, it is a big 'but') this account is marred by a string of irritating inconsistencies and sometimes glaring errors which one might have expected to have been spotted and corrected before publication. Within the space of four pages for example, conflicting dates are given for both the composition and the publication of the early song *Whither must I wander* (pp. 28/32). Whatever the difficulty in dating its composition precisely, the fact that R L Stevenson's *Songs Of Travel* (from which it comes) were themselves not published until 1896, the earlier year suggested - 1894 - surely *cannot* be right.

Elsewhere, 10 years have been added to Gustav Holst's age at his first meeting with RVW (p. 29). Jameson is also in error to attribute a remark about the 'impertinences' of the *Sea Symphony* to Stanford (p. 43): that comment was Parry's. There is confusion between the (London) Bach Choir and its Oxford namesake, but neither of them, one feels, would have performed the purely orchestral *London Symphony* with much conviction (p. 52). 'White Gates' at Dorking was, of course, *not* the composer's home from 1929 'for the remainder of his life' (p. 65), as a later reference makes clear (p. 81). And Ursula Wood (who also appears for the first time on p. 81) was not widowed at the time of her first meeting

with RVW in 1938 as here suggested. Further, Sir Adrian Boult's pioneer recording of the *Ninth Symphony* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, made immediately following RVW's death, did not, in fact, form part of his symphonic cycle for Decca (p. 84) which thus remained incomplete - as evidenced by its recent re-issue on the Belart label. Throughout the book, the intrusive, and incorrect, middle 'c' appears in *Sinfonia Antar(c)tica*. (How much subsequent linguistic confusion on this point might RVW have saved had he adopted the plain English title *An Antarctic Symphony* instead!) Incidentally, neither Eric Coates nor Malcolm Arnold can really be thought of as key 'wartime' film composers (p. 70), although their most celebrated scores - *The Dam Busters* (1954) and *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) respectively - were indeed written for screenplays with a World War 2 setting.

Finally, one wonders whether Michael Jameson can be aware of Michael Kennedy's *Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. It is missing from the list of 'Suggested further reading', while even the most cursory glance at that indispensable reference would surely undermine the claim that the list of works given here is 'complete'.

While - Holst's suggested seniority apart - none of these points, in isolation, may be a matter of major significance which would merit more than a quizzical raised eyebrow, collectively they do suggest a want of care that is worrying and which calls in question the publisher's professed high aims for the 'Lifelines' series.

Charles Long
Leatherhead

Edmund Rubbra

Ralph Scott Grover, *The Music of Edmund Rubbra*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England:

Scolar Press, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1993. 643 pp. 277 music examples. \$99.95. ISBN: 0-85967-910-1 (Cloth). [To order in the U.S., contact: Scolar Press, Ashgate Publishing Company, Old Post Road, Brookfield, Vermont 05036-9704. Tel: 800-535-9544; Fax: 802-276-3837; or, E-mail: info@ashgate.com]

(Charles) Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986) was an English composer who left a rather large *œuvre* of compositions in all genres which, with few exceptions, exhibit the primary attributes of an eclectic compositional idiom - expressive lyricism through tonal centrality, formal development through contrapuntal or polyphonic means - much influenced by neo-mediaevalism and modality, two elements reflecting his philosophical-religious position (i.e. Rubbra

was a mystic and visionary by nature, a Roman Catholic by conversion).

One would think that such a large body of interesting and challenging musical literature, by a composer who was given to explaining it in print, would have its respective large collection of scholarly criticism. Yet, that is not the case; and, in fact, until the appearance of the present work, there have been no comprehensive publications on Rubbra's music or life. One encounters a number of very brief periodical essays commenting upon his progress at various stages; the more significant and longer articles dealing with all of the symphonies in general or particular symphonies in specific, the most important writers of which are Hugh Ottaway, Elsie Payne and Harold Truscott; and, a thin symposium released by an obscure press in a very limited quantity - Lewis Foreman, Editor, *Edmund Rubbra: Composer* (Rickmansworth: Triad Press, 1977) - which includes an introductory autobiographical sketch by the composer and chapters, each by a different author (including those above), treating Rubbra's orchestral style and various genres. Thus, upon its release, *The Music of Edmund Rubbra* by Ralph Scott Grover became the definitive work on the composer.

Modelled upon the above-named symposium, the author has organized the contents of his book into twelve chapters: chapter one ("An essay in autobiography", pp. 1-27), chapters two, three and four ("The first four symphonies", "Symphonies five, six and seven" and "The last four symphonies: a new approach", pp. 28-191), chapter five ("Other orchestral music", pp. 192-204), six ("Concertos and concerto-related works", pp. 205-259), seven ("Music for solo instruments", pp. 260-288), eight ("The chamber music", pp. 289-381), nine ("The choral music", pp. 382-508), ten ("The songs", pp. 509-570), eleven ("Miscellaneous works", pp. 571-583) and twelve ("Conclusions and summaries", pp. 584-592).

Grover's first chapter reproduces completely Rubbra's autobiographical essay of his childhood and adolescence as it is found in the Foreman symposium. Since Rubbra's account stopped at age twenty, Grover has included the transcriptions of three taped interviews made during the summer of 1980. Though the chapter introduces the biographical details that furnish the necessary background to the discourse about the music, this reviewer believes the author could have chosen a different method of presentation: the narrative consists of four long sections of quoted material broken by authorial comments that highlight certain portions of the material or explain the subsequent passages, e.g. "From this point to the end of the chapter Rubbra's autobio-

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graphical account has been transcribed from three tapes ..." (p. 8); "We return to Rubbra's narrative" (p. 12); "Tape No. 2, which follows, records events and reminiscences from approximately 1930..." (p. 14); etc.

Following the autobiographical chapter, the symphonies are the first works to be considered by the author. Consisting of 163 pages, the discussion in three chapters is the longest, compared to the other genres, of the twelve chapters (with the exception of nine, at 126 pages, about the choral music), which underscores (i) the perception of the musical world and of the author that Rubbra was essentially a composer of symphonies and (ii) the importance the author places upon his discourse about this genre in the book.

Grover's discussions of the music are excellent, with the single exception that shall be noted below; however, I was somewhat disappointed with his treatment of, and conclusion about, *Symphony No. 9 (Sinfonia Sacra)*, Rubbra's choral symphony (see pp. 165-172). The composer was very careful about his title, and there are palpable symphonic processes to support the narration and devotional commentaries concerning the events leading up to the Resurrection; even so, some hear it as a cantata or condensed passion. Citing the commentary of Elsie Payne (pp. 170-171), who believed the work to be a choral symphony, as a foil to his opinion that it is an oratorio-like work, Grover takes Payne to task for arguing in favour of the symphonic status of the work in her contribution to the Foreman symposium, entitled "Non-Liturgical Choral Music"; yet Grover, who could have discussed the work in his chapter about choral music, does something of the sort by arguing for the choral status of the work in a section about the symphonies!

Rubbra's standing as a composer of symphonies should not obfuscate the fact that he left an impressively large corpus of choral music, in fact fifty-nine published works which extend throughout his creative life. Forty-two of the works confirm his immense interest in religious and philosophical texts: Mass settings, various other Catholic liturgical texts and hymns, and passages from the Old and New Testaments, and settings that range from Alcuin of York through such metaphysical poets as St. John of the Cross, Donne and Vaughan, to Gerard Manley Hopkins. This chapter, alone, will certainly serve as the basis of much future research, for Grover's discussions of the respective works are superb though brief; in particular, I should list the following: *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Op. 41, No. 1, a setting of the poem by St. John of the Cross for SATB, a small orchestra consisting of strings, woodwinds, two horns, trumpet and timpani and contralto soloist (pp. 388-392); *The*

Morning Watch, Op. 55, one of Rubbra's finest choral works, on Henry Vaughn's magnificent poem, for Mixed Voices and Orchestra (pp. 397-399); *Missa Cantuariensis* (Canterbury Mass), Op. 59, commissioned by Canterbury Cathedral during WWII, Rubbra's first venture in setting a liturgical text in English, the earliest and largest of the Masses and, with the exception of the Credo (with organ underpinning), for unaccompanied voices (pp. 400-404); *Missa in Honorem Sancti Dominici*, Op. 66, Rubbra's sublime Mass in Latin for unaccompanied voices, written in celebration of his conversion to Catholicism and intended for normal liturgical use (pp. 405-410); *Song of the Soul*, Op. 78, an extraordinary setting of another St. John of the Cross text in translation by Roy Campbell, scored for SSATBB, strings, harp and timpani (pp. 419-423); *Lauda Sion*, Op. 110, one of the pinnacles in Rubbra's choral output scored for a *cappella* double mixed choir and soprano and baritone soli (pp. 438-443); *Te Deum*, Op. 115, Rubbra's second setting of this Latin text for SSAATTBB chorus, and noted for its expansively-large *a cappella* writing (pp. 449-455); *Inscape*, Op. 122, a beautiful suite of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins for Mixed Voices, Strings and Harp (pp. 458-468); *Natum Maria Virgine*, Op. 136, one of Rubbra's major choral works, a cantata in English, scored for baritone solo, mixed choir and small orchestra which includes harp and bells (pp. 480-486); and, *Mass in Honour of St. Teresa of Avila*, Op. 157, Rubbra's fifth and final Mass (and, like the two preceding it, lacking a Credo), scored for unaccompanied SATB choir (pp. 497-501).

Described as analyses by the author, his discussions can only be defined as descriptive comments illustrating some of the compositional features of the music which are enriched by performance reviews of the works from diverse sources. Though the reviews usually appear at the conclusion of the discussions, it is when they are introduced for their relevancy to the work during the discussions that the author becomes defensively challenging. The method is quite simple: an author is quoted, then portions of the quotation - a word, phrase or sentence - is extracted and refuted, in much the same way as was mentioned, above, in the debate about *Symphony No. 9* (choral symphony vs. oratorio status). This method is a weakness of the book, for although Grover believes that "an author's objective and subjective feelings should enter into discussions and analyses to a reasonable degree" (p. xii), he does not extend that privilege to his colleagues. Undoubtedly, Grover would underline "to a reasonable degree" in the sentence, and admittedly his objection has more to do with subjective than with objective comments. Nevertheless, in many places, he does not allow an author's objective claims, because

they are incapable of proof and meaningful only to the writer, while expressing himself in a similar fashion.

Perhaps Grover's tone is caused by his passion for the subject matter, for his exuberant prose illustrates his love of the luminous intensity and visionary purity of Rubbra's music; and it is obvious that he wants everyone else to love it, too. Therefore, this single reservation does not cause me to withhold my endorsement of the book. Indeed, *The Music of Edmund Rubbra* by Ralph Scott Grover is one of the many outstanding texts from the Music Studies Catalogue of Scolar Press, the superlative imprint of the publishing firm of Ashgate Publishing Company. The reader interested in Rubbra's idiom, and the choral conductor unfamiliar with his choral music, can do no better than consulting this book and Richard Hickox's latest addition (*Symphony No. 9* and *The Morning Watch*) to Chandos's planned recording of the complete symphonic canon (CHAN 9441 DDD). Order your copies as soon as possible.

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VW Studies

Alain Frogley, Editor, *Vaughan Williams Studies*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 241 pp. \$59.95 (Cloth). ISBN: 0-521-48031-0.

"The object of art is to stretch out to the ultimate realities through the medium of beauty" ("A Musical Autobiography", *National Music*, p. 189). This concise statement by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) presents his belief that art, especially music, is the agency through which both composer and listener can experience what lies beyond the boundaries of sensory perception. It is because of this visionary feature of his music, a yearning for transcendence, and because Vaughan Williams consistently refused to promulgate for others an exclusive explication of the meaning of his work, instead permitting them to approach it by their own individual methods of analysis, that many listeners have remained fascinated and intrigued with his creations. At the same time, it is true that little research on the life or music of Vaughan Williams has been published since the mid-1960s, "despite his seminal importance in British music, international stature as a symphonist, and wider signific-

ance as an icon of Englishness" (p. i).

The present collection of essays addresses both situations splendidly: it explains why very little substantial writing has appeared in print since the authorised life and works volumes were published in 1964 - i.e. Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) and Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) - while adding a text that will be consulted frequently by RVW scholars to the subsequent canon of scholarly output - e.g. Wilfrid Mellers, *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), Neil Butterworth, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Guide to Research* (New York: Garland, 1990), and a spate of master's theses and journal articles. The emphasis is on new research that (i) mines the rich, and virtually untouched, vein of the enormous autograph manuscript collection in the British Library, (ii) subjects selected examples of Vaughan Williams's music to a close analysis, using what may be called pluralistic, analytical methods, and (iii) probes the questions of social and cultural context and the place of Vaughan Williams and his art in the politics of national identity.

Five of the chapters (1, 4, 5, 6 and 7) treat the third topic ("Constructing Englishness in music: national character and the reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams" by the editor; "Vaughan Williams, Germany and the German tradition: a view from the letters" by Hugh Cobbe; "Scripture, Church and culture: biblical texts in the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams" by Byron Adams; "Vaughan Williams's folksong transcriptions: a case of idealization?" by Julian Onderdonk; and, "Vaughan Williams and British wartime cinema" by Jeffrey Richards); three chapters (3, 8 and 9) entertain the second topic ("Vaughan Williams, Tallis and the Phantasy principle" by Anthony Pople; "Rhythm in the symphonies: a preliminary investigation" by Lionel Pike; and, "Symphony in D major: models and mutations" by Arnold Whittall); two of the chapters (2 and 10) are less analytical *per se* ("Coming of age: the earliest orchestral music of Ralph Vaughan Williams" by Michael Vaillancourt and "The place of the *Eighth* among Vaughan Williams's symphonies" by Oliver Neighbor), yet the former may be categorised with those considering analytical issues, while the latter may be grouped with those chapters (e.g. 2, 3 and 6) that are also grounded in an examination of the holographs deposited in the British Library.

In chapter one, Alain Frogley argues cogently that Vaughan Williams's reputation has been distorted by the international musical politics of this century

(which, until recently, were focused on the Stravinsky-Schoenberg axis) and by the special ideological tensions of Britain's long decline as a world power, while he addresses three related issues: the nature and limitations of the current associations of the label "nationalist" as applied to RVW, i.e. the composer has been identified with the narrow image of English national identity - "parochial, pastoral and emotionally reticent, if not repressed" (p. xiii); how this label has evolved over the years; and its links with broader constructions of English national identity in the twentieth century. Drawing upon research from other disciplines, Frogley's essay is intellectually sweeping, compellingly written and immensely engaging. Ultimately, the author states that he has not sought "to deny categorically the existence of national characteristics, in music or in any other area of human activity"; he has "merely tried to show how, in the case of Vaughan Williams, ideas of national character have, consciously or unconsciously, been selectively manipulated" (p. 22). His final sentence has a challenging ring: "Nationalism this century has penetrated deep into the irrational domains of human feeling long associated with music: a detailed study of the reception history of English music this century would, I believe, have implications well beyond the current reputation of Vaughan Williams" (p. 22).

In chapter four, Hugh Cobbe traces, in the composer's own words taken from his writings and letters, the development of RVW's view of the musical tradition emanating from the German-speaking lands of central Europe; "a development which took him from accepting this tradition as the mainspring of European music, to regarding it as certainly a vital component but only one among several, albeit with a dangerous predominance from which English music needed strong protection" (p. 81). Excerpts are taken from "A Musical Autobiography", the recently-discovered "The Romantic Movement and its Results" and "Letter from Berlin" (from *The Musician*), "Ein Heldenleben" (from *The Vocalist*), "Should Music be National?", "The Evolution of folk-song" and "Nationalism and Internationalism" (from *National Music*), and letters to Ralph Wedgwood, G.E. Moore, René Gatty, Edward Dent, Elizabeth Trevelyan, Robert Müller-Hartmann, Sir Granville Bantock and Ferdinand Rauter. Cobbe concludes by writing that RVW "did not believe that [the German music tradition] provided a springboard for the development of English music"; that he was "probably right to fear the new influx of refugee musicians [from the Nazi régime], many of whom became influential writers, critics and teachers in their adopted country" (pp. 97-98). Indeed, "since they could not... feel at ease with [the] English idiom", Cobbe argues speculatively, "they inevitably lent some impetus to that swing of the

critical pendulum away from Vaughan Williams's music which took place towards the end of his life and in the years following his death" (p. 98). Perhaps the most important information to be gleaned from the chapter is that Hugh Cobbe is editing the complete letters of RVW for eventual publication.

In chapter five, Byron Adams focuses upon Vaughan Williams's use of biblical texts, which illuminate "the development of his personal beliefs and his desire to create an aesthetic that would embrace his visionary impulses, as well as [cast] new light on the cultural nationalism which led him to honour the liturgy and musical traditions of that unique institution, the Church of England" (p. 100). Adams's sobering and elegantly written chapter, thus, treats the complex interlacing of several ideas - the fascinating layers of ambiguity and conflict within RVW - and is likely to surprise those who have not scrutinised RVW's family background of faith and rationalism, and who remember him chiefly as a composer of Church music, of such glorious music as the hymns "Down Ampney" ("Come Down, O Love Divine") and "Sine Nomine" ("For All The Saints"). Innately and deeply spiritual, RVW rejected the claims of Christianity, however, and did not set a verse from the Bible until he was over forty years old and an established composer. By that time, RVW's intellectual position had evolved to permit their use. "By considering the Bible a series of folk texts created over generations in the same manner as one of his beloved folksongs", Adams writes, "Vaughan Williams gave himself permission to jettison the aversion to Christian dogma that had kept him, a card-carrying atheist throughout his early career, from using biblical texts without discomfort" (p. 108). Hence, "Vaughan Williams's cultural nationalism led him to select texts whose metaphors spoke directly to the English community through a common religious heritage. The composer 'drifted into a cheerful agnosticism'... developing a private system of belief that rejected Christianity's claims to a unique validity among other religious traditions while preserving the power of its myth and metaphor through his music" (p. 110).

In chapter six, Julian Onderdonk summarises some of the salient ideas presented in his New York University Ph.D. dissertation, "Vaughan Williams and folksong: English Nationalism and the Sensibility of Pastoral". Onderdonk's contention is that anyone desiring to evaluate RVW's activities as a folksong collector must understand the changes that have occurred in British folksong studies over the past thirty years; studies that have come to see folksong "less as a collection of individual songs and repertoires than as one part of a fluid social and cultural process, in

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which the meaning of a song is defined by the circumstances of performance and audience reception" (p. 118). Though the author concludes that there is evidence of melodic misrepresentation and distortion to be found in RVW's treatment of the tunes he collected, there is also evidence of a genuine interest in and careful focus on the facts of folksong performance. Onderdonk suggests, therefore, that "a thorough understanding of Vaughan Williams's achievement even in one aspect of his collecting work may be grounds to revise the folklorists' reading of the historical significance of the Folk Revival as a whole and its role in the emerging ruralist nationalism of the time" (p. 123).

In chapter seven, Jeffrey Richards focuses primarily on the propaganda role of the wartime film scores. As a backdrop to the more specific concerns of propaganda, Richards discusses such topics as RVW's method of writing film music (pp. 141-142) and his construction of Englishness, a central theme of his work both during and after the war (p. 145), which really cannot be separated from the wartime film scores. Considered in one or two paragraphs, Richards's excellent treatment of both of these topics are models of comprehensiveness through brevity. And inasmuch as most of the films are not in general circulation, and their scores are neither published nor recorded, Richards has included in his essay a considerable amount of basic description of visuals and music. His conclusions are that (i) RVW fulfilled his own oft-stated definition of the composer as a citizen, contributing to the life of the nation; (ii) the composer satisfied perfectly the criteria dictated by the Ministry of Information for films about what Britain was fighting for, how Britain fights, and the need for sacrifice if the war is to be won; and, (iii) there is a close musical and philosophical blending of the film music with the rest of the composer's output; indeed, "the film music can be seen as distinctively complementary as well as consanguine" (p. 165).

Arnold Whittall's statement, in chapter nine, that the object of analytical narratives "is not to 'translate' the score into words, but rather to provide a parallel text, interpreting certain elements which can be inferred from the score's notation - and thereby... raising the possibility of alternative readings and responses" (p. 198), may be taken as the philosophical overlay of analytical chapters 3, 8, 9 and 2 (in that order, dealing with harmonic, rhythmic, harmonic and thematic parameters), although I must say that all of the chapters are not "notoriously resistant to literary elegance", as Whittall thinks, in general, of such narratives.

In chapter three, Anthony Pople tries "to exploit the existence of influential norms in

order to construct an interpretation of the *Tallis Fantasia* that takes into account such matters as the composer's revisions to the score" (p. 50). After a particularly helpful review of the recurring interpretative ideas about the work in earlier critical studies, Pople arrives at the meat of his essay: (i) the *Fantasia* met with a sense of incomprehension by some who accused the music of fragmentation, and thereby of failing to sustain its length; (ii) to the extent that thematic fragmentation is part and parcel of the *Tallis Fantasia*'s format, such criticism was to some extent perceptive; (iii) whereas other observers saw this feature as the key to its organicism, Pople believes it is arguable "whether such organicism is a genuinely technical feature or is more properly considered programmatically" (p. 57). Examining minutely both published score and autograph manuscript, the author concludes by writing: "... on his return from the Great War, Vaughan Williams contrived by relatively simple means to effect an important shift, developing his *Fantasia* away from a pre-war dilettante genre into a piece whose measured traversal of a stylistic network opened up a significant part of the space in which he chose to do the remainder of his life's work" (p. 80).

"Vaughan Williams seems to have been regarded by many as a kind of wandering rustic who fantasized endlessly in a pastoral rubato" (p. 166), Lionel Pike states in chapter eight, and as a result, the rhythmic subtleties of his music have not been properly investigated. Utilizing examples from three of the symphonies - *Symphony No. 5: Scherzo*; *Symphony No. 6: I, II and III*; and *Symphony No. 8: Scherzo alla Marcia* - he illustrates cleverly how vital is the role played by rhythm in RVW's symphonic logic.

In chapter nine, Arnold Whittall considers briefly the problems - of doubleness and ambiguity - associated with RVW's *Fifth Symphony*: (i) the quality of its musico-metaphysical thought; (ii) its handling or blending of modality and tonality; (iii) the basic topic of its generic integrity as a symphony; and, (iv) the issue of connections between traditional formal models and the musical genres implied by the four movement titles. "It seems to be generally accepted," writes Whittall, "that the *Fifth Symphony*'s greatness, if not exactly conditioned by such ambiguities, is not diminished by them" (p. 189). And, by investigating more closely and at great length the doubleness and ambiguity of the work's earlier stages, the author considers "some of its processes in the light of alternative but not contradictory models of resolution: those which absorb the enriching elements of ambiguity, and those which positively exclude - declare redundant - the very forces that serve to delay their own earlier emergence" (p. 190).

In chapter two, Michael Vaillancourt shares the results of his archival research on the manuscripts of the early orchestral music of RVW composed between 1898 and 1904, two of which are deposited in the Yale University Library, while the others are held by the British Library. He concludes by observing that the period under consideration was a time of assimilation and exploration for the composer, and "only after completing this process of assimilation could the composer begin to experiment with a more personal idiom, one that sounds to us much closer to the mature Vaughan Williams" (p. 46).

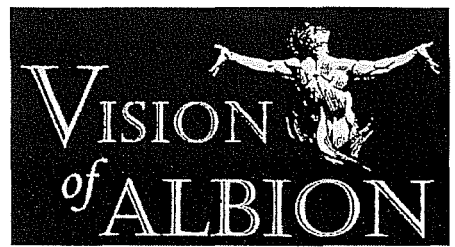
In chapter ten, Oliver Neighbor presents an argument that involves all of the symphonies, for he believes the place of the *Eighth Symphony* cannot be determined without a framework in which to place it. Thus, much of his chapter, is "devoted to tracing various recurrent ideas" - i.e. extra-musical ideas - "through the other eight symphonies" (p. 216). Alain Frogley refers to Neighbor's contribution, an exceptional essay among extraordinary essays, as "panoramic"; that it is, and like all panoramic essays, the reader's mind races forward and backward through the lovely subject matter under consideration. Neighbor's contribution is a fitting conclusion to an essential book of essays by Vaughan Williams scholars.

The choral conductor will note that not a single essay is devoted exclusively to a choral work. Nevertheless, *Vaughan Williams Studies* by Alain Frogley, Editor, is a required purchase for anyone pursuing research on the great English composer, because it contains new research and reveals new trends of presenting that research. This volume signals a recrudescence of writings on RVW and interested persons should note that *Vaughan Williams Studies* will be joined in the near future by other publications: a research guide by Alison McFarland, a book on the symphonies by Lionel Pike, a monograph on the sketches for the *Ninth Symphony* by Alain Frogley, and another book of essays by the recipients of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Research Fellowship, given by the Carthusian Trust of Charterhouse, the school RVW attended as a boy, of which the present reviewer was the eighth awardee.

Stephen Town
Book Reviews Editor and
1993 Ralph Vaughan Williams Research
Fellow.

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Stephen Connock meets two of the stars of the recent *Vision of Albion* Opera Festival



Donald Maxwell

Donald Maxwell has performed Falstaff in both the Verdi and Nicolai operas. As he put it, "Vaughan Williams was writing for an audience familiar with Shakespeare's play. He was also very knowledgeable about the work. He therefore sets the play fairly straight and, crucially, adds the Elizabethan lyrics which emphasise the romantic side of the play rather than the dramatic. Verdi was writing for an audience who did not know Shakespeare. This freed him to concentrate on those aspects of the play that suited his dramatic purpose. Boito skilfully adapts the play to suit Verdi's vocal style."

Donald Maxwell is as engaging in discussion as he is compelling in performance, and he soon warmed to his theme. "Falstaff does not have the dominance in Vaughan Williams as in Verdi or Nicolai. His first entry comes after some of the smaller characters have already made their mark. Falstaff's character is never established in a way it is in Verdi, and the great confrontation between Ford and Falstaff, so central to Verdi's opera, does not in Vaughan Williams have a dramatic impetus. Nicolai's setting is great fun, with wonderful drinking songs. Falstaff, set for low bass, has great weight about it without distracting from the charm of the opera overall."

Donald acknowledges the strength of the writing for Falstaff, and the full vocal range is used, including *false*alto. However, he feels that a full staging is necessary in this opera more than the others. "The roles of Hugh and Mary are well differentiated in *Hugh the Drover*, whilst Maurya or Pilgrim clearly dominate their respective operas. With *Sir John in Love* it is important to make sure that you don't lose sight of Falstaff amidst such a wide range of other characters. Vaughan Williams invests considerable skill on these other roles - Sir Hugh Evans for example. VW must have had a soft spot for that Welsh parson! The Host of the Garter Inn has great moments, too, as do Dr. Caius and Fenton. A staging would enable the central role of Falstaff to project more clearly, and help the audience to distinguish between the different parts."

Donald Maxwell stressed that all the performers in *Sir John in Love* sought to project the story line clearly despite the limitations of a concert performance. The work can become episodic unless the singers

characterise well, and this he feels was achieved at the Barbican. Like all of us, Donald Maxwell longed for a staged production and a new recording - he would certainly be available should the RVW Society manage to bring this off!

Anne-Marie Owens

Fresh from receiving excellent critical reviews for her roles in *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Riders to the Sea* and *Sir John in Love*, Anne-Marie Owens balanced her enthusiasm for Vaughan Williams with a down-to-earth appraisal of her roles. "I was a bit sceptical at the beginning, since I did not know the operas in depth. At the end, we were all won over, and learnt a lot. The operas are well worth doing, preferably in fully staged productions."

Anne-Marie's role as Maurya in *Riders to the Sea* was her most challenging part. She had sung in the chorus in a Guildhall production some years ago, and so knew the opera. She had also sung in *Pelleas and Melisande*, which had helped her deal with the speech-rhythms of *Riders*. As Anne-Marie put it "With *Riders* you have to be as clear as possible in your singing. It is vital not to over-interpret this piece, or it could come across as self-indulgent, even mawkish. Vaughan Williams knew exactly what he wanted, and no additional stress or elaboration is required. It is also important at the beginning of the opera not to be too conscious that Maurya will ultimately lose all her sons, otherwise one can be too lachrymose from the start which then diminishes the impact of that great final aria."

Anne-Marie shared with me a passion for that culminating section of the opera beginning: *They are all gone now, and there isn't anything the sea can do to me*. "There is an expressiveness at this point which can be very moving," says Anne-Marie. "The music also lightens, there is after all nothing that can be done to hurt Maurya, and she feels this lifting of the burden of fearful expectations."

And what of the Irish accent? "It's important not to go too far with the accent, otherwise it could become almost laughable. Treat the accent subtly, that is enough."

It seemed a long way from Maurya to Mistress Quickly and Madame By-Ends

even if Anne-Marie Owens seemed equally at home in these different roles. She played Mistress Quickly in Verdi's *Falstaff*, and so was able to compare the two roles in some detail. "Verdi and Boito build the characters with considerable dramatic insights, and Verdi writes for voices superbly. Vaughan Williams does not use the full range of the mezzo voice, but he is very expressive, warm-hearted and romantic. I felt the same in *Pilgrim*. Vaughan Williams was not to me a natural dramatist, unlike Verdi or Puccini. He knew exactly what he wanted, however."

Focusing on *Pilgrim*, Anne-Marie said that learning her parts was not easy. "A lot of the work is in a similar idiom, with the same colours in the orchestra. It helped enormously to stage the work. On the night, we all gained inspiration from Gerald Finley's commitment to the role of Pilgrim. We tried to bring the work to life, to avoid being sanctimonious. We felt the audience was with us, and Richard Hickox's choice of tempi moved the work along without any loss of nobility. It really came off on the night and I hope we helped to show what a great work it is. *Pilgrim* touches a vein of Englishness and spirituality in us all. It is a great universal work of art."

(Editor's Note: An interview with Gerald Finley will be included in the June issue.)

Call for papers

The October 1998 edition of the RVWS Journal will be devoted to folk-song. Any member who wishes to contribute - on a particular folk-song or on the impact of folk music on VW's style for example - should submit an article by August 20th.

**Index to Journals Nos 1-10
by Rolf Jordan**

An index to Journals 1-10 is enclosed. Numbers in bold show the Journal edition, the other number shows the page in that edition.

News and Notes

- A superb festival of Vaughan Williams music has been organised at the Dorking Halls, and elsewhere in Dorking to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the composer's death. The main events include:

April 3 at 8.00 - The film music of Vaughan Williams

April 4 at 7.30 - *Job*

April 5 at 6.00 - *Mass in G minor*

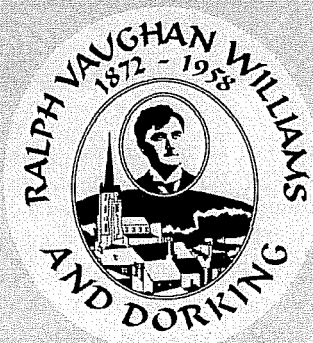
April 19 at 3.00 - Lecture on VW by Michael Kennedy

May 1 at 8.00 - *On Wenlock Edge, Quartet in A minor*

May 2 at 12.00 - *Songs of Travel* and other songs

For further details contact 01306 881717

1998
April 3rd - May 3rd



A Fortieth Anniversary Celebration at the DORKING HALLS ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH and elsewhere in Dorking

- The Basingstoke Choral Society will be performing *Dona Nobis Pacem* on 30 May at The Anvil, Basingstoke, contact 01256 844244.
- The Guildford Choral Society and Philharmonia Orchestra will be performing *A Sea Symphony* on 14 March at the Royal Festival Hall. The symphony is coupled with Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet*.
- The 150th anniversary of Hubert Parry's birth is being celebrated on 27 February with a concert at the Wigmore Hall in London. The programme includes Parry's *English Lyrics (Third Set)* and his *String Quartet No. 3 in G minor*, together with Butterworth's *Love Blows as the Wind Blows*. There is a pre-concert talk by Jeremy Dibble. Phone 0171 935 2141.
- Richard Hickox has been busy recording VW. Following the Barbican concert, *A Cotswold Romance* was recorded coupled with *The Death of Tintagiles*. The *Fifth Symphony* was also set down. Watford Town Hall was the recording venue for *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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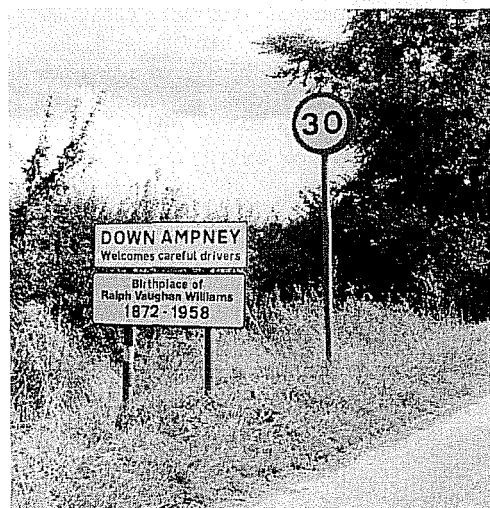
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One of the new road-side signs at Down Ampney, paid for by the RVW Society.

Next Edition:
June 1998

**40th anniversary
issue**



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