



Journal of the **RVW** Society

No. 17 February 2000

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VW – A composer for the New Century

‘He was a great man, a man of stern integrity and high principles, modest but knowing his own worth. He was avuncular, benign and stoic, with a steely courage and determination. Vaughan Williams was a mighty figure and a very great composer.’

With these words, Michael Kennedy concluded his presentation *Vaughan Williams - Then and Now* to a large and appreciative audience at the British Library Conference Centre on 19th of November, 1999. His keynote address set the tone for the two days of lectures and discussions in the *Vaughan Williams in a New Century* Conference sponsored by the British Library, The Royal Musical Association and The Royal College of Music.

1958 to 2000

Michael Kennedy began his talk by comparing reactions to the composer at his death in 1958 with the position today. In the 1950s, critics had referred to Vaughan Williams’s ‘clumsy technique’ and had spoken of him as a ‘major minor composer’. *Hodie* was reported as ‘grossly over-composed’ at its première. Vaughan Williams was the Grand Old Man of English music, a label VW hated – ‘I’m not old and I’m not grand’ he would say. The BBC viewed him as insular. Yet as Michael Kennedy pointed out, he was the antithesis of the parochial establishment composer. To the left-of-centre politically, he was broad-minded on social issues and had refused a knighthood.

Despite critical reactions, performance royalties have steadily increased since 1958. Several cycles of his symphonies have been recorded. In a remarkable turnaround, the

Ninth Symphony is now widely recognised as one of the greatest of the cycle. His music at the turn of the century is more widely appreciated than ever before.

Rehabilitated works

Michael Kennedy continued his presentation with reference to a number of works whose stature had increased since 1958:

- *Piano Concerto* (original version) - a remarkable work showing the influences of Ravel, Bartók and Stravinsky.
- *The Pilgrim's Progress* - the inspired Royal Northern College of Music performance had shown the dramatic nature of this work.
- *A London Symphony* - a symphony which fulfilled Mahler’s all-embracing definition for this form.
- *The Lark Ascending* - idealising an England that vanished in 1914. Its spiritual and universal qualities occupy a unique place in English music.
- Film Music - recognised today as wonderful examples of versatility and craftsmanship.

A great composer

Michael Kennedy concluded by reminding the audience that Vaughan Williams would have wanted to be judged on his music. Understanding and appreciation of his work had undergone a sea-change since 1958 and all the signs were that this would continue. Vaughan Williams was indeed a composer for the New Century.

In this edition:

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Vaughan Williams in a New Century

Vaughan Williams admirers owe a debt of gratitude to Hugh Cobbe, Head of Music Collections at the British Library for organising an excellent 2-day Conference on 19-20th of November in London. The following abstracts capture the breadth and depth of the occasion.

Day One – 19th November 1999

Andrew Herbert

Vaughan Williams: the foundations of *A Sea Symphony*

Vaughan Williams's *Sea Symphony*, based on the poetry of Walt Whitman, dominated his early output. With a gestation period of approximately seven years, the process of composition was hesitant and a substantial amount of material was rejected. A large number of relevant manuscripts survive and, using these, it was possible to shed a good deal of light on the composer's thought-processes as he carefully and painfully sculpted his most ambitious work to-date.

Although the issues raised were never simple, it was clear that Vaughan Williams relied heavily on ideas derived from the work of other composers. That this is hardly surprising only serves to increase the impact of self-derivations revealed or implied by the preliminary material. Furthermore, many references to other models were seen to be gradually excised as Vaughan Williams became more adept at covering his tracks and kicked away his props.

This paper in particular traced the influence of Wagner and Tchaikovsky. It also explored why Vaughan Williams felt the need to hide some of his models whilst letting others stand. A greater understanding of these issues added to a more general awareness of how he forged his compositional voice.

Stephen Connock

The death of innocence: Vaughan Williams and the First World War

The paper explored Vaughan Williams's wartime experiences concentrating on the period from June - November 1916, when he served with the 2/4 London Field Ambulance in the front line north of Arras. Using archive material and photographs of his locations in northern France, Mr. Connock described how Vaughan Williams's war years impacted upon both the man and his music.

Eric Saylor

The nature of spirit: subtexts in the *Pastoral Symphony*

Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony* proved to be a remarkable piece on a number

of different levels; in terms of structural coherence, thematic unity, and expressive character, it was revealed as one of his greatest masterworks, and certainly one of his most original at the time of its composition. However, many researchers have been confounded by a more overarching concern, one which has accompanied the piece from its first performance: what does the *Pastoral Symphony* mean?

Through a careful consultation of materials held in the archives of the British Library (including Vaughan Williams's personal correspondence and autograph scores and sketches of the *Pastoral*), as well as examining statements of VW, his biographers, and other researchers, Eric Saylor presented a better understanding of not only the work's genesis, but its ultimate expressive rationale. By examining the events leading up to the work's composition, as well as Vaughan Williams's intellectual and emotional state of mind during the period of its creation, a more detailed and multifaceted understanding of the work was gained.

Julian Rushton

The gritty lyricism of the *Fourth Symphony*

The opening of Vaughan Williams's *Fourth Symphony* is famously gritty, and the composer's note draws attention to modernistic elements, including the not-quite-BACH motive and the motive based on superimposed fourths. These have continued to attract critical attention, as they provide a marked contrast with the *Third* and *Fifth Symphonies*. But as with Beethoven, who may have provided the model for some aspects of the *Fourth*, Julian Rushton said it would be a critical mistake to overlook the lyrical impulse which develops from the opening, flowers in later themes, and towards the end of the first movement, generates a peculiarly original form of symphonic 'breakthrough' into transcendence.

Eric Hung

National Hero or Self-Involved Zealot? Robert Falcon Scott in Film and Symphony

In 1947-48, Vaughan Williams wrote the musical score for *Scott of the Antarctic* - a film about Robert Falcon Scott's fatal journey to the South Pole. Over the next four years, he constructed *Sinfonia Antartica* using material from the film score.

This paper argued that *Sinfonia Antartica* was a negative response to the heroic image of Scott in the film. Vaughan Williams often left clues about the programmatic meaning of his works to close friends and performers. We have two such clues about *Sinfonia Antartica*. He told conductor Raymond Leppard that the symphony can be performed with narrated

quotes from Scott's journals. Moreover, Ursula Vaughan Williams reveals that the composer had serious reservations about Scott's character.

Additional evidence for Eric Hung's reading comes from an examination of the symphony's genesis and an analysis of the "heroism theme" in the film and the symphony. In the film, the "heroism theme" is constantly juxtaposed with themes depicting Antarctic landscapes. In the symphony, this theme appears only in the *Prelude* and *Epilogue*. The contrasting uses of the "heroism theme" suggested that, while the film was concerned with Scott's heroic struggle against natural forces, the symphony asks whether Scott even is a hero. The ultimate collapse of the "heroism theme" in the *Epilogue* answers the question in the negative.

Roger Savage

***The Scholar Gipsy*: An Unwritten Opera**

For much of his life, Vaughan Williams, a warm admirer of the work of Matthew Arnold, nursed the desire to make an opera out of Arnold's poem *The Scholar Gipsy* (1853). This session looked at the parallels between the careers of the two men, at analogues to Vaughan Williams's thought about music and society in Arnold's cultural/critical writings and at the several Arnoldian compositional projects - all but one of them subsequently discarded but all leaving distinct traces behind them - which Vaughan Williams worked on between 1899 and 1908: a setting of *Dover Beach* especially significant among them. The appeal of *The Scholar Gipsy* to the composer was then considered; also, the problems and potential rewards of making a viable operatic scenario and libretto out of such theatrically recalcitrant material, and the relevance of such a scenario to Vaughan Williams's 'grand narrative' - traceable in many works from the *Songs of Travel* and the Bunyan pageant to the *Seventh Symphony* and *Hodie* - of a redeeming journey towards some kind of transcendence. Matters of ideology and practical 'opera-craft' were equally touched on. Also considered was the possibility that Vaughan Williams connected his Arnoldian operatic project with one for a musical treatment of George Borrow's *Lavengro* (1851) - subtitle: *The Scholar, the Gipsy, the Priest* - and its sequel *The Romany Rye*. (Together with the earlier *Zincali* of Borrow, *Lavengro* - Vaughan Williams's favourite novel - made a contribution to the genesis of *Hugh the Drover*, and the composer proposed it at that time as the subject of a subsequent opera.) The significance of Vaughan Williams's *not* in the end writing a Borrowian or Arnoldian opera was considered in connection with his use in the late concert-piece *An Oxford Elegy* of spoken extracts from *The Scholar Gipsy* itself and from Arnold's companion-poem *Thyrsis* (both of them formal 'pastoral elegies', whose genre may throw light on the vexed use of 'pastoral' in the *Third Symphony*), and in connection finally with the marked modification of the VW Grand Narrative in the still later, uncompleted opera *Thomas the Rhymer*.

Alain Frogley
The Wasps for WASPs: Vaughan Williams and American musical politics

The significance of Vaughan Williams's strong transatlantic ties has been largely overlooked, both in the literature on the composer himself and in studies of American music. Yet the New World played a crucial role in Vaughan Williams's career and philosophical outlook, and his music has been embraced more widely and consistently in America than anywhere else outside Britain, by composers as well as performers and audiences. Whatever the intrinsically musical attractions of his works, Alain Frogley argued that mid-century American interest in Vaughan Williams also received a powerful impetus from broader cultural and political developments. The desire amidst sections of the American elite to reassert Anglo-Saxon hegemony in the national self-image; as a foil to increasing cultural diversity; the growing strength of the Anglo-American alliance in international affairs; the widespread interest in Anglo-American folksong and hymnody that emerged during this period: all these trends inevitably drew Vaughan Williams, as perceived ambassador of Englishness and champion of folk-song, into the debate surrounding American national identity, and the politics of race, class and gender that shaped this. Yet his relationship to such issues was not simple, and the appeal of his music ultimately went beyond the confines of special-interest groups.

Duncan Hinnells
Vaughan Williams and the politics of English nationalism: should we read him as a leader or victim?

A number of recent studies have sought to re-cast traditional images of Vaughan Williams. In particular, it has been argued that long-established associations of him with Englishness, folk song and pastoralism over-simplify a much more complex reality. A central theme has been to explore Vaughan Williams's national identity as a critical construction, which reflects at least as much about cultural pressures in modern Britain as it does about the composer himself.

Duncan Hinnells supported the general approach of recent revisionist discussions. However, he suggested that recent work on the composer's reception history, although highly significant, emphasised the critical construction of Vaughan Williams's reception so exclusively that it neglected the role played by a wider field of cultural production, in which not only critics but also institutions, markets and the composer himself were all involved. The speaker briefly outlined some of these processes by using examples drawn from Duncan Hinnells' recently-submitted doctoral thesis. He then moved on to the more complex question of how we might begin, to re-approach Vaughan Williams's music in the light of his own engagement - as a leader and as a victim - of English musical nationalism.

Jenny Doctor
VW and the BBC

The development of radio - in particular of radio broadcasting by the BBC - ran in parallel with the unfolding of Vaughan Williams's career. For him and composers of his generation, the growth of the new sound media had profound effects on their musical conceptions and their professional identities. Vaughan Williams listened frequently to the wireless, and had strong convictions about the BBC's responsibilities to British musical life. Jenny Doctor reviewed how he attempted to manipulate BBC music policies in the 1940s and 50s, how he viewed the Third Programme in particular once it was established in 1946, and the effectiveness of his efforts.

Day Two Saturday 20th November 1999

Deborah Heckert
The composer as historian: Vaughan Williams, Tudor music, and the genre of masque

While valuable work has been done by scholars investigating the connections among folk song, pastoralism and nationalism in the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams, less work has focused on the composer's understanding of the music of England's past and how his ideas about so-called "Tudor music" compare to those of folk song and national music. As a point of entry into the important issue of Vaughan Williams's understanding of Tudor music, both on the formal and ideological level, Deborah Heckert focused on the masque genre which figures prominently among Vaughan Williams's stage works. Several areas were explored: the contemporary academic sources, for the composer's knowledge of period and genre, Vaughan Williams's own writings on the subject of English musical history, and the period and generic characteristics which were conflated to serve as compositional models for the composer's masques. Works examined ranged from the very early realisation of Ben Jonson's *Pan's Anniversary*, through the pageant-like masques written for various amateur groups, to the most ambitious and complex of the works within the genre, *Job, a masque for dancing*.

Timothy Day
Vaughan Williams and 'the greatest of all composers'

Vaughan Williams's attitude towards Bach, the 'universal musician', 'the greatest composer the world has yet produced', he called him, gave a glimpse of what he considered the nature of musical experience to be at its most elevated and profound. His views on the nature of true musical experience were also illuminated by his criticisms of the attempts being made in the late 1940s and '50s to re-create eighteenth-century sonorities and performing styles. Why did he dislike the 'early music movement' so much?

(This presentation will be reproduced in full in the June issue of the RVWS Journal - Editor)

Stephen Banfield
Vaughan Williams and plain speaking

'I don't know whether I like it, but it's what I meant': truth above beauty, honesty over diplomacy, duty before desire. Vaughan Williams's musical idiom, and the vaunted lack of 'technique', can be seen as representative of all these values; but where did the values come from, and why were they imperative? Stephen Banfield explored these questions and the search for an answer quickly led away from music to historical, political and philosophical aspects of VW's cultural and class formation.

Hugh Cobbe
Yrs RVW: Vaughan Williams as letter-writer

Hugh Cobbe has been working for some years on an edition of the letters of Vaughan Williams. At present the corpus collected amounts to some 3000 letters, certainly a fraction of the number he wrote. The letters are distributed unevenly over his lifetime and are now to be found in many different locations. His habits as a letter writer were described and some general account was given of the recipients and of the topics discussed. Finally, some general conclusions about the man and his music were drawn from this hitherto largely unpublished body of material.

(See more details on page 4)

Jochen Eisentraut
Vaughan Williams: National Music, Art Music and the Vernacular.

In his lectures on National Music, Vaughan Williams made a strong case for rooting art music in traditional music. He posits 'folk-song' as the distillation of a musical language over many generations. The relationship with the vernacular was strained or even severed in mainstream modernism and re-emerged as a post-modern option. Jochen Eisentraut reviewed VW's folk song and its proximity to the vernacular.

Malcolm Taylor
Through Bushes, Briars - and Brentwood: RVW and the folk-song revival

This talk covered VW's connection with the early folk song revival, in particular his methods of collecting of folk songs and relationship to contemporary collectors such as Cecil Sharp.

Julian Onderdonk
Hymn Tunes from Folksongs: Vaughan Williams and English Hymnody

Commentators on Vaughan Williams have long acknowledged the central importance of English folksongs and English hymn tunes to his 'nationalist' vision. Indeed, observing that he adapted folksongs for use in *The English Hymnal* and in other hymnbooks, they have come to see the two as twin components of that vision. Yet none of the commentators espousing this view has examined the editorial

(Continued on page 12)

Vaughan Williams's Letters

A rare performance of
Vaughan Williams's *Piano Quintet*

With considerable anticipation, a large audience was drawn to the Royal College of Music on 19 November, 1999 to hear the first modern performance of Vaughan Williams's *Quintet in C minor* for piano, violin, viola, cello and double bass. This *Quintet* is the first result of a collaboration between Faber Music and RVW Ltd. to produce an authorized edition of many of VW's chamber works withdrawn by the composer.

The work was finished in October 1903 and revised in April 1904 and again in September 1905. Vaughan Williams had by then finished *In the fen country*, *The House of Life* and the *Songs of Travel* so he was producing works of quality. Michael Kennedy tells us that the last known performance of the work before it was withdrawn was on 8 June 1918.

The composer's unhappiness with the work is hard to understand. The opening *Allegro con fuoco* is bold and invigorating showing the influence of Brahms. A reflective central episode in this large-scale first movement is more characteristic. It has a rapt inward quality that is reminiscent of the *Phantasy Quintet*.

The central *Andante* is quite lovely. Opening with an extended part for solo piano, the writing is expressive and overtly romantic. Its beauty is tempered only by the movement outstaying its welcome.

The *Moderato* finale has the piano again as the dominant instrument with a theme VW reused 50 years later in the *Violin Sonata*. The influence of Brahms is clear even as Vaughan Williams's lyricism and nobility shine through.

It was a privilege to be present on this occasion with three RCM scholars - Tom Hankey (violin), Martin Saving (viola) and Naomi Williams (cello) - together with Charlotte Hooper-Greenhill (bass) and David Warn (piano), all in excellent form. We look forward eagerly to further chamber music from VW's early years from this fruitful RVW Ltd. /Faber partnership.

Stephen Connock

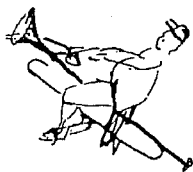
Hugh Cobbe told the audience at the British Library Conference that his work on editing VW's letters was nearing completion. Stephen Connock sends this report from the Conference.

However, over 700 letters are still in the process of being edited. A major problem is often that of dating them since VW often omitted any date, or if he does give a date he does not add the year. Dating the letters was a challenge that he particularly enjoyed and involved using such as postmarks, addresses, writing paper or detailed analysis of the contents of the letter. Of the 3000 letters, 1,450 had been sent to just 15 people, including for example, 202 to Finzi, 130 to Ursula Vaughan Williams and 150 to Michael Kennedy. Few inward letters to the composer had survived.

Overall, Hugh Cobbe said, the letters provided remarkable insights into Vaughan Williams's opinions on a wide range of issues including other composers. They provide a vivid picture of the man and will illuminate our understanding of him, showing his breadth of vision, largeness of mind and concerns for his friends.

Thanks to help from Eric Saylor over a three-month period in 1998-99, Hugh Cobbe was hopeful that his work would be completed in 2000. Good luck to him, and we await the finished product with the keenest of interest.

Thanks awfully for the photographs
I send you one when they
are if I may. You might
have been taken outside
your home - I saw
him to be taken - perhaps
on an open place



An early letter from Vaughan Williams to Holst (about 1895).

Reproduced with the kind permission of
Ursula Vaughan Williams and the Oxford University Press

Hugh Cobbe's monumental effort to edit for publication Vaughan Williams's letters has involved examining over 3000 examples. Many owners of letters inspected for the project have generously presented them to the British Library to join the growing collection there, though many remain dispersed throughout the UK, America and even Australasia. Hugh Cobbe reported that the letters which had been edited were spread over the following time periods:

- 1900-1909 - 104
- 1910-1919 - 136
- 1920-1929 - 178
- 1930-1939 - 588
- 1940-1949 - 596
- 1950-1958 - 612

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The Fifth Symphony

A study of genesis and genre
by Arnold Whittall

Arnold Whittall, in an insightful special meeting in 1998 at the Royal College of Music, reflects on aspects of the *Fifth Symphony*.

I want to address two very different aspects of this marvellous work. They can be summarised in two seven-letter words that differ by only one letter: genetic and generic. The genetic approach to the work concerns the various stages it went through before completion - and I'm introducing this with the source materials divided between the British Library and the Royal College of Music Library very much in mind. The generic approach is more to do with the nature and the character of the completed work - as we think of it, and as it is performed and widely enjoyed. So, if the genetic looks at the work in progress, the generic looks at the work as a complete entity, which has now been with us for some 55 years or so. As far as I know (I don't pretend to be an expert on the genetic side of this topic) there is as yet no really exhaustive or authoritative review of the sources for the work and it is very clear, from what Michael Kennedy has said in his Vaughan Williams Catalogue, that study of the symphony's genesis would involve working on the sketch materials which are in the British Library, looking at the full score which is also in the British Library, and looking at the earlier draft full score which is in the library of the Royal College of Music. The score that we have here at the RCM is that little less polished, that little bit less finished in terms of what was eventually printed and published. But that means that it yields all sorts of particularly interesting materials for the scholar. The RCM score gives us a very good and vivid picture of the composer as self-critic, scratching out, rubbing out, writing over the actual draft that he is working on at the time. From the brief period that I spent with this material, it's clear to me that the over-riding factor in Vaughan Williams's mind, as he worked on this draft, was the need not to go over the top, to be under-stated rather than over-stated, to simplify, to compress, and these are aspects of his musical character which many of us find particularly attractive. The way he avoids blatancy and tries to be expressive through restraint rather than through flamboyancy is most distinctive.

The character of the RCM draft is also

dominated by a great sensitivity to the actual sound of the music. You find the composer making many fine adjustments of texture, altering doublings in various ways, changing doublings in thirds to doublings in sixths - for example, in the second movement where he decides that it is a slightly more transparent and better balanced sound with sixths rather than thirds. The composer is aiming, not for elegance, but for under-statement, for something which doesn't draw attention to itself in any awkward way. This is what I am calling the genetic side of research into the symphony and there are many other interesting examples that could be given.



VW at the time of writing his Fifth Symphony
(photograph courtesy of Ursula Vaughan Williams)

Of course, it would be dangerous to suggest that these examples provide an exact reproduction of Vaughan Williams's working methods. I believe passionately that the study of drafts and sketches has to be undertaken with enormous caution: there is always the danger that musicologists start to believe that they know what the composer was actually thinking. We can never claim to reproduce the decision-making process exactly, and I don't think we should attempt to, but we can still draw conclusions from the changes and corrections we find in drafts. It is an interesting question, of course, to ask whether all the changes and corrections are for the good: with some

composers, I sometimes think that changes often do more harm than good. But I don't think that is so with Vaughan Williams, from what I have seen of his materials in the RCM library!

I now move on to the subject of generic analysis, and to certain endlessly fascinating questions about this work - what is symphonic about it? Does it have the right title? I want to consider the symphonic cohesiveness of the work, whether there are ambiguities, and whether consideration of these topics actually enhances our appreciation of the symphony. Let's start with the normal idea of something called *Symphony in D Major*. We expect symphonies in D Major, any work which claims to be in D Major, to have a relatively open and sunny character. Yet if there is one thing that we all know and remember

about the Vaughan Williams score, it's that it doesn't begin with a straightforward statement of the D Major chord, but with something much more indefinite and ambiguous. This must be one of the most unemphatic symphonic openings ever conceived. It comes as no surprise to realise that the composer considered calling the work *Symphony in G*, and if he had written the first movement as it is now and had done something else for the fourth movement, then *Symphony in G* as the title wouldn't worry us too much. We would say: 'oh well, you know, it is more in G than anything else.' It is not in G in the way that Dvorák's *Eighth Symphony* is in G, or Haydn's *Oxford Symphony* is in G - but 'G' is one way of explaining the first movement's opening in terms of tonality. Yet there are other aspects to this opening that are perhaps more germane to the composer's way of thinking than the question of whether it was in G or D major or any other key. It has a haunting, serious quality to it, and it's not surprising that it should mean so much to the composer. We know that Vaughan Williams dedicated the

symphony to Sibelius, who had been silent for quite a while by 1943, but was still alive, and still frequently performed and highly regarded, certainly in this country. So the idea of a tribute to Sibelius is something that made sense: and a good way of celebrating Sibelius is by a veiled reference to his work. My suggestion is that Vaughan Williams's opening subtly recalls the opening of Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony*, with its dark brooding texture in the cellos and basses, and a sustained C moving on to D, F sharp and E. The characters of the two openings could hardly be more different. The Sibelius is dour and overtly tragic in mood, the Vaughan Williams, far from that. So I

am not saying that Vaughan Williams was consciously alluding to Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony*: rather that these two openings are technically comparable.

There are other examples of a comparable sonority in different music of the time. One work, which comes to mind in this respect, is the *First String Quartet* by Benjamin Britten, which was composed in 1941 and first performed in the UK in London in the Wigmore Hall in April 1943. This was three months before the Vaughan Williams symphony was premièred, so there was no question of borrowing, and Britten uses the sonority in his own very different way, with an E inserted between the D and F sharp and the whole transposed up several octaves. A low C against D major harmony is also a very important feature of Britten's first movement. The object of drawing attention to these similarities is not to suggest that Britten influenced Vaughan Williams, or *vice versa*, but rather to identify a certain kind of harmony, a certain kind of procedure that was in the air at the time. Yet the main effect of finding these similarities is actually to enhance the differences between them. One finishes up by saying yes, of course, there is a certain fundamental resemblance between the Sibelius, Britten and Vaughan Williams works, but their context and their character could hardly be more different. They do point to a certain way of thinking about tonality, I think, which you can find in all three composers. It's a way of thinking which seeks to resist any tendency to move in the direction of the expressionism or intense fragmentation of other contemporary music. So it is in the best sense of the word a conservative procedure, a conservative way of thinking, but a conservatism which renews and doesn't simply reproduce well-established procedures mechanically and unimaginatively.

I've worked a lot with the analysis of 20th century music, and the most fascinating thing of all to me about the structure of VW's *Fifth*, as opposed to its character, is the almost tongue-in-cheek attitude of Vaughan Williams to the symphonic genre. When I say 'tongue in cheek', I don't mean that he was sending up the symphony, far from it. But I think he relished the prospect of a work which avoids conventional symphonic characteristics as much as it adopts them. Vaughan Williams distances himself from traditional symphonism in the *Fifth* by giving the movements titles: and those titles, certainly in the case of the first and third movements, called *Prelude* and *Romanza*, do not immediately suggest symphonic movements at all. In the case of the *Romanza*, in particular, the effect of the title is to make the character of the movement much more subtle, much more complex and much more ambiguous - especially with respect to its rather 'religious' atmosphere - than it would be if it had no title at all. All these matters of

genre and style should be the basis for further consideration and further research. They seem to me to open up possibilities that are still being explored and could still lead to some very interesting and novel conclusions.

What I will do now is focus in a bit more on the music itself, in order to try to convey something of what I think is most important and valuable about the work. In order to introduce this I would like to refer to what Michael Kennedy said about the work in his marvellous book on Vaughan Williams because, of course, there has been so much discussion about the relationship between the *Fifth Symphony* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Yes, I have to mention *The Pilgrim's Progress*, to refer to its relation to the symphony and also to the symphony's possible representation of pastoral - pastoral in a rather different sense from the third Vaughan Williams symphony, called *The Pastoral*. Michael Kennedy summarises some of these topics very well by saying that it is a "supreme work of art, the product of so many varying constituent elements."

That is the key phrase to me - the product of so many varied constituent elements. This is what we need to bear in mind, and what we experience in a performance as a kind of seamless entity. It really is a seamless entity - a triumph over many disparate elements. For example, Kennedy explains that parts of it were first heard as music for a pageant, about preservation of the countryside from bungalow growth, which the composer was involved in around 1938. That was really when it got started. The symphony also shares several themes with *The Pilgrim's Progress*: but it is easy to exaggerate the connection between the two works. You will, of course, not find the whole of the symphony in the opera. But many of the ideas from the first, third and fourth movements are there. It is perhaps most important to remember that the material for the symphony's *Passacaglia*, the finale, occurs in the opera early on when there is a description of peace, the house called peace. It must therefore be the case that the ending of the symphony evokes, or encapsulates, that sense of peace and stability which occurs early in the opera and not at the end.

So Kennedy's point about the many varied constituent elements is very well taken, and I don't think that we should seek to under-value the disparities and the diversities that are present in the symphony - the urban as well as the pastoral, the unquiet as well as the serene. What I will focus on now are the instances where that diversity and that tension are most effectively and powerfully deployed by the composer. The first movement is, to me, one of the most radical conceptions that Vaughan Williams ever completed. People rather assume that it is not radical, or progressive, to the extent that say the finale of the *Sixth* is, or the whole of

the *Sixth*, or much of the *Fourth*. The impression is created that the *Fifth* was a kind of well-deserved holiday from the stresses and strains of the *Fourth*, before he geared up again for number six. But I find the closing stages of the *Fifth*'s first movement to be the most bleak and disturbing music that the composer ever wrote. This is because of the context in which it happens. It has an eerie, very tense character: and in an effective performance of the work, that first movement ending continues to haunt the music from then onwards.

I think that the second and third movements are best thought of as attempts to escape from that character in very different ways. They complement each other, but they both can be construed as attempts to get away from the implacable (though understated) assertiveness that that ending of the first movement presents us with. The finale, the *Passacaglia*, seems at first to be the most overtly genial and triumphant kind of music that you could possibly wish for. It swaggers along in its louder sections and it really does seem to have resolved to turn darkness into light. But, of course, the crucial thing in the finale is the darkening that takes place, the disturbance that comes in, the tendency to move away from D major back towards F minor and the crisis that this creates, summed up most powerfully by the return of the first movement material itself. This is the most marvellous moment, when the first movement material comes back with the pounding Cs in the bass: and although that kind of climactic, cyclic return is, by the mid-20th century, a familiar symphonic trick, it is something that only a composer who is very confident in his ability to sustain a symphonic argument would dare to do. Vaughan Williams does it magnificently and is absolutely justified in bringing back this first movement material to create a sense of crisis.

The crisis adds up to the fact that the ending could go either way. It could go in the direction of the first movement, the bleak ghostly ending, or it could go in the direction with which the *Passacaglia* began. Now, which direction does it go in? This is the question that I would like to leave you with because we could say, without much fear of contradiction, well of course it doesn't end like the first movement ends, it could hardly be more different. It doesn't end with that oscillation between F minor and D major, with C in the bass: instead it goes back to pure D major, it goes back to the *Passacaglia* material. Yes, it goes back to the *Passacaglia* material and we hear the *Passacaglia* material transformed, even transfigured into a beautiful, ethereal, other-worldly flowing texture moving very serenely and very slowly, opening into musical space, until in the end you are just left with the sublime strings - a huge span of

(continued on page 16)

Five Mystical Songs

An Introduction and CD Review

by Jonathan Pearson

the age of only forty.⁵ Having begun composing the songs around 1906, when he was in his mid-thirties, Vaughan Williams was of a similar age to the poet. As Michael Kennedy has written, 'this is young man's poetry and music'.⁶ Vaughan Williams was attracted to

*'The Five Mystical Songs (1911)... add little to the general experience of Vaughan Williams's musical nature, as so far observed. These songs owe much of their welcome to their collocation with Herbert's homely mysticism... [T]he texture is too reactionary to be distinctive. Harmony derived from various modes in turn (the chief feature of the much sung The Call), a restless but steadily pegged tonality, and a firm turn to the major by way of epilogue, musically unpersuasive, and a weak text, are prevailing features. Let All the World maintains an inner exuberance without going much further.'*¹

Reading Professor Dickinson's description of *Five Mystical Songs* you might be forgiven for dismissing them out of hand. The opinion of Benjamin Britten² (who facetiously referred to them as 'the fifteen biblical songs'), after a radio broadcast in 1935, that they were technically incompetent, 'pi' and artificially mystic, might well put off the most sympathetic listener. But the cold eye (or is it ear?) of musicological scrutiny is not directly comparable with the æsthetic rewards of real music making, or even a CD performance. There are many subjective elements that go to make up a rewarding musical experience — the excitement of an 'occasion', the mood of the listener, the ambience, even what one had for dinner! We do not need to worry unduly at the undertones of Elgar or the backward glances to VW's earlier Rossetti settings, simply to enjoy the passion, the richness, the sheer beauty of sound of these songs. Certainly, Claire Mackail (the sister-in-law of baritone Campbell McInnes who sang in the first performance) was not thinking of rising fourths or parallel triads as she sat in Worcester Cathedral, at one of the concerts, waiting for the performance to begin. Ursula Vaughan Williams tells us that Claire 'recalled seeing Adeline³ sitting in the nave of the cathedral:

with the sun shining through the windows on her hair which looked like pure gold. It was an unforgettable sight, the two of them. He had a thick thatch of dark hair, a tall, rather heavy figure, even then slightly bowed; and his face was profoundly moving, deep humanity and yet with the quality of a mediæval sculpture—'⁴

As a result of the interest aroused by the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* at the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester in 1910, Vaughan Williams had been commissioned to produce a new work for Worcester the following year. He decided to polish up, rewriting where necessary, the *Five Mystical Songs* on which he had been working sporadically since 1906. He had chosen as his text poems by the seventeenth century religious poet George Herbert, from the collection known as *The Temple*, published just after his death from tuberculosis in 1633, at

Herbert on two main levels. One was that the poet had also been a musician — John Aubrey was told 'that he had a very good hand on the Lute, and that he sett his own Lyricks or sacred poems'.⁷ The other was a shared affinity with music as a 'divine voice'. Vaughan Williams's mysticism 'is to be found in that self-same divinity of music through which alone he could perceive the ultimate realities'.⁸ The settings were for baritone solo, mixed chorus and orchestra (with an alternative accompaniment of string quintet and piano), or for baritone and piano alone, without chorus. Vaughan Williams conducted the first performance in Worcester Cathedral on Thursday 14 September 1911, with Campbell McInnes (the baritone whose voice he had had in mind when composing the songs), the Three Choirs Festival Chorus and the London Symphony Orchestra.

Anxious to build on the favourable reception of *Tallis* the previous year, but with very little rehearsal time available, VW later recalled:

I was thoroughly nervous. When I looked at the fiddles I thought I was going mad, for I saw what appeared to be Kreisler⁹ at a back desk. I got through somehow, and at the end I whispered to Reed,¹⁰ 'Am I mad, or did I see Kreisler in the band?' 'Oh yes,' he said, 'he broke a string and wanted to play it in before the Elgar concerto and couldn't without being heard in the Cathedral.'¹¹

The Three Choirs Festival, founded in around 1715, was one of the more permanent fixtures of the English musical calendar, but there was much else going on besides.¹² The two outstanding events of 1911 were the visit of the Russian Imperial Ballet in April and the Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary on 22 June. The Coronation brought new works by Parry, Stanford and Elgar, and on 26 July the King and Queen attended a gala concert at Covent Garden, with excerpts from *Aida*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and, of course, a performance by the sensation of the year, Diaghilev's Russian Ballet. In Paris, the reception of Nijinsky and Karsavina had been ecstatic, and anticipation in London intense. The Covent Garden audiences were not disappointed — indeed, their anticipations were perhaps exceeded. *Les Sylphides* and

⁵ He was not the first contemporary composer to set Herbert. Walford Davies included *The Call* and *Let all the World* (among other poems by Herbert and Herrick) in his choral work, *Noble Numbers*, heard at Hereford in 1909. [Christopher Palmer, sleeve notes for Chandos CDA66420, p. 6.]

⁶ Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, Oxford University Press, 2nd edn. 1980, p. 132.

⁷ Oliver Lawson Dick (ed.), *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, Secker & Warburg, 3rd edn. 1958, p. 137.

⁸ Michael Kennedy, *Works*, pp. 131-2

⁹ Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962). Virtuoso violinist and composer. Born in Vienna, he settled first in Berlin, then Paris. In 1939 he went to the USA and became an American citizen in 1940.

¹⁰ W. H. Reed (1876-1941). Violinist, conductor, teacher, author and composer. Joined LSO 1904; leader from 1912. Friend of Elgar, RVW, etc.

¹¹ Quoted in Ursula Vaughan Williams, *RVW*, p. 97. Kreisler was to play the Elgar *Violin Concerto* later in the concert.

¹² The following information on the musical events of 1911 is taken from Lewis Foreman (ed.), *Music in England 1885-1920 as recounted in Hazell's Annual*, Thames Publishing, 1994, pp. 86-88.

¹ A. E. F. Dickinson, *Vaughan Williams*, Faber and Faber, 1963, pp. 163-4.

² In a letter to Vaughan Williams's pupil, Grace Williams, quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, Faber and Faber, 1992, p. 62. VW, adjudicating the Farrar Composition Prize of 1931 (which Britten won), is supposed to have described BB's effort as 'very clever but beastly'. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³ Adeline (née Fisher) was Vaughan Williams's first wife (died 1951).

⁴ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *RVW: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 97.

Scheherazade were among the works performed and the Company was immediately re-engaged for the Autumn.¹³

How, then, does Vaughan Williams fit into this cosmopolitan picture? The answer is, more than one might at first realise. It would be a grave mistake to imagine that the Vaughan Williams of the *Tallis Fantasia* and the *Five Mystical Songs*, the *English Hymnal* and *Linden Lea* should inhabit a completely different milieu from the fashionable and glitzy world of Diaghilev. Indeed, he was never insular and was always aware of the international picture. He had studied with Max Bruch in Berlin in 1897-8 and it was only three years since his time in Paris with Ravel. He had fallen under the spell of Wagner as early as 1892 while still a student. It is not such a surprise, therefore, to find him meeting over lunch at the Savoy that year the great Russian impresario himself, with Nijinsky and the theatre designer Gordon Craig.¹⁴ However, the subject of the projected ballet, *Cupid and Psyche* (as suggested by Craig), was not one to which Vaughan Williams naturally warmed. Furthermore, Craig demanded a finished score to which he would fit the story but VW insisted on having the scenario first. The resulting impasse sealed its fate, leaving us with the tantalising thought of what a Russian ballet by Vaughan Williams might have been like.¹⁵

Although concert attendance that year suffered somewhat from the rival attractions of coronation festivities and the very hot summer weather, there were first performances of Elgar's *Second Symphony* and Granville Bantock's symphonic poem *Dante and Beatrice* in its newly revised version. At the Festival of Empire in the Crystal Palace an 'Imperial Choir' of four thousand voices performed an all-British programme. Henry Wood conducted most of the Promenade concerts and the Sheffield Triennial Festival, where he also trained the choir in Bach's *B minor Mass* and *St. Matthew Passion*, Brahms's *Song of Destiny*, Bantock's *Omar Khayyâm*, Part I, and excerpts from Wagner's *Ring* and *Parsifal*. He also conducted *Messiah*, *Elijah* and the *St. Matthew Passion* at the Three Choirs, and received a knighthood.

Choral music was somewhat in the doldrums. There were performances of *Messiah*, Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha* and Elgar's *King Olaf* and *Dream of Gerontius*, but 'the lack of fresh material... indicated a dearth in the supply of promising new works'. Indeed, the Queen's Hall Choral Society was disbanded 'owing to the difficulty of finding novelties of sufficient attractiveness'.¹⁶

There were, however, a number of 'novelties' at the Three Choirs Festival. Worcester was particularly colourful, with extra coronation decorations as well as the usual festival flags. Elgar, the leading light, was in fine form. He had printed a handbill of "Side Shows", lampooning well-known festival personalities, public figures and friends to whom they were distributed.¹⁷

More seriously, as a result of an idea by the Festival organiser (and organist of the cathedral), his friend Ivor Atkins,¹⁸ Elgar had arranged two Bach chorales for brass. These were played from the top of the cathedral tower to introduce each part of the *St. Matthew Passion* (being performed in the new Elgar-Atkins edition). This was a great success and became the sensation of the festival.¹⁹

Among recent works performed at the festival were Elgar's new symphony and Parry's *Coronation Te Deum*, as well as special commissions from Bantock (*Overture to a Greek Tragedy*), Walford Davies (*Sayings of Christ*, a setting of words from Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*), W. H. Reed (*Variations for String Orchestra*) and Vaughan Williams (*Five Mystical Songs*).

So how should we approach the *Five Mystical Songs*? The title begs the question, How mystical? Does the music match the mood of the poetry? Frank Howes made a distinction between metaphysical and mystical, the former implying an enquiry of logical reasoning, the latter 'a vision employing intuition', and I think I would agree with him in placing both Herbert and Vaughan Williams in the realms of the mystical.²⁰

The critics differ on how far VW has succeeded in matching the spirit of the poetry. Wilfred Mellers thinks that, although Edwardian hints in the music of the Housman settings of *On Wenlock Edge* (1909) were apposite to the text, such Elgarian and Parryan traits in *Five Mystical Songs* 'are at odds with the sober precision, tough wit, and humane fervour of Herbert's poetry'.²¹ Michael Kennedy, on the other hand, asserts that 'it is a remarkable feature of this cycle that the religious sentiments are expressed in music of much romantic ardour which does not seem at odds with the text'.²² In the end, I think that music and poetry of such heart-felt inspiration necessarily speaks most directly to those who also see and feel the spiritual link between them and share the mystic vision.

The first two songs, *Easter* and *I Got Me Flowers* take as their text the two halves of a single poem. In the first, Herbert praises the risen Christ and draws on thoughts of alchemy that in the ashes of his death 'His life may make thee gold, and much more just.' Vaughan Williams's rising fourth on the exhortation 'Rise heart' is another decisive stroke, following on from the bold choral entry of *A Sea Symphony*.

In the following verses the composer was clearly inspired by Herbert's vivid musical imagery. The poet addresses his lute, likening its substance to the Cross of Jesus which 'taught all wood to resound his name', and comparing the tension in its strings with the 'stretched sinews' of the crucified Christ. The prominent harp at these words is one

¹³ Also new at Covent Garden that year were Puccini's *The Girl of the Golden West* (1910) and what was considered to be an over-lavish production of Massenet's *Thaïs* (1894), but neither composer was judged to be at his best in these works.

¹⁴ (Edward Henry) Gordon Craig (1872-1966), actor, artist and stage designer, was the illegitimate son of the architect Edward William Godwin and the actress Ellen Terry. He was nearly as famous for his amatory liaisons as for his brilliant and boldly innovative stage designs.

¹⁵ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *RVW*, pp. 93-4.

¹⁶ Lewis Foreman (ed.), *Music in England 1885-1920*, p. 87.

¹⁷ Information on Elgar and the Worcester Festival comes from E. Wulstan Atkins, *The Elgar-Atkins Friendship*, David & Charles, 1984. Incidentally, after the festival, Elgar [aged 54!] planned more 'high jinks' in the form of a 'Flight from Worcester' à la Charles II! He and a friend were to leave the

train at Great Malvern, hire a donkey and a small horse (his friend was large), and ride the whole length of the Malvern Hills, completing their journey to Hereford by train from Malvern Wells. The journey was accomplished, but at the expense of 'an awful chill'. [E. Wulstan Atkins, pp. 231-2]

¹⁸ Sir Ivor Algonson Atkins (1869-1953). Organist and Master of the Choristers, Worcester Cathedral, 1897-1950. Conductor, Three Choirs Festivals at Worcester, 1899-1948. Knighted in 1921 for his part in the revival of the Three Choirs Festivals at Worcester in 1920 after the First World War.

¹⁹ E. Wulstan Atkins, pp. 227-31.

²⁰ Frank Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, Oxford University Press 1954, p. 132.

²¹ Wilfred Mellers, *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*, 2nd edn. Albion Music 1997, p. 163.

²² Michael Kennedy, *Works*, p. 132.

of my favourite moments in the cycle. In the third verse the poet asks that 'heart and lute' combine to 'twist a song' and imagines an ideal harmony of lute, heart and Holy Spirit.

The second part of the poem (Vaughan Williams's second song) *I Got Me Flowers*, is Herbert's realisation of the song he imagined in the first part. He compares Christ's resurrection with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as described in *Mark* 11: 8-9. He alludes to the spices brought by the women to the tomb to embalm his body but says that Christ has no need of these. The music begins gently, but builds to a climax with soloist, chorus and full orchestra at the final declaration that there is no day to compare with this: 'There is but one, and that one ever.' Vaughan Williams begins this phrase with a variation of the *Sine Nomine* motif which crops up again and again in his music 'at times of elation or release',²³ and which was first heard in the final song of his Rossetti cycle *The House of Life*. In the middle he employs a wordless chorus, perhaps for emphasis, but less successfully, I think, than in the next song, which I shall discuss below. I am reminded of H. C. Colles's later criticism of the technique in *Flos Campi*, that:

The ear, which will be content to take a melody simply as a melody from Mr Tertis's viola [or here, from the baritone soloist], feels that the same melody sung to 'Ah' or with closed lips by voices has not the same eloquence, because the voices could do something more with it.²⁴

Love Bade Me Welcome was the last song to be written. It is also the longest and most complex, being largely in the form of a dialogue between the poet and Love (i.e. God). It symbolises that final communion described by Jesus to his disciples when he warns them to be always prepared, like servants awaiting the arrival of their master in the middle of the night:

Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.²⁵

The undulating chords in this song remind us of both the earlier *Songs of Travel* and the later *Pastoral Symphony*. Together with the questioning tone of the opening repeated phrase, they seem to me to convey the very hesitancy and doubt which James Day finds lacking.²⁶ At the end, Vaughan Williams again uses a wordless chorus, to intone the ancient *Corpus Christi* antiphon, *O Sacrum Convivium*. This time the voices introduce and comment on the final lines:

*You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat*

and the soloist's melody follows the contours of the plainsong. Here is one of those wonderful passages in Vaughan Williams's music that either touches something very deep within your soul or simply passes you by. For James Day it consists of the 'rather flaccid choral vocalising on "Ah" at the end' and he concludes that 'Vaughan Williams's mastery of the wordless chorus in later works

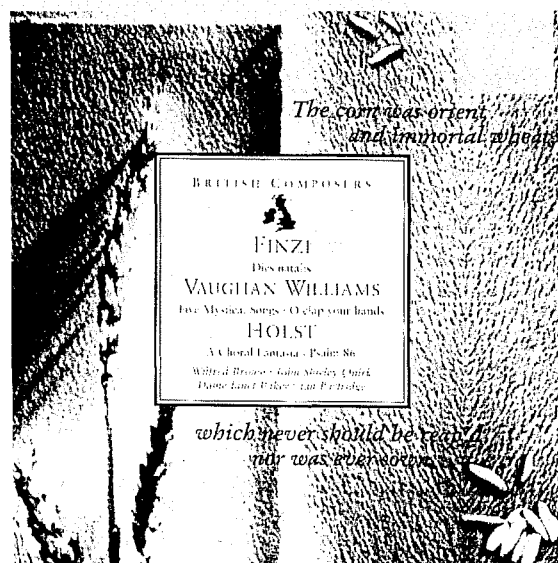
merely emphasises his comparative inexperience here.'²⁷ Christopher Palmer, on the other hand, was one of those lucky ones to whom this music speaks directly without the need for analysis:

The rapt stillness at [the centre of this song] — the Act, at which point in the traditionally Edenic key of E wordless voices intone the *O Sacrum convivium* — is one of the great moments in Vaughan Williams, like the sighting of the New Jerusalem in *Sancta Civitas*.²⁸

The penultimate song, *The Call*, is a hymn, profound thoughts in deceptively simple words. In a kind of trinity, the three verses begin, each in its opening line, by invoking three attributes of God, the ensuing three lines describing how each attribute guides us through life and brings us to communion with God. The internal rhymes propel us ever forward until at the end we feel we have travelled the same journey with the poet. The symmetry of the repeated words and internal rhymes creates a satisfying inevitability, which is perfectly mirrored in Vaughan Williams's beautiful tune and its timeless modal harmony.

Finally, we come to *Antiphon*, for chorus alone (except in the version for baritone and piano). This is the well-known hymn, *Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing, My God and King*, a straightforward song of praise set in a rumbustious and forthright manner, of a kind which was to be repeated in many later works. *The Times*, reporting on the first London performance,²⁹ thought that 'the spirit of the words is reproduced with extraordinary sympathy; and the words themselves are declaimed in a way which indicates a true musical descendant of Lawes and Purcell.'³⁰

There are four main recordings of the work in the full orchestral version, ranging in date from 1968 to 1990. These are:



John Shirley-Quirk, baritone
Choir of King's College, Cambridge
English Chamber Orchestra
Conducted by David Willcocks
Recorded in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge,
August 1968

[EMI] CDM5 65588-2

[ADD]

²³ Michael Kennedy, *Works*, pp. 113-14.

²⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 190-1. H. C. ('Harry') Colles, (1879-1943), as well as being music critic of *The Times* for many years, also edited the 3rd and 4th editions of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

²⁵ *Luke* 12: 37.

²⁶ James Day, *Vaughan Williams* (in 'The Master Musicians' series), 3rd edn., Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 119.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁸ Christopher Palmer, sleeve notes for Chandos CDA66420, p. 7.

²⁹ At the Aeolian Hall on 21 November 1911. The work was sung once more by Campbell McInnes, but in the version for baritone and piano, without chorus. The pianist was Hamilton Harty. [Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, Oxford: University Press, 2nd edn. 1996, p. 56.]

³⁰ Michael Kennedy, *Works*, p. 133.



Thomas Allen, baritone [Hyperion] CDA66420
 Corydon Singers
 English Chamber Orchestra
 Conducted by Matthew Best
 Recorded on 18/19 February, 1990 [DDD]

I must say at once that these are all good performances. Indeed, listening to them many times, as I have during the last few weeks, I am still finding it difficult to choose one above the others.

Reviewing is a dangerous business. As I said at the beginning of this article, a lot depends on the attitude of the listener at the time of listening. On one occasion, I thought that a particular performance, while clearly expressive, did not penetrate the surface—that it seemed strangely empty. Listening to it again, I cannot understand my reaction at all. It was clearly a reflection of *my* state of mind, not the quality of the performance. In the end, subjectivity cannot be eliminated, and if, as you listen to these recordings, you violently disagree with my judgements, then 'fair enough'. Criticism should encourage us to *listen* and not just *hear* the music, and should act as a stimulus to debate.

For many years the only recording was the David Willcocks on EMI, with the wonderful voice of John Shirley-Quirk, to be heard on so many fine Vaughan Williams recordings of the late sixties and early seventies. This much-loved recording is the one I grew up with, and therefore, subjectively, it is the one I have to use as my benchmark. In its earliest incarnation it appeared on LP, and mine certainly took a hammering.

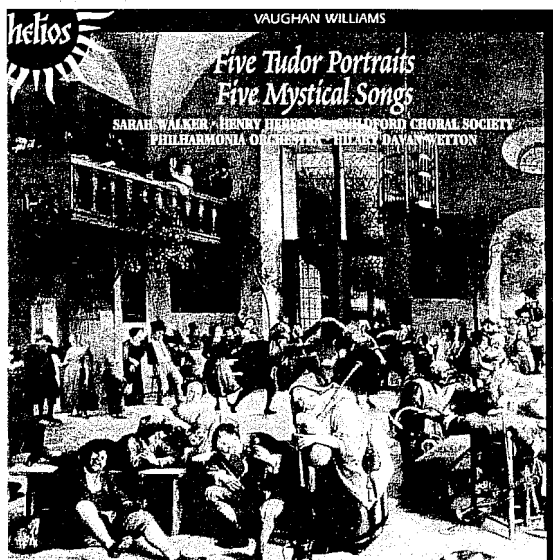
The 1968 recording is, of course, analogue and suffers from very slight distortion at the biggest climaxes. That said, the sound is full and rich, and more analytically detailed than any of its rivals. The close-miking, typical of its period, brings out every delicious detail of the orchestral part, whilst retaining the wonderfully rich ambience of Trinity College chapel.

You can really feel the tautness of the 'stretchèd sinews' in *Easter*, and it is a delight to savour the beautiful rising chord progression with its silky strings at the end of the song. In *The Call*, Shirley-Quirk sustains the closely-wrought lines and tune perfectly, and sings with just the right tension in the dialogue of *Love bade me welcome*. The voices of King's College choir, *senza espressione* as marked in the *Sacrum Convivium*, seem to hang in the air, perfectly balanced with the woodwind doubling the voices. Every word of the choral *Antiphon* is heard, and David Willcocks, organist at Worcester in the fifties, and who knew the composer from those days, brings just the right amount of drive to the piece.

Listening to Brian Rayner Cook and the London Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra, conducted by Bryden Thomson on Chandos, two observations immediately strike me. The recording (made nearly twenty years after the Willcocks) is digital, with a smooth, opulent 'Chandos sound', and there is a more natural balance in the orchestra.

Brian Rayner Cook is a sympathetic soloist, if his tone just occasionally reminds me (dare I say it) of the 'piousness' so deprecated by Britten. His articulation, however, is exemplary in *I got me flowers*, and he is at his best in *The Call*—beautifully and sensitively sung. Listen to the perfectly judged *diminuendo* at the end of *The Call*, from both soloist and orchestra.

Brian Rayner Cook, baritone [Chandos] CHAN 8590
 The London Philharmonic Choir
 The London Philharmonic
 Conducted by Bryden Thomson
 Recorded in St Jude's Church, London NW11 on 15/16 January, 1988 [DDD]



Henry Herford, baritone [Hyperion/Helios] CDH55004
 Guildford Choral Society
 Philharmonia Orchestra
 Conducted by Hilary Davan Wetton
 Recorded in Henry Wood Hall, London on 27/28 March, 1988 [DDD]



Bryden Thomson's reading is generally as well-paced as Willcocks', except in the first song, which seems just a little too laid back. The harp is not as prominent in this recording with the result that the sinews are not quite so well-stretched, but the London Philharmonic Choir are full-bodied, and just a shade more spirited in *Antiphon* than King's College.

Henry Herford, in the earlier of the two Hyperion recordings, uses more *vibrato* than the two singers so far mentioned, giving his performance slightly less mystery, not helped by the slightly drier acoustic of the Henry Wood Hall. The opening 'Rise, Heart' is good, and sounds more authoritative than Brian Rayner Cook's, but, on the whole, Herford's *timbre* is more suited to the quieter songs. He has good expression, though he is somewhat lack-lustre where he should be *poco animato* at 'Awake, my lute'. The *Sacrum Convivium* section in the third song also lacks some of the mystery of the earlier recordings, and in *I got me flowers* Hilary Davan Wetton does not quite manage the expectant tension in the hushed 'Can there be any day but this...' before the climactic 'There is but one, and that one ever'.

But these are only quibbles of detail—the overall performance comes across strongly, with a particularly spirited *Antiphon*. Guildford Choral Society, in their 150th anniversary year, sound as though they really mean it.

The last of the full orchestral versions also comes from Hyperion. The CD notes do not say where it was recorded, but there is just enough reverberation to give a pleasant bloom to the sound. The English Chamber Orchestra, some twenty years on from Willcocks, are as fresh as ever. Listen, in *Easter*, to the beautiful high string descant on 'resound his name'. The Corydon Singers, too, are a highly skilled choir with a fine series of recordings to their name. I particularly like their light touch in *Antiphon* at 'His praise may thither fly', where the puckish melisma interweaves with the mercurial undulating chords of the orchestra.

On the whole, Matthew Best's tempos seem right, except in the first song, which I find a trifle languid. Thomas Allen is an expressive soloist, especially in *I got me flowers*, and comes across favourably in most of the cycle, but I do find his quiet, sustained notes less pleasing than the other singers we have considered, and he tends to slur between notes in *The Call*.

So much for the work in its full orchestral form. There remain two 'cut down' versions, one of them adapted from the authorised string quintet and piano accompaniment, but with added harp and timpani, and substituting organ for piano:

Kevin McMillan, baritone [Marquis] ERAD 127
Gentleman and Boys of the Cathedral Church of St James,
Toronto
Unnamed instrumentalists
Norman McBeth, organ
Conducted by Giles Bryant
Recorded in St James' Cathedral, Toronto in 1989 [DDD]

This Canadian recording is a disappointment. Kevin McMillan is a fine young baritone, with good expression, but he can sound a little thin in the quieter moments, such as the beginning of *I got me flowers*, and his voice is not really a match for the maturity and experience of his rivals. The instrumentalists play with charm, and the modest forces suit the reflective songs well, but this paired-down version draws attention to itself in the outer songs, where the big climaxes sound as though the local theatre pit orchestra had

KEVIN McMILLAN

baritone

JOHN GREER, piano

Gentlemen & Boys of St. James' Cathedral,
Giles Bryant

ERAD 127



BRITTEN
songs and proverbs of William Blake
VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
five mystical songs

to be employed at the last minute. Even this might be forgiven if it were not for the choir. In the final song especially, the 'Boys' are horribly out of tune and (to be charitable) the 'Gentlemen' sound somewhat superannuated.

The other reduced version uses just organ for accompaniment and comes on a recording from Canterbury Cathedral of anthems and motets of the late sixteenth century to the present day. A performance of Vaughan Williams's 1921 setting of Psalm 90, *Lord, Thou hast been our refuge* is included:

Jeremy Davies, bass [York Ambisonic] YORK CD 107
The Choir of Canterbury Cathedral
Michael Harris, organ
Conducted by David Flood [DDD/Ambisonic]
Recorded in Canterbury Cathedral in 1989

I am sorry to say this is a complete 'non-starter'. Jeremy Davies, who is a member of the choir, appears to be singing from the back row of the basses, and cannot engage the listener from there in music written for concert performance. His backward position does not help the fact that, while he is accurate enough, his voice is just not of the calibre required to bring out the complex emotions expressed in these songs. The organ accompaniment is no substitute for the orchestra and I was constantly missing the subtleties of woodwind and strings. Only *Antiphon* comes across as anything like a 'proper' performance. Here, the choir are vigorous and the organ sounds less makeshift in the context.

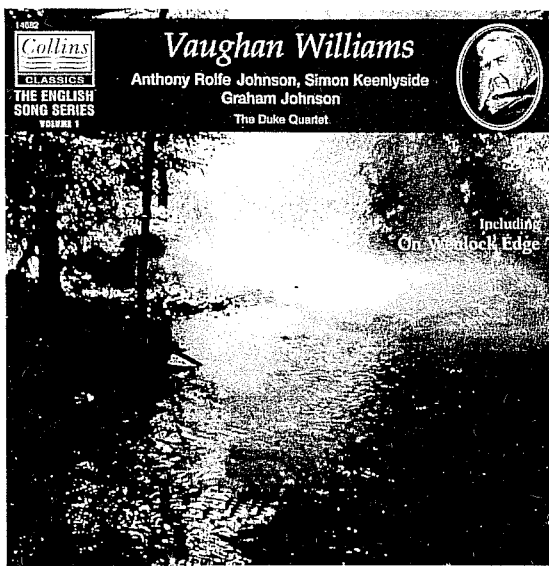
The first London performance of *Five Mystical Songs* was given in the voice and piano arrangement, with no chorus.³¹ There is just one complete recording of this version:

Simon Keenlyside, baritone [Collins Classics] 1488-2
Graham Johnson, piano
Recorded in Rosslyn Hill Chapel, London, on 9-11 July 1996
[Volume 1 in the English Song series] [DDD]

The lack of chorus calls, of course, for some changes. In *Easter*, this involves some re-casting of the solo part,³² and

³¹ See above and note 29.

³² Incidentally, there is an anomaly in the opening song, just after letter C, 'thy Lord is risen'. At this point, in the choral version, the sopranos sing F followed by E on *ris-en*. In the solo version the baritone is given the notes D, C, but Keenlyside sings C followed by Bb, as in the first line of the song. The C is sung against a chord of G, Bb, D and F in the piano part. Is there a misprint in the score?



Antiphon, originally for chorus alone, is reprinted in an alternative form as an appendix in the vocal score.

The voice and piano are well balanced in this recording. Simon Keenlyside is particularly fine in *The Call*, and anyone who has heard pianists struggling with the scales and *arpeggios* of *Antiphon* will be grateful to Graham Johnson for his consummate fingerwork.

The most successful song here is *The Call*, with its simple melody and accompaniment, but the work as a whole is not well served in this arrangement. There are many passages where mere adaptation cannot mask the removal of the chorus. This is apparent in the missing choral entry in the last line of the second song, 'There is but one, and that one ever', but especially so in *Antiphon*, whose structure and accompaniment just do not 'come off' in this version.

Nevertheless, this is a lovely disc, all VW, and including, as well as other songs, a full performance of *On Wenlock Edge*, sung by Anthony Rolfe Johnson, with the Duke Quartet.

And so, having considered all these recordings, which one would I take with me to my desert island? Well, I hope the Gentlemen and Boys of St. James's can swim, despite their age, and I definitely do not have room for Canterbury Cathedral. As I declared earlier, I have a soft spot for the Willcocks, where every tempo seems just right, and I would not like to be without the wonderful voice of John Shirley-Quirk. But the recording does show its age, if only *slightly*. I think I will have to go for Brian Rayner Cook under the direction of Bryden Thomson. Their sensitivity to words and music is exemplary, the London Philharmonic play beautifully, and the choir is by turns mellifluous and ebullient as required. I rather hope, though, that Simon Keenlyside and Graham Johnson managed to stow away and will be washed up, still clinging to their piano, so that I can continue to enjoy their wonderful musicianship.

But let us end on a serious note. Whichever of the full versions of *Five Mystical Songs* described above you might choose, you will not be disappointed. Michael Kennedy mentions them, far more eloquently than I can, in his summing up of the appeal of Vaughan Williams's music:

Its rich humanity is its surest stake for survival and can be expected to appeal to generations that did not know the man's strong personal magnetism and influence. But something of these will be understood by a sympathetic listener to a performance of the *Five Mystical Songs* or the

Fifth Symphony in one of the cathedrals of the West Country, in the harvest-time of the year, when music, architecture, history and æsthetic experience blend into one.³³

Now, put on the CD, sit down comfortably, close your eyes, and *listen*.

Jonathon Pearson

(VW in a New Century - continued from page 3)

process by which Vaughan Williams converted folksongs into hymn tunes. Julian Onderdonk filled this need by comparing folksongs from the composer's own collection with the hymn tunes he derived from them. Such a comparison testifies to Vaughan Williams's skill as an arranger and adapter, but also uncovers the fact that he often altered the original folk melodies in the course of adaptation. Offering suggestions as to the range of forces - ideological, musical and purely practical - acting upon these changes, this seminar explored the extent to which Vaughan Williams's nationalist beliefs and agenda were reflected in the details of his editorial choices.

Guido Heldt

Dialectics of Development - Nature and Structure in *In the Fen Country*

Musicological literature usually describes Vaughan Williams's *In the Fen Country* as one important step in a natural development towards folksong-based music in his œuvre. But on closer scrutiny this development is not quite so smooth. Guido Heldt charted this development.

Philip Brett

'Williams the Headmaster and Britten the Promising New Boy in the National School of Composition'

'Williams being of course the Headmaster' wrote Britten in July 1937 about his 'school relationship' with Walton as 'the head-prefect of English music' (soon to 'leave & return as a member of the staff'). In October of the same year, Britten finished the Auden cycle, *On this Island*, Op. 11, notable for its opening rhetorical flourish invoking the historical lineage from Purcell which countered the older composer's obsession with 'the Tudor School'. From that point on, Britten appears perhaps consciously to have conceived of himself as vying at least for the post of Head Boy, matching every aspect of Vaughan Williams's work with an alternative, and supporting other figures (such as Percy Grainger for whose music he cannot have felt deep sympathy) wherever possible. During the 1940s, and especially after his return from the U.S., Britten cultivated folksong arrangement in very different terms from those of Vaughan Williams, and his development of a new style of choral music was part of the same picture. Philip Brett saw the strategy of embracing opera, a genre in which Vaughan Williams was vulnerable, as part of this almost Edipal struggle.

³³ Michael Kennedy, *Works*, p. 373.

Such Sweet Art

Stephen Connock explores the background to the *Five Mystical Songs* and discusses each song in turn.

The *Five Mystical Songs* were premiered almost exactly a year after the first performance of the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. There are similarities between the two works, not in structure or in instrumentation, but in style and spirit. The *Five Mystical Songs* show the composer at his most lyrical and fluent, aligning the spirituality of *Tallis* with the romanticism of *Hugh the Drover*. As Michael Kennedy has put it, the work blurs the boundary between mysticism and sensuality.

Although the beginnings of the work can be traced to 1906, just after the Rossetti and Tennyson settings, the style of which lingers on in these songs, the work was completed in 1910-11. The intervening four years had been immensely important to Vaughan Williams, with his work on the *English Hymnal* being completed, his period of study with Ravel and his discovery of the musical potential of Walt Whitman. If Whitman opened for Vaughan Williams a new exultant, visionary and confident style of writing, George Herbert combined these qualities with a yearning romanticism, memorable imagery and beautiful words. No matter that this Rector-Poet was intensely religious and Vaughan Williams a professed atheist. What mattered to Vaughan Williams was the strength of Herbert's vision, his wonderful poetry and his sincerity - the same qualities that attracted Vaughan Williams to John Bunyan.

Vaughan Williams's friend Hubert Foss, noting the 'mystical humility and faith of the poet' found the composer 'managing the words with a new musical ease'. Simona Pakenham added that 'Vaughan Williams exactly matches his poet, writing affectionately, peacefully and making use of the rhythms that grow naturally out of the words'. A.E.F. Dickinson, by contrast, found the work 'too reactionary to be distinctive' and 'musically unpersuasive'.

Five Mystical Songs is, for this writer, one of those Vaughan Williams works that, when I play it, makes me feel like rushing

into the street and dragging complete strangers into the living room and not letting them go until they admit that *I got me flowers* and *Love bade me welcome* are the most beautiful things they have ever heard.

The opening song, *Easter*, to the striking words:

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise

Without delays

is met by equally striking music, marked *Maestoso*, rising from B flat to E flat and establishing a style of exultant mysticism to

attracted to these moving musical images.

I got me flowers is a tender song, rapt in a way unique to Vaughan Williams. The yearning, plainsong style melody at *The Sun arising in the East* is followed by a moment of wonderful beauty:

*Can there be any day but this,
Though many suns to shine endeavour?
We count three hundred, but we miss:
There is but one, and that one ever.*

In the original, these words are from the second part of the poem *Easter*, thus the day in question is the same *most high day* as in the first song. Vaughan Williams sensibly splits the poem in two since the metre is completely different after the words *I got me flowers to strew thy way*. Herbert moves from complex rhyming couplets with an unusual metrical pattern to simpler quatrains (Line 19: see George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, Penguin Classics, 1991, p. 37.)

Love bade me welcome is the most far-reaching song of the cycle and the last to be written (1911). The dialogue of the poem is exquisitely set and the choir sings the evocative chant *O Sacrum convivium*, marked *pppp*, to accompany the baritone's romantic setting of:

*You must sit down,
says Love, and taste
my meat:
So I did sit and
eat.*

The Call is a simple and lovely song which seems to distil the essence of Herbert's religious vision.

Finally, *Antiphon* bursts upon us, the baritone strangely silent, although there is a version of this

song for soloist rather than choir:

*Let all the world in every corner sing,
My God and King.*

It is an exuberant and fitting ending to a heartfelt cycle.

Stephen Connock

FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS

Words by

GEORGE HERBERT

SET TO MUSIC

FOR

Baritone Solo, Chorus (ad lib.) and Orchestra

BY

R. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS.

- No 1. EASTER.
2. I GOT ME FLOWERS.
3. LOVE BADE ME WELCOME.
4. THE CALL.
5. ANTIPHON.

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MADE IN ENGLAND

Page 1 of the score of *Five Mystical Songs*

be further developed in the *Four Hymns* of 1914. The musical imagery in this song is noteworthy, for example:

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part

With all thy art

and:

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song

Pleasant and long

As Ursula Vaughan Williams has pointed out (see page 17), her future husband was

TWO CHURCHMEN OF BEMERTON, SALISBURY

George Herbert (1630 – 1633)

As you enter the Church your eye is caught by a mediæval arch in the opposite north wall, which proclaims that the Church's origins go back to the XIVth century. The building has been restored several times, but still retains much of its original character. Much of the north wall may well be largely a rebuild of less than a century back. On the other hand, if you turn and look at the south wall, nobody would have built that in recent centuries: and the door through which you entered is almost certainly that which George

Herbert used three and a half centuries ago. For the placid flow of village life here was suddenly illuminated by his arrival as Rector in 1630.

George Herbert was a distinguished scholar who spent the largest part of his life in Cambridge, but who completed his days here as Rector of this small village. He was born on 3rd April, 1593, the younger son of a Welsh border family, in Montgomery. He was educated at Westminster

and at the age of sixteen won a scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge, which he entered in 1609, with the intention of offering himself for the priesthood. He had already started to write poetry, and in a letter to his mother in 1610 declares that *"my poor abilities in poetry shall be all, and ever consecrated to God's glory"*. He was elected a Fellow of the College in 1614: but further, his ability was such that he was appointed Public Orator of the University in 1620. Which senior post was often the prelude to some high office of state; and as he had attained this at the age of twenty-seven his gifts were such that one would confidently predict a brilliant future. It was: but not in the way that anyone would have expected.

Although life must have been full of interest and the world was at his feet, not all was well. In the midst of the gaiety, drama and diversions of Court life and the heights of intellectual exchange at Cambridge, he began to suffer considerable disturbance. What about his earlier intentions of ordination? How did they fit into his pattern of life among the high lights of Court society with dreams of further advancement? Self-questioning appears in *Frailty*:

*Lord, in my silence how do I despise
What upon trust
Is styled honour, riches or fair eyes:
But is fair dust!
I surnamed them gilded clay,
Dear earth, fine grass or hay:
In all, I think my foot doth ever tread
Upon their head.*

We know that he suffered ill health: but that does not seem sufficient to have caused a re-orientation of his life. Perhaps he was asking himself the questions that beset so many of us. Had he a really worth while purpose in life? What was he doing? Had God a better use for him? There seems a yearning for some other role, to be someone or something else. From *Employment*:

*Oh that I were an orange tree,
That busy plant!
Then should I ever laden be,
And never want
Some fruit for him that dressed me.
But we are still too young or old:
The man is gone.
Before we do our wares unfold:
So we freeze on,
Until the grave increase our cold.*

In 1628, his friend Bishop Williams of Lincoln offered him the Prebend of Leighton Ecclesia, near Huntingdon. He accepted it, and was made Deacon at some point. But he wasn't required to live in the parish and there is no record of his ever having visited it. His responsibility was to rebuild the Church, which he did, and there stands today the magnificent memorial to him, and it still retains the furnishings that he gave.

What was it that changed this elegant academic gentleman into a country parson, this aristocratic courtier into a saint? It was partly that he was never free to choose for himself: there was always another voice that spoke to him. This voice shows the futility of much of his life and purpose. In the *Collar* he tells of a mood in which he decides to abandon the Christian life, with its sighs and tears, its cold dispute of which is fit, and follow a life of earthly pleasure. But in the last two lines we hear precisely how the mood ended - he was checked by the voice of Christ:

*But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methoughts I heard one calling, Child!
And I replied, My Lord.*



Memorial window to George Herbert in St. Andrew's Church

A strong influence in his life was his mother. After her death in 1527 he wrote a series of poems, some in Latin, some in Greek, as a memorial to her, showing the depth of his grief. It was shortly after this that he resigned his office of Public Orator. His subsequent movements are obscure, but while staying at Dauntsey House, near Chippenham he met his step-father's cousin, Jane Danvers, and they were married in the magnificent Collegiate Church at Eddington on 5 March 1529. It is thought that they lived at Bainton House nearby while George was considering the future.

In 1630, the parish of Fuggleston-cum-Bemerton became vacant; and the Earl of Pembroke put forward the name of his cousin as a candidate. The proposition brought much mental turmoil to Herbert who endured *"such spiritual conflicts as none can think, but only those that have endured them"*. It would be an unusual post for one with his abilities and social background: but in this countryside he might find the peace of mind which he had lacked among the world's affairs.

(continued on page 16)

Arthur Vaughan Williams (1860-1863)

Charles Arthur Vaughan Williams was the third son of Edward Vaughan Williams and Jane Bagot. Born in 1834, he was one of seven children - six sons and one daughter. Arthur was brought up at Tanhurst on the slopes of Leith Hill and was educated at Westminster School.



**Arthur Vaughan Williams
in the 1860s.**

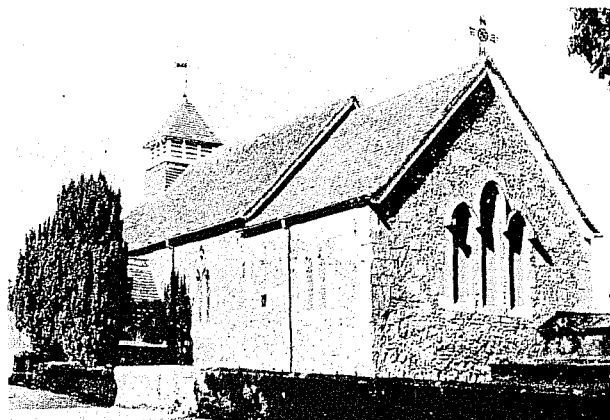
*(Photograph courtesy of
Ursula Vaughan Williams)*

The evidence from Arthur's period at Bemerton shows that he was deeply interested in education. This interest continued at Down Ampney where he was appointed vicar in 1868 following a stint at Halsall in Lancashire. As the *History of Down Ampney*, compiled by Pamela Varey, tells us:

The Rev. Arthur Vaughan Williams played a prominent role in the village affairs... At Down Ampney, he figures largely in the school life... conducting the scripture lessons and determining the holiday dates according to the harvest.

An entry in the schoolbook for October 3rd 1871 shows Arthur Vaughan Williams visiting the school to take the upper Standards in Religious Education. (p. 75. For information on how to obtain this *History* see back page of the Journal.)

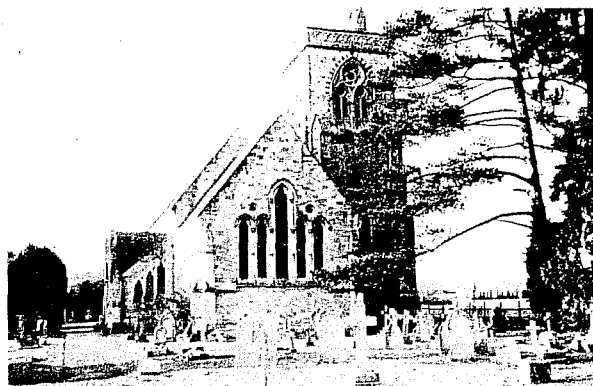
Meantime, Arthur Vaughan Williams had met Margaret Wedgwood, from neighbouring Leith Hill Place, and they had become engaged in 1867. They married at Coldharbour Church in 1868. Their



**Illustration 1 – Arthur Vaughan Williams's first
appointment was to George Herbert's lovely
Church of St. Andrew's in Lower Bemerton**

Ursula Vaughan Williams's superb biography of her husband (OUP, 1964) is the major source for information on Arthur. She tells us that he went to Christ Church in 1854 where he took his B.A. in 1857 and his M.A. in 1860 - the same year that 'he won a silver' tankard in a foot steeple chase', (UVW, page 2).

In 1860, shortly after receiving his M.A., the Bishop of Oxford ordained him Deacon. For the Vaughan Williams sons, it was either the law or the church for a career. His first appointment was as Curate at St. Andrew's church in Lower Bemerton, near Salisbury (see Illustration 1). Nearby, a new church - St. John's - was completed in 1861 and Arthur Vaughan Williams became this church's first curate. (See Illustration 2).



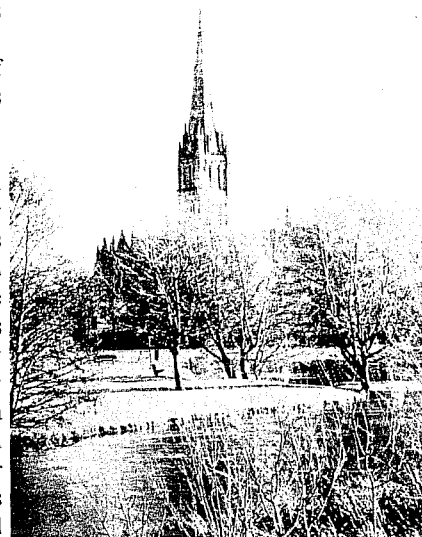
**Illustration 2 - St. John's Church at Bemerton where
Arthur Vaughan Williams became Curate in 1861**

second son, Ralph, was born on October 12th 1872 at the vicarage in Down Ampney.

Arthur's sudden death on 9 February, 1875, aged just 41, was a terrible shock. Arthur had been dogged with ill health. The Rev. Pigott's glowing testimonial to Arthur when he left Bemerton in 1863 makes reference to his health, which improved during his residence at Salisbury (UVW, page 3). His death was after an illness which, according to the schoolmaster's log, only began on the morning of the 7th of February, (quoted in UVW, page 9). This suggests tuberculosis, although the evidence of cause of death is unclear.

Although Arthur died too young to directly influence Ralph, his character must have had some bearing on the development of his son's personality. It may be that Arthur's legacy was to give RVW a certain humility and lifelong concern for others. Ralph's privileged background might not otherwise have led to these qualities. Furthermore, Ralph's self-effacing character and consistent tendency to under-statement may owe much to his father. We can never know. The RVW Society will, however, be conducting further research into Arthur's background and will publish this in the October, 2000 edition of the Journal to commemorate the 125th anniversary of Arthur Vaughan Williams's death in 1875.

Stephen Connock



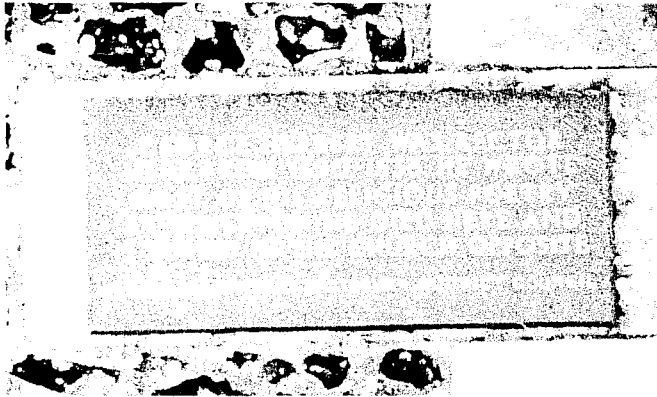
**View of Salisbury cathedral across the
water meadows from Arthur Vaughan
Williams's residence in Bemerton**



**Arthur Vaughan Williams
(Photograph courtesy of
Ursula Vaughan Williams)**

(continued from page 14)

On 25th April he was instituted in this Church by Dr. Davenant, Bishop of Salisbury. The Church needed much restoration, so did the Rectory. Of the latter, the south front looks today much as Herbert left it, but the north front has been rebuilt. He and his wife had no children, but he adopted three nieces who were to be brought up in his home. It sounds a happy place. "Men usually think that servants for their money are as other things they buy, even as a piece of wood, which they may cut, or hack, or throw into the fire, so that they pay them their wages, all is well".



Plaque outside the Rectory at Lower Bemerton

He was still only a Deacon on his arrival, and was ordained priest in the Cathedral on 19th September. He was soon committed to his role as parish priest, and became the ideal country parson. His care of the people, his ordering of public worship, which he saw as of the greatest importance in its influence on the spiritual life of the people, is clearly portrayed in his book *The Country Parson*. But his life here was not to be long. As the years passed, the fatal stages of consumption gradually took their toll, and he died here on 1st March 1633. His body was buried under the chancel floor, and some of the Cathedral choir, whose music had meant so much to him, came to sing at the funeral.

He lived barely forty years; and here for less than three. Why does he still appeal to the world, which today is so different from the world in which he lived? Human nature is still the same, and human problems are still the same: and he can speak to us with real religious devotion as well as with a profound knowledge of human feelings: and all conveyed in poetry which is timeless. He can speak to the human condition at any time: and in our brash and materialistic society we can take courage from a scholar, aristocrat and saint who spurned the world's honours and found happiness and fulfillment in his humble role here.



George Herbert's Memorial Stone in
St. Andrew's Church

Lastly, what has he to say to us today?

To the individual:

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for thee.*

*Not rudely, as a beast,
To run into an action;
But still to make thee prepossessed,
And give it his perfection.*

*A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Of if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.*

*All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws.
Makes that and the action fine.*

*This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold.
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.*

To the nation:

*O England, full of sin, but most of sloth:
Spit out thy phlegm, and fill thy breast with glory.*

P C Magee, Rector 1975-84.

Reproduced with the kind approval of the Rector of St Andrew's Church, Bemerton.

Fifth Symphony (continued from page 6)

strings very quietly sustaining the final sonority. If we can accept this as, to put it crudely, the answer to the crisis which has preceded it, then we will feel that the work completely resolves that crisis and answers the conflicts and the tensions that have been very powerfully put forward. But I don't think we necessarily have to hear the ending in that way. We can even hear it differently on different occasions, depending on how much impact the more crisis-ridden episodes of the work made on us. Sometimes we may feel that the serenity is complete, that we are getting, as Wilfrid Mellers said so eloquently, a vision of the new Jerusalem at the end. This is something *The Pilgrim's Progress* couldn't really manage as well as it is managed in the *Fifth Symphony*. But are we truly getting the new Jerusalem, or are we retreating to a state of suspended animation, a state of numbness? Is there not still some ambiguity, some residual tension about the ending? Well, I am not going to answer that question because, as I hope I've made clear, I think it can be either. It doesn't have to be one or the other; we can feel differently in different performances, depending on our mood at the time. But what to me is the absolute crucial thing is that the music has the stature to allow for these alternatives, these nuances: and that is ultimately what confirms the *Fifth Symphony* as a major symphonic achievement. We can talk endlessly about what the music means, but ultimately what it means is the result of the extraordinary mastery of symphonic process and symphonic structure which Vaughan Williams demonstrates in this remarkable composition.

(Edited from an illustrated talk given at the RCM on 21 February 1998 and reproduced by kind permission of Arnold Whittall and the RCM.)

Ursula Vaughan Williams on George Herbert

Ursula Vaughan Williams contributed the following notes to a programme which included the *Five Mystical Songs* on 28th February, 1969 at the Royal Festival Hall:

Ralph Vaughan Williams's father was for a time curate at Bemerton, George Herbert's parish, just outside Salisbury, and then, or after their marriage, he gave Ralph's mother a copy of Herbert's poems. So it is quite possible that RVW knew some of these from early childhood, for his mother used to read aloud to her children and her choice was wide: poetry, adventure, fairy tales and classics had a part in the time they spent with her each day.

In the course of his life, RVW set a number of poems by Herbert and from the earliest to the latest there is a special quality, a belonging, a matching of mood to that of the poet's, that reminds the listener that Herbert was also a musician. It is as if the tune was implicit in the poem and RVW heard it.

The Five Mystical Songs were written for the Three Choirs Festival of 1911 at Worcester. The first performance was on 14th September when the soloist was Campbell McInnes and the composer conducted.

(Reproduced with the kind permission of Ursula Vaughan Williams)

Ursula Vaughan Williams met Stephen Connock to discuss George Herbert in more detail in November 1998. She began by referring to the 'delightful coincidence of both George Herbert and Arthur Vaughan Williams being connected to the same church near Salisbury'. Ursula then recalled that the *Five Mystical Songs* arose from a commission for the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester in 1911, following the success of the *Tallis Fantasia* the previous year. He loved Worcester, and chose the Herbert songs for the occasion in a setting for baritone, chorus and orchestra. He had the voice of Campbell McInnes in mind. Ursula said that Campbell McInnes was 'terrified of the new work' during rehearsals, finding it technically demanding. There was not enough rehearsal time. 'Ralph who was conducting was not able to eat for a long time before the concert. When it ended successfully, he was starving and the first thing he did was to have a huge supper!'

The musical imagery in many of the poems was important to Vaughan Williams, confirmed Ursula. She added that Ralph was excited by the poetry of George Herbert and not at all put off by its religious content. She explained that while he did not want to have anything to do with the church directly, he was attracted to the underlying vision, to the spirituality which Herbert so warmly embraced.

The Garland Appeal - An Update

Considerable progress is being made in both the UK and the USA to enable the charity to meet its objectives to cancer research, British music (including RVW) and to encourage the healing power of music. In the UK, further performances of *A Garland for Linda* have been held in London and Oxford and have consolidated the high standard of the music. Both concerts were by the Joyful Company of Singers under Peter Broadbent. Further performances are scheduled for Bridgewater Hall, Manchester on 28th May and The Anvil at Basingstoke on 9th June. BBC Radio 3 are proposing a broadcast on 13th February and it is still hoped that Classic FM will broadcast the work at the end of January.

The EMI CD is in finished form and is excellent. It is due to be in the shops in the UK on 7th February and a launch event is being held for invited guests only on the 27th January, 2000. A press conference will accompany the concert and Sir Paul McCartney will attend this event along with the other composers. 300 guests have already accepted invitations to the concert. The charity gets £2.24 for each CD sold.

A schools' competition, to compose *A Song for Linda*, is being launched in the Spring. More details will be included in the June Journal.

The charity is now formally incorporated in the USA. A USA board has been convened which includes two of the leading USA cancer specialists. The première of *A Garland for Linda* in the USA is at Riverside Church, New York City, on 3rd June, 2000 - and The Garland Appeal now has an office in New York, on 54th Street, and one full time employee is based there. Considerable corporate interest is being shown in the Appeal in America.

As always, more help is needed and any member wishing to participate directly in the Appeal's work should contact Stephen Connock.

Stephen Connock

THE LETTER & THE SPIRIT

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS AS CONDUCTOR

by Lewis Foreman

RVW died when I was 16, and I never saw him conduct, so my enthusiasm for him as a conductor is probably somewhat different from those who played and sang under his direction. As well as his now classic performance of the *Fourth Symphony*, recorded by HMV, my appreciation of Vaughan Williams as a conductor comes from a rather remarkable recording on a now very rare set of LPs issued in Canada on the Caviar label, but unavailable for over 30 years. This recording is from the Leith Hill Festival at Dorking, on 5 March 1958, some four-and-a-half months before Vaughan Williams died at the age of 86. He conducted Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, or rather, the *St Matthew Passion* refracted through a lifetime's study, enthusiasm and experience; what was effectively his own performing edition of Bach's masterpiece. With its piano continuo, it asks so many questions about Vaughan Williams's attitude to Bach, as well as Vaughan Williams as conductor. This is from his radio talk 'Bach the Great Bourgeois', from July 1950.

When I was a small boy I was brought up almost entirely on Handel, and especially the Handel Festival. I once heard a Bach Gavotte at a village concert and asked whether it was right to put such a name on the same programme as the great masters, and my aunt told me that Bach was quite a good composer: but of course not so good as Handel (this being the accepted view in those days); and with the strange incuriosity of a child I left it at that and made no further inquiries until I went to school at ten years old.

There I was taken in hand by the music master, Mr. C. T. West, whose name I shall always hold in reverence. He soon realised that I did not much care for the 'Maiden's Prayer' or 'True Love' and one day - a momentous day for me - he brought me a Bach Album edited by Berthold Tours. Here indeed was a revelation; here was something undeniably belonging to no period or style, something for all time. This is where Bach differs from other composers. They, with the exception of a few outstanding Beethoven works, belong to their time, but Bach, though superficially he may speak the eighteenth-century language, belongs to no school or period.

There is a tendency nowadays to 'put Bach in his place'. He is labelled as 'Baroque' (whatever that may mean) and according to the latest orders from Germany he is to be performed as 'period music in the precise periwig style'. This is all part of a

movement to 'play Bach as he wrote it'. To do this would be impossible even if we wanted to. Our violins are played on quite a different principle; our horns are soft and our trombones are loud. I should like to see Mr. Goossens confronted with one of those gross bagpipe instruments which in Bach's time stood for an oboe. The harpsichord, however it may sound in a small room - and to my mind it never has a pleasant sound - in a large concert room sounds just like the ticking of a sewing machine. We have no longer, thank Heaven, the Baroque style of organ, which we are told, with very insufficient evidence, was the kind of instrument Bach played upon. (By the way, I see there is a movement afoot to substitute this bubble-and-squeak type of instrument for the noble diapason and soft mixtures of our cathedral organs.)

We cannot perform Bach exactly as he was played in his time even if we wanted to, and the question is, do we want to? I say emphatically, No! Some music dies with its period, but what is really immortal endures from generation to generation. The interpretation and with it the means of interpretation differ with each generation. If the music is ephemeral it will disappear with any change of fashion. If the music is really alive it will live on through all the alterations of musical thought.

A young exquisite once said to me, 'I don't like Bach, he is so bourgeois', to which I probably answered that being bourgeois myself, I considered Bach the greatest of all composers.

It is Bach's intense humanity which endears him to me.¹

Many of RVW's pronouncements here raise guffaws when the recording of the composer himself giving the talk is played. There are many points to be made and we could analyse RVW's attitude to the period performance movement of his day, but that is for another paper. But, we have a paradox. Vaughan Williams was a man who introduced to his orchestra the saxophone, the flügel horn, the wind machine and the vocalising soprano - in short a man with a vivid aural imagination, an acute ear and an inventive and questing mind; a visionary in any sense, yet a man who was *ever* involved and preoccupied with the *practicalities* of performance; a man who cued his scores so

¹ "Bach, the Great Bourgeois" in *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony with writings on other musical subjects by Ralph Vaughan Williams*. OUP, 1953 pp 122-3

that reduced orchestras could do them; and if we glance through the surviving pictures of him, a man *constantly* conducting, making music. These disparate elements of his art are focussed in the *St Matthew Passion*.

During Vaughan Williams's lifetime, 37 of his works were given at the Three Choirs Festival, of which, 29 were conducted by the composer at one time or another. In fact, he conducted 47 actual performances of his own music at the Three Choirs in the period from 1910 to 1956, several of them on a number of occasions. These included the *Tallis Fantasia* and *Job*, each heard four times, and *Dona Nobis Pacem*, *Sancta Civitas*, the *Pastoral Symphony* and *The Lark Ascending* three times each. 26 performances of RVW's music were given at the Worcester Three Choirs in his lifetime, and Worcester saw RVW conduct four premières of his own music - *Five Mystical Songs* in 1911; *Four Hymns* for tenor and strings in 1920; the *Magnificat* in 1932; and *Hodie* in 1954.



RVW conducting *A Sea Symphony* at the Norwich Festival

I have not been able to undertake a complete census of RVW conducting RVW, but a few inquiries indicate that while he was not an every-day conductor, he was a comparatively familiar figure on the rostrum. At the Proms, for example, a scan through a run of programmes shows that in 1929, for example, he conducted the *Concerto Accademico* and songs from *Hugh the Drover*. It was *A London Symphony* in 1931, the *Pastoral* in 1933, the *Fourth* in 1937. During the War, it was the first performance of the *Fifth Symphony* on 24 June 1943. On 31 July 1945, the suite - a very extended suite - from his film *Story of a Flemish Farm*. In 1946 and 1948 he

conducted *A London Symphony* at the Proms, while in 1947, on 15 and 16 October, he conducted Albert Hall performances for his 75th birthday. In 1948 he conducted the first performance of his *Partita*; on 10 August 1954 he conducted his *Serenade to Music*. On 6 February 1955 *A Sea Symphony* was relayed from Birmingham Town Hall.

also appeared on CD, from privately recorded acetates. For me this merely underlies what might be possible, for it is an exciting and uplifting reading as I will discuss below, and in remarkably good sound considering the circumstances of its preservation. This 1936 performance was the second, six weeks after the first in Huddersfield. It has the soloists of the first, to which it must approximate closely.



RVW conducting the Band of the 2nd Btn., Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry in England's Pleasant Land

Off-air recording became a practical reality, at least for the few, from around 1934. Some of these composer performances were certainly broadcast, and so from the mid-1930s onwards, there is always the possibility that someone might have recorded them off-air. From the early period we know that *Dona Nobis Pacem* was thus preserved in 1936 (and issued for us by Pearl, a wonderful survival) and we now know that most of the first performance of the *Fifth Symphony* also from 1943 also survives on a home recording, though not, as yet, given wider circulation.

Also, one is not necessarily only researching so early a period, for from 1950 to 1956 RVW conducted as many as ten Three Choirs performances including the première of *Hodie*, and the *Pastoral* and *Sixth* symphonies. Raising further opportunities for some enthusiast of the time to have captured them.

So much for later broadcasts and public performances. We will return to them below. But first what was *officially* recorded? As most readers will know it is a disappointingly small tally. Vaughan Williams conducted just three of his own works for 78s. Acoustic recordings of the overture *The Wasps* and the ballet *Old King Cole*, the latter when the music was still quite new, plus just one electrical recording, the celebrated HMV 78s of the *Fourth Symphony*. There was also a group of folk dances, which have recently been reissued on a very recommendable CD set from Pearl.

In addition to this official tally, as mentioned above RVW's broadcast of the second - studio - performance of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, on November 13th 1936 has

But that is not the end of the matter. There are some other surviving RVW performances, and I am convinced that yet more recordings of the composer conducting his own music are yet to turn up. It does seem strange, though, that more were not more

officially preserved by the BBC. However, the opportunity was

there for amateur recordists (tape recordists after 1951) for there were broadcasts of all of the then written symphonies under the composer's baton in the 1950s except for the *Fourth*. Even the *Sixth Symphony* was heard in 1950. Indeed, Ralph Nicholson recalled an amusing incident when he was conducting the *Sixth Symphony*, Vaughan Williams retorting to the orchestra:

Oh, you chaps are all right. You know it but I've never conducted it before. There's one place where you're playing one thing and I seem to be conducting something else. I think the best way is not to listen - don't you?²

So, in fact, in living memory at one time or another he conducted the first six symphonies, the *Fifth* and *A London Symphony* many times. Vaughan Williams's own performances were broadcast well into the era of domestic tape recorders - in fact what we have here is a great project for the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society - a national census of surviving RVW conducting RVW. So check your collections, your attics, the collections of elderly friends and relatives. Surely there must be more of this precious heritage out there, and even one item rediscovered would materially add to our knowledge of RVW.

But there *is* more: the tally that I have mentioned thus far: we have two surviving performances of the *Fifth Symphony*, one of *A London Symphony* and the 1954 Prom performance of the *Serenade to Music*. The last, vocally, is not a good performance³

and this may be why we do not know it. But, taken together these are such illuminating performances to give us real cause to regret that more of Vaughan Williams's art has not been preserved for us. However, they also constitute a valuable body of evidence of the composer's approach to his own music, providing guidance to later performers of how the composer viewed some of his most characteristic works.

* * * * *

I can imagine there must have been those who constantly found themselves performing for him, at the Three Choirs, at the Leith Hill Festival, in the Bach Choir, in the leading orchestras of the day. Yet we have a view of him as rather homespun, tended to be thought of by a certain constituency as a rather bumbling, amateur and ineffective conductor. This was perhaps suggested by Columbia's recordings with him of those folk dances, which I feel are rather routine, seemingly presented in a no-nonsense brisk manner in 1929. While it is nice to have them, for me this was a terrible wasted opportunity. All the surviving recordings of his performances of his own music share this briskness of approach, but they project a burning passion and sincerity impossible to divine from such folk arrangements. My view of RVW as a conductor, even if there were no *Fourth Symphony*, is that wonderfully dynamic sketch by Guy Worsdell on the cover of Ursula Vaughan Williams's biography of her husband, and that terrifying glare at a rehearsal at Buffalo in 1954. Yet in his book *Music on Record*, the legendary Fred Gaisberg, that vastly experienced pioneer of recording, who captured most of Elgar's own performances on wax, wrote about RVW:

When recently he recorded for us his *Fourth Symphony* I noticed how gently and unobtrusively he indicated his wishes to the men. His movements were rather awkward and he employed a minimum of gesticulation. Self-effacing and silent to a degree, he had not the equipment for a good conductor....⁴

Even if that was an accurate description of what went on, one wonders whether Gaisberg had any interest in, or sympathy with, Vaughan Williams's music, for if he had, surely he must have realised the unprecedented power of the composer's own performance of his *Symphony* which he had just completed. However, the impression Gaisberg had formed meant that far from the great record producer being the architect of the preservation of the composer's

years before, and the recording reveals that time had not dealt sympathetically with them.

⁴ Gaisberg, F W: *Music on Record*. Robert Hale, 1946 p 232 (previously published in the USA as *The Music Goes Round*, New York, Macmillan, 1942.)

² *The RCM Magazine LV* no 1 Easter term 1959 p 44

³ The soloists included some of the original performers from the first performance sixteen

performances on record, as he had been Elgar's, he became the barrier to it ever taking place. So all other surviving recordings are from broadcasts and public performances.

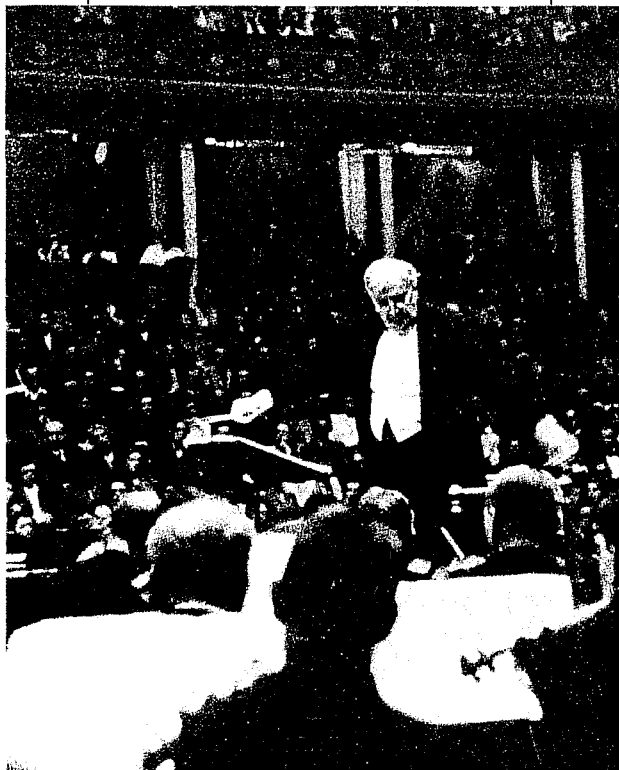
I suspect that Vaughan Williams had first been exposed both to the limitations and the opportunities of recording in the acoustic era, when a young Malcolm Sargent conducted extended extracts from *Hugh the Drover* in September 1924 on ten sides. This was only three months after the British National Opera Company's stage premiere, when Malcolm Sargent had, so the story goes, pulled the chestnuts of an under-rehearsed company out of the fire, literally at the last minute. The young Sargent's conducting was splendidly red-blooded, but I cannot help feeling that this has all the directness and impact of a composer's interpretation, which tends to be absent in later Sargent recordings. If RVW was not on the podium, he was certainly in the studio - and if we listen, say, to the love duet, one surely has the feeling we are experiencing a creator's, and composer's, view. (Reissued on Pearl GEMMCD 9468.)

Vaughan Williams first found himself on the podium for a recording at the age of 52 when he cut waxes of *The Wasps Overture* for the Vocalion company, and although it was issued in 1925, the year in which electrical recording first appeared, it was one of the last acoustics. Now you might think that this rather primitive sound and very fast opening more reflects the demands of acoustic recording and 4-minute sides than Vaughan Williams's interpretation. I disagree; here is a powerful musical personality at work. That performance times at 7' 53"; Sargent, not a conductor to hang around, was almost a minute slower. Was Vaughan Williams what my father used to call "a speed merchant"? Or could it be that brisk tempi were his natural inclination, were what he wanted. That's probably also too simplistic. Sir Adrian Boult recalled how he once took his cue from RVW's tempi, only to regret it later:

It was actually first heard at a rehearsal of the Royal College of Music students orchestra a week or two before the first performances in Queen's Hall. He used to say rather gloomily beforehand that the *Pastoral Symphony* was in four movements, all of them slow. And when the work went into rehearsal I was continually being told to go faster, I think in every movement. After those first performances I was away from London and it wasn't until four or five years later that he heard me do a rehearsal in Prague.

He listened patiently all through and then said he thought everything was too fast. I ventured meekly to remind him what had happened at the first rehearsals, and his reply was characteristic - "Oh yes, I know, but you see I've conducted it myself several times since then, and I find that that slow stuff isn't as boring as I thought it might be."⁵

But to return to *The Wasps*. We only have to follow the performance once we reach the middle section and hear how Vaughan Williams moulds his lovely slow tune to realise how this is very much a composer's performance: irrespective of the technical limitations of the medium. One of the newly discovered off-air recordings is of Vaughan Williams conducting another of his works, the *Serenade to Music*, and one only has to listen to the orchestral opening



**RVW conducting A London Symphony
at an Albert Hall prom, 31 July 1946**

to find a composer communicating his own vision.

The other, and longer, Vocalion recording from 1925, was when the composer conducted his *Old King Cole* ballet within a couple of years of the first performance. This was a remarkable and pioneering undertaking at the time. How many can they have sold? We need to remember that Vaughan Williams was a regular performer, particularly of his own music. But he was also the conductor of the Bach Choir from December 1921, and significantly there soon followed his first performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in March 1923. He conducted many first performances of his own music, including *A Sea Symphony*, *A London Symphony* - and, of course, that

legendary first hearing of the *Tallis Fantasia* in Gloucester Cathedral so memorably recalled by Herbert Howells. Howells told the story on several occasions, this dates from the 1950s:

I heard this wonderful work - I was thrilled - I didn't understand it - But I was moved, deeply. I think if I had to isolate from all the rest, any one impression of a purely musical sort that mattered most to me in the whole of my life as a musician, it would be the hearing of that work not knowing at all what I was going to hear but knowing that what I had heard I should never forget.⁶

RVW also conducted *Tallis* within living memory, but I have not been able to find a recording or a critical account, to suggest how he took it, or a timing to give us a clue.

However, on 29 January 1936, the Boyd Neel String Orchestra under their conductor Boyd Neel, and with the composer in attendance, recorded the *Tallis Fantasia* at the Chenil Galleries in Chelsea for Decca. The issued records made much of the fact that the recording was "supervised by the composer". I am willing to believe that Boyd Neel was taking his cue from the composer in matters of tempi, but we are in no way taken back to the glorious acoustic of Gloucester Cathedral in 1910, when RVW conducted the first performance, and for me this is rather disappointing though undoubtedly reflecting the composers view on how it should go.

We have already touched on RVW's only commercial electrical recording of his own music, that gramophone classic the *Fourth Symphony*. Sir Adrian Boult had given the first performance on 10 April 1935 at Queen's Hall, and he repeated it there in the 1935-36 season and on 23 April 1936 in the Konzerthaus in Vienna. But RVW *did* conduct it in the hall, in the 1937 season of Promenade concerts, on 14 September, and I think it must have been his account then which resulted in him being chosen to conduct the recording in preference to Sir Adrian. What he produced in HMV's Abbey Road Studio No 1 on 11 October, in the searching atmosphere of a recording session, had an almost visionary intensity and with what Alan Saunders referred to in a review as 'that unique, unerring and unvarnished directness which only a composer performance can bring'.⁷ The BBC Symphony play as if their lives depend on it. In fact it recalls the intensity that they brought to other visiting conductors in the 1930s, notably Toscanini. No one has equalled it.

⁶ BBC interval talk, now in BBC Archives

⁷ *Gramophone* February 1988

⁵ BBC interval talk, now in BBC Archives.

RVW's *Fourth* is fast. All Vaughan Williams's tempi, the *St Matthew Passion* excepted, tend to the brisk, and that is certainly dramatic. But not the brusque. There is a wonderful intensity behind this music making, and as RVW showed in other performances of his works it is not necessary to go slow to convey a rapt and visionary mood. This makes it so galling that we don't have him conducting the *Pastoral* or *Sea Symphonies*, or *Lark Ascending* and other works he appeared with in his last twenty years.

In the 1930s two works of RVW seemed to anticipate the war: the *Fourth Symphony* and the cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*. It is particularly fortunate that we have RVW conducting both of these, and his dramatic and urgent tempi in the cantata give it a splendid edge. Here we have the soloists of the first performance, the soprano Renée Flynn - a voice we've forgotten, but one with that elusive purity that Vaughan Williams so often requires combined with an engaging warmth; and even more, Roy Henderson's plea for reconciliation in the second movement balances the dramatic and reflective, with perfect articulation of the words. Michael Kennedy has reported a conversation he had with the composer 'how particular he was about the tempos in this work and how dissatisfied he was with Sargent's in a performance we had just heard.' Here we have a composer defining how he *felt* it, indeed how it *should* go. In his *Dirge for Two Veterans*, one is brought face to face with this one-time private in the 2/4th Field Ambulance on the Western Front, whose memories must have still been enormously vivid only twenty years after. Surely here Vaughan Williams is saying 'Not again, O Lord, Not again?'

All this underlines the fact that this is not Vaughan Williams merely getting through the notes; it is a conductor expressing himself eloquently in his interpretation of his own music. In a letter to Sir Adrian Boult after Boult had conducted *A Sea Symphony* on Trafalgar Day 1936:

There seem to me to be two essentials of great conducting: (1) Faithfulness to the composer. (2) The power of the conductor to express *himself* to the full *at the moment*. I always know I shall get (1) from you but sometimes without (2). Thank heaven I have never heard from you (2) without (1) - & I know I never shall. Yesterday we had (1) and (2) - result a great performance & great conducting for which I thank you from the bottom of my heart - and your singers & players too . . . You made me like the old work again & the awkward places seemed to have disappeared by magic . . .⁸

⁸ Kennedy, M: *Adrian Boult*. Hamish Hamilton, 1987 pp 178-9

I have long assumed that contemporary commentators would have shared my view of Vaughan Williams's own performances as being something special. But perhaps I am wrong. One of the most curious aspects of this is the fact that when he conducted his own symphonies I have the impression he did not necessarily get critical coverage - perhaps it was such a frequent event it was not thought in any way out of the ordinary. Do those with longer memories than mine remember how he was seen? On 31 July 1946 he conducted a performance of *A London Symphony*, and in *The Times*, presumably Frank Howes, reported:

Dr Vaughan Williams may not be, by ordinary standards, a great conductor, but, like Elgar he handles his own music in a personal manner that makes performances given under his direction peculiarly authentic. It mattered little that some details of the orchestral score were not completely realised, or even went astray, in comparison with the fine spirit of a performance which revealed the essential poetry of the music.⁹

A year later on 15 October 1947 Vaughan Williams conducted *A London Symphony* again, for the celebrations for his 75th birthday. *The Times* once more reported:

Dr Vaughan Williams is not a virtuoso conductor, but he knows well how to obtain the expression he requires from the orchestra. There were a few minor blemishes in the actual playing, but if these were the fault of the conductor there was compensation in the authenticity of the performance.¹⁰

The viola player Bernard Shore, for many years the first viola of the BBC Symphony Orchestra also wrote of Vaughan Williams as a conductor, with the authority of a player who has played under him. Here's his assessment:

As a conductor he is not a great technician, but few composers get such satisfactory performances of their own music. Young conductors please note: Vaughan Williams is a fine example of how a conductor should approach an orchestra. Calm and collected, he wastes no time but gets on good terms *with* the orchestra in about three words. Granted, this is easy for him because of the profound admiration the orchestra has for him both as man and musician. But that is the whole point. He has been years building up his great fame. Being where he is he can convey to the orchestra the sincere conviction he has that he has nothing in the least to be proud of, but that on the other hand, he is exceedingly proud of conducting us. He has the two

most precious possessions of any conductor - great and sincere humility and a complete understanding of the minds of the players. His stick is clear enough for his needs, and though he may not give the impression of effortless ease in his movements and gestures he stands fairly on his two adequate boots, and there is a grand solidity and structure about any performance he is directing. He can get anything he likes from an orchestra. Delicacy and swiftness are given him for the asking; the orchestra needs no subtle gestures from him. We understand everything he wants, and give it to him, full measure. What an orchestra asks for is a man it can admire, and Vaughan Williams stands for everything English we love.¹¹

Many emotive words there for those who like unpacking such commentary and deconstructing its meaning. But equally no missing the passion of the memory it evokes. RVW's performances had impact. Of course, inevitably we compare him as a conductor with his champion Sir Adrian Boult. What did Sir Adrian have to say about it?:

Vaughan Williams always gave a most memorable performance of the *London Symphony* - it is sad that this was never recorded. Many passages where most of us are tempted to linger a bit, and make the most of the expressiveness, were simply played through by him: he didn't want any nonsense about it, and it could carry its own message without embellishment. He rushed through it and somehow it sounded absolutely splendid. I'm afraid I should never dare to copy his reading.¹²

This underlines the importance of the discovery of a surviving recording of RVW conducting *A London Symphony*, and it certainly bears out what Sir Adrian was referring to. Boult went on about *A London Symphony*:

There was a good story about a particularly fine performance which he conducted in Buffalo, U.S.A. He always marked his own scores a good deal to help him to conduct, in very large blue pencil; and particularly where there were bars moving fast - one in a bar or two in a bar - he numbered the bars so that he could feel his way along as he went. The score which he had marked for this Buffalo performance suddenly disappeared just before the performance took place, and he had to use another virgin copy, which made him very angry, with the result that the performance

¹¹ Shore, B: *The Orchestra Speaks*. Longmans, Green & Co., 1938 p 138

¹² Boult, Sir A: *Boult on Music*. Toccata Press 1983 p 118

gained magnificently in intensity. He was rather amused to tell the story afterwards, because the full score was discovered very close to him. It had been shut up inside the grand piano!¹³

This is the point where I think we need to note the composer Kenneth Leech, not for his works, but for his disc recording machine. From the early 1930s it was possible for well-off music lovers to record programmes from the air. This could be done in two ways, either by paying a studio like the Louis Levy studios in Oxford Street, or by acquiring a disc cutting machine and doing it yourself. A composer such as Bantock used the studio option, but RVW was not the man to be bothered with recording his own performances.

When we investigate the surviving acetates from the 1930s - and a remarkable number do survive - we find a problem: they were 78rpm recordings and so each twelve inch side could hold no more than about 4½ minutes of music before one had to turn over or put on a fresh disc. Unless one had two machines, one could only record short items or else there were gaps every 4 or 5 minutes while turning over. Leech acquired his disc recorder in 1934 and immediately started recording from the radio. He went on doing so for over 20 years, making some 1200 sides in all. Such things as the 1935 Three Choirs *Dream of Gerontius*, Oskar Fried conducting *Das Lied von der Erde*, Henry Wood in Mahler 8, and much, much, British music including first performance of Harty, Moeran and others. Maddeningly, none of it is complete because of the short sides, and mouth watering things such as the Mahler are only represented by short extracts. He did record, however, the first performance of Vaughan Williams's *Fifth Symphony* in 1943, and *A London Symphony* in 1946. *A London Symphony*, in particular, gives us a wonderful window on Vaughan Williams's approach to the practical realisation of his vision.

When we come to the *Fifth Symphony* Vaughan Williams conducted it at least four times, probably more, and two of these survive, one of them pretty-well complete. The *Fifth* in 1943 was the only time Vaughan Williams conducted the first performance of an orchestral symphony (he had, of course, directed the *Sea Symphony* at Leeds in 1910) and after the war he appeared with the *Fifth* at the Gloucester Three Choirs in 1947, and in London on 11 September 1950 and 3 September 1952. It's the last of these performances that we have pretty well complete.

Again Vaughan Williams's speeds tend to be brisk. Although we do not have all of the 1946 *London Symphony* - it was a Promenade Concert - and so we can get the

timing of the complete work to the nearest half minute from the 'Programmes as Broadcast' file at the BBC Archives, where it is given as 43½ minutes, though that may include some of the breaks between movements, so possibly it was even quicker. Compared to Haitink's commercial recording at 49' 07" or even Bryden Thomson at 47' 36" it strikes one as brisk.

The *Fifth Symphony* is also a robust view, though the first performance with its rather distant microphone placing sounds a little tentative, making me wonder if Vaughan Williams was finding that on the podium after little rehearsal he did not know the intricacies of the score as well as he later did. After the undoubted success of Vaughan Williams's own recording of the *Fourth Symphony*, the choice of Barbirolli to conduct the first recording of the *Fifth*, which took place on 17 February 1944, may have come as a surprise. As we have seen, we have Gaisberg to thank for that. Yet, in that first recording, Barbirolli seems to reflect RVW's view of the work at that time. Later, as we all know, his approach broadened. By the time Vaughan Williams came to do it in 1952 it was securely in his repertoire. Here his performance times at 35' 24" as compared to Menuhin at 38' 50" and Marriner at 38' 54", or Previn's later recording which is over 40 minutes. Yet Vaughan Williams catches the shifting colours, the half lights, and fully alive as he is to the importance of the changing dynamics, the visionary climaxes.

His audience in 1943 knew nothing of what to expect of the *Fifth Symphony*; Vaughan Williams's previous symphony had been the tumultuous *Fourth*, the outcome of the war was still far from clear, much of the audience were in uniform; later that night there was an air raid. What they heard must have had a visionary quality for many, for its serenity and poise. As they heard the glorious change to E major when Vaughan Williams gives us what would later become the "House Beautiful" music in *Pilgrim's Progress*, how many could have failed to be inspired with hope. This is particularly well caught in Leech's surviving acetates of the performance and deserves to be available to all.

I think we need to say a few words about the 1952 performance, as there are two or three different recordings floating around purporting to be this performance, given at a Promenade Concert at the Royal Albert Hall on 3 September 1952. None have announcements, but mine is from a very reliable source and I believe it to be authentic.

We have heard RVW in three of his nine symphonies, and also in his most impassioned choral work: his approach was direct and it seems to me his mask of non-nonsense vigour which Sir Adrian Boult

remarked on was a cover for a most un-British passion. What was so British was his not wanting to admit what we can all hear - he was content to let the music speak of the ecstasy of his vision.



RVW rehearsing A London Symphony at Buffalo, 1954

In the *Scherzo* of the *Fifth* Vernon Handley showed us what can be done to inject an almost Mendelssohnian lightness into the texture. RVW cannot do this - his is a rather coarser performance, and yet his goblins aren't merely galumphing yokels - those woodwind accents near the beginning so often missed by conductors learn down vividly.

Vaughan Williams is particularly good at articulating the wonderful climaxes of the first and third movements of the *Fifth Symphony*, particularly apparent if we compare the 1943 and 1952 performances of the *Romanza*, the third movement. If one listens to the first performance; it is notable how the cor anglais player shapes the opening solo, always played much straighter today:

The overall feeling of the *Fifth Symphony* is one of spirituality, yet it is not necessary to lay it on with a trowel to achieve the radiant visionary quality the composer so clearly intended and was able to achieve from a more vigorous perspective. One does not make progress down the Kings Highway unless one strides out. In his finale, the regular tread of the *Passacaglia* set out with determination and vigour.

Having dealt with Vaughan Williams's performances of his own music, we need to return to Bach. This could well be a discussion of that other paradox of British music; of the agnostic composer, haunted by scripture and religious books and liturgical practice. Amazing that no one has written a book, or a PhD thesis, on the subject, and

¹³ *op. Cit.* pp 118-9

the parallel between RVW and Britten is fascinating. The twin poles of Vaughan Williams's spirituality were John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. It was typical of the man that his involvement with both matured over a very long time. Let Sir Adrian Boult take up the story. He wrote:

When Vaughan Williams took over the London Bach Choir, he asked the Committee to allow him to have no concert at all for the whole of the first winter, but to devote it to the study of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. At the end, when Easter time came, he gave about half a dozen performances of it, in various places, with different sections of the choir. It was a most moving and interesting performance. I heard the first of them. He took some arbitrary liberties with Bach which are not perhaps to everyone's taste, and these he developed more and more as he developed to the annual performances which made such a deep impression in connection with the Dorking Festivals, and were repeated with the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, a year or two before his death.

The paramount impression on me, when I first heard the London *St. Mathew Passion*, before Vaughan Williams had done it very many times, was that it was not a fine piece of conducting in that sense at all. It was that a very great musician indeed had worked for six months with a large number of intelligent people, and at the end of it he had impressed the whole choir with his own view of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* so that the production of it was not at all a piece of conducting. The performance could not proceed except as it had been rehearsed and rehearsed: Bach through the spectacles of Ralph Vaughan Williams. The performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* was a spiritual matter with Vaughan Williams.¹⁴

The performance we have is the last he gave, and at almost 86 who could blame a conductor for slowing down. How good a performance is it; more to the point how good a *Vaughan Williams* performance? I think it gives a splendid flavour of what RVW did, and what he believed in. With its piano continuo it is decidedly not a performance of the nineties, and yet it is an entity bringing great rewards on its own account: as Holst wrote about one of RVW's own works, 'a blessed abiding fact'. One is reminded of Vaughan Williams's remarks on the object of art. He wrote:

The object of an art is to obtain the partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and beyond human faculties [of that which, in fact, is spiritual]. The means we employ to induce this revelation are those very senses and faculties themselves: the human, visible, audible and intelligible media which artists [of all kinds] use are symbols not of other visible and audible things but of what lies beyond sense and [beyond] knowledge.¹⁵

For many years Vaughan Williams's lieutenant at the Leith Hill Festival was Dr William Cole, Bill Cole to many. His view of Vaughan Williams approached reverence, and yet he saw from close quarters the practical music making he brought to reaching the infinite. He wrote:

His presence on the rostrum commands immediate respect, such is his personality and influence. Before a rehearsal he will be there, sitting aloof and apart from the general flurry of singers and players finding their position on the platform. He seems to be in another world, but then

with a glance at the clock, a few polite words of introduction, the rehearsal will begin at the appointed hour. He has a wonderful gift for extracting the very best out of his singers and players. . . . Bach and the words of the Bible make an ideal union for him and his interpretation of the *Passion* music is something to be felt rather than heard. He shows the drama of the story. To help this he has written out a complete continuo part and throughout he makes much use of tempo rubato. It is obvious that the story moves

him profoundly and, though him,

others.¹⁶

And Vaughan Williams himself wrote of that occasion in 1931 when they sang the *St Matthew Passion* for the first time, with seven hundred singers:

"When the seven hundred voices whispered 'be near me Lord' they made a magical sound which I shall never forget."

Johan Sebastian Bach's *St Matthew Passion* was conducted by Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Leith Hill Festival on 5th of March 1958. Another World. And yet one, I think, worth remembering; particularly as we can still experience the sounds made then, if not the atmosphere in the hall, reminding us of a great composer seen also to be a great interpretative artist, whose art can still be recalled for us today. It is surely a worthwhile exercise to extend the search to see what else of Vaughan Williams's art as a conductor might have survived, and ensuring its preservation.

Both acetate discs and tape recordings are fragile and impermanent media. If the music recorded on them is to be preserved they have to be copied onto something more permanent. These days the new medium for archiving is the digital disc, and CD-Rs can be made very cheaply, blanks costing under £2. Now is the first and the last opportunity for a great Ralph Vaughan Williams Society initiative: a census and archiving of all surviving performances of his music conducted by the composer. These might be off-air recordings made by individuals, they might be discs made for some of the performers themselves, or ex-BBC discs of one sort or another, or they might be recordings made overseas. For example was RVW's Buffalo performance of the *Fourth Symphony* recorded? I bet it was - but where is it now?



'DR. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
CONDUCTING HIS
"SEA SYMPHONY"

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS CONDUCTED RVW

- 1925 *Old King Cole* Vocalion A-0247/8 Pearl GEMMCD 9468
 - 1925 *The Wasps Overture* Vocalion A-0249 Pearl GEMMCD 9468
 - 1929 *Folk Dances* Columbia DB 181/3*
 - 1936 *Dona Nobis Pacem* GEMMCD9342 (also in BBC Sound Archives)
 - 1936 *Tallis* ("supervised RVW") Decca K815/6*
 - 1937 *Symphony No 4* HMV DB 3367/70*
 - 1943 *Symphony No 5* Leech Colln British Library
 - 1946 *Symphony No 2* Leech Colln British Library
 - 1952 *Symphony No 5* private collection (also in BBC Sound Archives)
 - 1954 *Serenade to Music* (Proms) private collection (also in BBC Sound Archives)
 - 1957 *Parry: Blessed Pair of Sirens* (Haddo House) see Kennedy p 746
 - 1958 *St Matthew Passion* Caviar
- * Reissued on Pearl GEMS 0062;
Tallis and *Symphony 4* also on Dutton CDAX 8007 and CDAX 8011

¹⁵ My quotation is transcribed from RVW's talk later published as "The Letter and the Spirit". The first passage in square brackets is in the published text not the talk, the latter such passages are in the talk not the published text. (*Beethoven's Choral Symphony* . . . op. Cit. pp 54-5.)

Lewis Foreman

¹⁶ *Leith Hill Musical Festival 1905-1955*. Epsom, Pullingers Ltd., 55 pp 60-1

¹⁴ op. Cit. p 119

YOUR LETTERS

*We are always pleased to
receive contributions for this page*



Antartica in Sydney

Immediately preceding the 2000 Olympic Games, Sydney is hosting a huge Olympic Arts Festival covering opera, concerts, theatre, dance and other events, with performers from all over the world. The RVW Society may like to know that the festival includes a performance of the *Sinfonia Antartica* in a concert (September 25) from the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra directed by James Judd. On the same programme in Sydney Opera House, percussionist Evelyn Glennie will premiere a new work by New Zealand composer Gareth Farr. The RVW performance is to be accompanied by a dramatic film about Scott's ill-fated expedition which includes "original footage from the last expedition shot by photographer Frank Hurley".

Fred Blanks
New South Wales, Australia

Antartica in Antarctic

Tim Page on the icebreaker *Aurora Australis* was given a cassette of *Sinfonia Antartica* to introduce him to the music of RVW. The version I taped was the Barbirolli performance with Sir Ralph Richardson's superscriptions added. I received the following e-mail on 4 December:

"Well I'm back on the ship. We have just left Macquarie Island, which was magic. It's covered in penguins and seals, just amazing. We are on our way to the pack ice, and should be there in a day or 2. Then we start work on the seal survey, which should keep us busy for a month or so till we reach the continent.

Your recording of Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica* has been played in the Antarctic and very much appreciated."

Bob Rush
London

Paul Holmes biography in USA

It might be of interest to US members to know that Paul Holmes's book *Vaughan Williams: His Life and Times* is being offered for sale at \$5.95 by the Edward R Hamilton book Catalogue company over here. The catalogue item number is 791245. Hamilton's is a remaindered book company, and one never knows how many copies of any book they have in stock, but if others are interested, as I was (in fact I had never come across the book before), I thought it might be worth mentioning.

Edward Hamilton can be contacted on the Web at www.hamiltonbook.com. they have a search function within the site.

Stephen Nash
New York

VW in National Portrait Gallery

(A)

When my wife and I visited the National Portrait Gallery in April we found two portraits of outstanding musicians, Dr Ralph Vaughan Williams and Lord Menuhin hanging

opposite each other on a very narrow staircase down which most people were walking without so much as noticing them and finding it impossible to stand and view them. I strongly objected to this and my wife, Professor Angela Pack later wrote a letter expressing our objections. While the reply (attached) concerning Menuhin maybe satisfactory, the intention to take the portrait of Vaughan Williams "off display" is I think certainly not satisfactory. It ought to be displayed in room 27 along with the Epstein bust. As you may know the RVW portrait by Sir Gerald Kelly (once displayed in the Royal College of Music) is large and needs space to view.

Perhaps a strong letter from the Society to the Curator is needed.

John Wesley Barker
Dunedin, New Zealand

(B)

Dear Professor Pack,
Thank you for taking the trouble to fill in one of our Visitor Comment forms when you came to the Gallery on 12 April.

We are just about to move the portrait of Sir Yehudi Menuhin. As you may have gathered, we are in the grip of a very large development programme, which is affecting quite a number of our displays, and that portrait will shortly move into one of the ground floor galleries. The portrait of Vaughan Williams will temporarily have to be off display, but he is also represented by a bronze bust in Room 27.

I hope that in other respects you enjoyed your visit to the Gallery and that you will come again when you are in London.

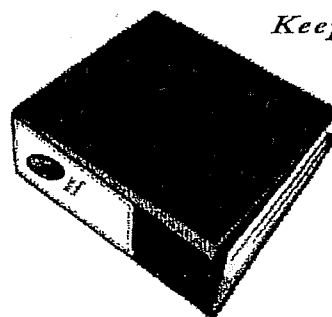
*Yours sincerely, Honor Clerk,
Curator, 20th Century Collection*

Chairman to National Portrait Gallery (C)

I am writing concerning the display of the Kelly portrait of Ralph Vaughan Williams. I found your recent comment that this portrait would be 'off display' most unsatisfactory. The ideal location for this work is in Room 27 alongside the Epstein bust. I would be grateful for your confirmation that the portrait is now available for viewing and the location you have chosen. I look forward to your reply.

*Yours sincerely,
Stephen Connock*

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Society, c/o 18 Perry Mead, Bushey, Herts WD2 3HW.**

(D)

Gerald Kelly portrait of Ralph Vaughan
Williams

Thank you for your letter of 12 September.

I can, of course, appreciate your concern at the Kelly portrait not being on display at the moment. You may be aware that we are in the midst of a major building programme here, which will open in May next year with a new five storey building between our Gallery and the National Gallery next door. During an extensive and highly disruptive project we have endeavoured to keep the Gallery open as normal, as far as possible, but there has inevitably been an impact on the displays, and the Kelly portrait came down because of re-wiring in the area where it was hanging.

Your suggestion of putting it next to the Epstein bust would be fine, but for the other contenders for that slot. Planning that, or indeed any, part of the galleries is always a question of juggling available works and trying to produce a balanced display. Questions of the importance of the sitter, the variety of vocations represented, gender, medium and aesthetic merit all have to be taken into account and as soon as one portrait has to be added, replaced or lent out it tends to have implications for the display as a whole.

The next change there involves moving the painting of Britten and Pears anyway to make room for an acquisition which has not yet been shown at all. This will entail putting a bust of Britten on view, thus displacing another bust. That bust will have to be replaced by a painting of the same sitter & etc. In working out this new sequence (which will probably happen in January) I have already taken into account the Kelly painting of Vaughan Williams. I hope you can appreciate that this is rather a complicated process and bear with us.

*Yours sincerely, Honor Clerk, Curator,
20th Century Collection,
National Portrait Gallery*

Concert Reviews

HODIE in Dover

Forty-five years after its first performance at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester Cathedral, Dover Choral Society embarked on a repeat in their Town Hall - part of which is the thirteenth Century Maison Dieu which sheltered countless pilgrims en route to Canterbury. It was a hard act to follow by an amateur choir only one third the number of the original 350 (trained) body, but with the full orchestra as was the composer's wont with the resultant full-bodied sound.



Dover Choral Society

Presents

CHRISTMAS CANTATA

"HODIE" by Vaughan Williams

FIRST NORFOLK

RHAPSODY by Vaughan Williams



CANTATA "FEN AND FLOOD"

By Patrick Hadley



Soloists:

Mary Seers - soprano

Gordon Pullin - tenor

Michael Pearce - bass-baritone

The Connaught Orchestra (leader George Simpson)

Dover Choral Society Chorus

Choristers from Dover College (under the direction of Roderick Spencer)

Conducted by Michael Foad

SATURDAY 27th NOVEMBER 1999 at 7.30 pm

DOVER TOWN HALL

TICKETS £7 (Students £3) from Dover Town Hall, The Music Box and members of Dover Choral Society

Assisted by



We worked hard to do this wonderful piece the justice it deserves, battling with Vaughan Williams's idiosyncratic cross rhythms and hemiolas to say nothing of the sudden unexpected and ethereal key changes. "You need to know your tones from your semitones" extolled our valiant conductor Michael Foad. (He could well recall the composer during his time at Cambridge where his own Professor of Music was Dr Patrick Hadley, Vaughan Williams's lifelong friend.)

The opening chorus was the most challenging for our choir but we finally achieved spontaneity of the opening *Nowells* against the exuberant *Hodies*. Was the sense of relief palpable as the four parts homed in unison for Alleluia at Moderato Maestoso? - a short-lived respite before going our diverse ways. In our copies the word "watch" featured frequently and obviously effectively as we all reached the final exultant *Nowell* on cue without a single domino!

After the prophetic dizzily high *Emmanuel - God With Us*, the female voices basked in the wordless accompaniment to Milton's beautiful words from his *Hymn on the*

Morning of Christ's Nativity. Memories of *Flos Campi* were stirred, indeed the whole of *Hodie* represents an apotheosis of the composer's earlier works. It is a wonderful 'summing up' with due reverence to his musical hero, J S Bach in the two exquisite chorales, but Vaughan Williams is kinder to his singers than J S Bach in that he facilitates pitching notes by subtle hints from the instrumentalists. Singing *a capella* is every choir's challenge to which, I think, we rose. Again, Vaughan Williams's sensitivity to the problem wisely prompted him to a subtle key change for the next number.

The combination of Vaughan Williams's haunting harmony and his wife Ursula's beautiful words are indeed a magical moment in the second Choral. Their combined art triumphs in the *March of the Three Kings*. We almost felt we were part of a film score echoing the majesty, mystery and pathos as the story unfolds.

In the *Epilogue*, Vaughan Williams, true to his own edict steers the chorus back to the beginning of the narration as *Emmanuel* rings out followed by a triumphant hymn. This transported this particular choir member back to the glorious tunes from school assemblies not even realising then who the composer was!

As Vaughan Williams once commented, that even an atheist could compose a good mass - I venture that as a 'cheerful agnostic' he gave a wonderful account of the Nativity. Perhaps his sympathy with Hardy's poem *The Oxen* is at the heart of this piece as the baritone sings of hope "that it might be so"?

I believe that as our choir, after initial doubts, got beyond the notes, we emerged richer for a musical experience we shall cherish for a long time.

Mary Druce

More on Hodie in Dover

An appreciative audience heard a performance of Vaughan Williams's Christmas Cantata *Hodie* given by the Dover Choral Society at Dover Town Hall on 27th November 1999. Other works included RVW's *Norfolk Rhapsody No 1* and Patrick Hadley's rarely heard Cantata *Fen and Flood*.

The soloists in *Hodie* were all former Cambridge Choral Scholars - Gordon Pullin

[tenor] Michael Pearce [baritone] and Mary Seers [soprano]. Mary is a local girl whose father is the President of the Choral Society; she was soloist on Hyperion's recording of VW's *Mass in G Minor* and Howells's *Requiem* sung by the Corydon Singers [CDA66076].

The opening prologue of *Hodie* started with suitable verve, the brass in the orchestra ringing out loud and clear as an introduction to the acclamation of 'Nowell! Nowell!' The trebles were supplied by Dover College and were unusually six female choristers. However, they provided clear voices to convey the narration when needed. All the soloists were first class. Miss Seers's pure soprano voice was a delight to hear, and both Mr. Pullin and Mr. Pearce sang their parts with suitable expertise, the diction was always clear throughout the work.

The choral parts were sung sensitively throughout, which made the performance very enjoyable. Areas which stood out were the *Lullaby* for soprano and the female members of the chorus which was beautifully balanced throughout, and the baritone solo, *The Oxen* in which Mr. Pearce sang wonderfully and was sensitively accompanied by the orchestral wind players of flute, cor anglais, and clarinets. The only slight hesitation in the whole piece was a less than convincing entry by the tenors and basses of the chorus in the *March of the Three Kings*, but encouragement from the conductor, Mr. Michael Foad, gave them the courage to be firmer in their singing. The finale was sung with enthusiasm and gusto, and made a fitting end to a lively performance of RVW's Christmas Cantata.

After the interval, the orchestra played a performance of the *Norfolk Rhapsody*. It was beautifully played throughout. The opening was delicately played, engendering a feeling of space and landscape of the Norfolk fenland. Typical use of woodwind and viola solos by RVW in the first part of the piece were played wonderfully. The more robust and animated middle section was played with enjoyment by the whole orchestra before calming down and finishing with echoes of the sensitive beginning.

The concert was concluded with a performance of Patrick Hadley's Cantata *Fen and Flood*. This was unknown to most of the audience, who learned from the programme notes that Hadley had written it after the disastrous floods in East Anglia in 1953. It was originally written for the male voice Caius College Chorus in 1955. It is the story of the Fens from early times to the 1953 floods. Ralph Vaughan Williams attended the first performance and liked it so much that he asked Patrick Hadley's permission to arrange the chorus part for SATB, as he wanted to perform it at Dorking. Hadley gave permission and RVW duly arranged the chorus part. Dover

Choral Society sung this version at the concert, and so a connection with Vaughan Williams was upheld all through the programme. The music used some traditional folk music and original material and was very interesting. RVW said that music should be an experience and this certainly was a musical experience which was a very enjoyable one.

**Linda Hayward
Dover**

National Symphony performs RVW's Fourth

On 7, 8, 9 October, 1999 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C., the National Symphony Orchestra under the baton of its Music Director, Leonard Slatkin, performed Shostakovich's *Tahiti Trot, Op. 16*; Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18*, Ivo Pogorelich, pianist; and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Greensleeves* followed by his *Symphony No. 4 in F Minor*. These concerts marked the first performances of VW's *Fourth* by this orchestra since its only other ones on 5, 6, 7 January, 1960 conducted by Howard Mitchell. A notable precedent to programming Rachmaninoff's second concerto with a Vaughan Williams symphony occurred in 1910 at the Leeds Musical Festival when *A Sea Symphony*, conducted by RVW received its first performance and Rachmaninoff played his concerto!

For these October, 1999 concerts, (I attended the Friday Matinée) Mr. Slatkin's printed program placed the Vaughan Williams works on the second half of the program most likely underlining the importance this conductor placed on them. After the opening and delightful *Tahiti Trot*, a brilliant and lighthearted orchestration of *Tea for Two*, we saw more musicians enter the stage, but no piano was rolled out! When Mr. Slatkin arrived at the podium, he turned to the audience and made several congenial, good humored and informative comments. He first assured us that, though there was no piano on stage at that time, the pianist was present and ready to perform! He went on to say that since Mr. Pogorelich's conception of the concerto was so spacious as to increase the ca. 40 minutes duration to ca. 50 minutes, he felt it necessary to let the concerto occupy the entire second half of the concert. He then maintained the importance of the Vaughan Williams works by commenting how unfortunate it is that his symphonies have been lost along the way, because each one is such an individual work of art. Mr. Slatkin then commented on the pastoralism of the *Greensleeves Fantasia* and the startling contrast of the *4th's* pervasive dissonance. He announced that the *Fourth Symphony* would follow without pause. Indeed, the

effect of this juxtaposition was most effective to illustrate his point and provided a unique listening experience that I will always treasure.

The performance of *Fantasia on Greensleeves* was heart-felt and touching, especially in the fourth phrase which was a softer, more tender echo of the preceding one. The only flaw was a ragged attack on the tremolo transition to the tune *Lovely Joan*. The performance of the *Fourth Symphony* was both energetic and eloquent. Mr. Slatkin's tempos matched very closely those of RVW's on his recording of 1937. The second movement was played with a very purposeful pace sedately marked by the pizzicato cellos and basses.

Throughout the *Fourth Symphony* the orchestra played with clarity, sharp rhythmic gestures, and expressive lyricism. Only at times did the sound of the brass section from where I sat seem to protrude too much where they would "dovetail" with the other sections.

Mr. Slatkin in his comments also expressed the hope that in the new century Vaughan Williams's music might receive increased hearings. Therefore perhaps we have reason to hope that Mr. Slatkin who has recorded a superb cycle of these nine symphonies will perform more of them with the NSO!

**John Barr
Bridgewater, VA, U.S.A.**

MUSIC YOU MIGHT LIKE

ERNEST FARRAR Orchestral Works.

The Open Road.
Variations for Piano & Orchestra.
The Forsaken Merman.
Heroic Elegy.
English Pastoral Impressions

Howard Shelly (piano)
Philharmonia Orchestra
Alasdair Mitchell.

CHANDOS CHAN 9586

The music of the composer George Butterworth, who was killed in action on the Somme in 1916, has been fairly well represented in performance and in recordings over the years since the Great War. His contemporary, Ernest Farrar, born 1885, and slaughtered just a few weeks before the end of hostilities in September 1918, has, until now, been little more than a

footnote in the history of English music.

Ralph Vaughan Williams, a friend to both composers, thankfully returned to the very different world that was left after the armistice and we have the legacy of his later works to enrich our lives. It was the RVW Trust, which enabled the performance material used in this recording to be produced.

Farrar's footnote status is largely the result of having been the teacher of Gerald Finzi (another thread in the RVW tapestry), but as a composer in his own right, Farrar now deserves to be taken seriously.

This splendid new recording with committed performances - the Philharmonia is here on top form - goes a long way towards redressing the 70 years of our neglect of this composer.

The longest piece on this CD is the symphonic poem *The Forsaken Merman Op. 20*, dating from 1913, which shows a composer in young maturity with an assured grasp of his material, musical form and the orchestra, producing a satisfying and convincing broad musical canvas with a developing personality and style.

English Pastoral Impressions Op. 26 is the only published piece on the CD and is dedicated to RVW. It is one of the two slighter works in the collection and is a charming work within its lighter idiom, as is the first piece, the rhapsody *The Open Road Op. 9*. The inventive *Variations for Piano and Orchestra Op. 25* date from 1915.

For me, the most poignant and prophetic piece in this collection is the *Heroic Elegy Op. 36*, Farrar's last orchestral composition, premièred by the composer in his home town of Harrogate on the 3rd July 1918, two months before he was killed. This solemn march-based elegy with its suitably muted grandeur, incorporates the *Aginccourt Song* (later employed by RVW and Walton in their Henry V pieces). Even without its tragic connotations, this elegy is enormously moving and well-crafted, deserving a far greater performance currency than it has had up to now. The author of the splendidly comprehensive accompanying notes, Bernard Benoliel, suggests that the elegy would be an ideal programme companion to RVW's *Pastoral Symphony* - he has a good point. Highly recommended.

Graham Muncy - Dorking

SOLUTION - RVW CROSSWORD No. 3

DOWN: 1. Isopod, 2. Up, 3. KO, 5. Partia, 6. Shepherd, 8. Milton, 9. Number, 10. Dirge, 13. ER, 15. Charbel, 18. Studies, 19. Miles, 20. Adagio, 21. BC, 17. LMS, 23. Third, 24. Cribb, 26. Gritton, 27. Bliss, 28. Concerto, 31. Last, 4. Opus, 7. Symphony, 10. Darke, 11. Pilgrim, 12. Drone, 14. Eight, 16. Air, 22. Bitter, 25. Benson, 29. NB, 30. eg.

RVW 2000
23rd - 29th July 2000 at Charterhouse
Vaughan Williams Symposium
Coordinator: Professor Byron Adams

This symposium will appeal to all lovers of the composer's music. It is offered in conjunction with The Charterhouse Summer School of Music (originated by RVW in 1945), The Carthusian Trust and the Vaughan Williams Society.

It will be held at Charterhouse and will commence on Sunday 23rd July until Saturday 29th July. It offers a wide range of activities connected with Vaughan Williams and his music.

Vaughan Williams was a boy in the school from 1887-1890. He maintained his links with the school throughout his life, returning to open the Old Music School in 1940, and to listen to concerts. Towards the end of his life he agreed to write the final scene for the 1951 performance of *The Masque of Charterhouse* and this year at the Summer School we hope that there will be a rare opportunity to hear this music. In 1972 the school celebrated the centenary of his birth with a fully staged performance of his opera *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1940 Vaughan Williams opened the newly converted Music School and in 1984 his widow Ursula Vaughan Williams opened the RVW Music Centre named after him and partly funded by the Vaughan Williams Trust.

The Carthusian Trust inaugurated in 1985 an annual Research Fellowship for an American scholar to spend part of the summer at Charterhouse while researching the music of Vaughan Williams. This scheme has continued to the present time.

The programme for the week will include:

Illustrated lectures

Many of these scholars are returning to Charterhouse this week to present papers on their researches. In addition, other Vaughan Williams scholars are being invited to give illustrated talks and to take part in seminars and discussions.

Excursions

There will be visits to locations associated with Vaughan Williams.

Concerts

The resources of the Summer School and its courses provide an opportunity for many performances and rehearsal sessions of his music during the week. We hope to include:

Symphony No.6; The Lark Ascending; Oboe Concerto; Concerto Grosso; Folk Song Suite; Flourish for Wind; The String Quartets and Fantasy Quintet; On Wenlock Edge; Three Shakespeare Songs; Flos Campi; Serenade to Music; Towards the Unknown Region; 6 Studies in English Folksong; Romance and Pastorale; and more besides!

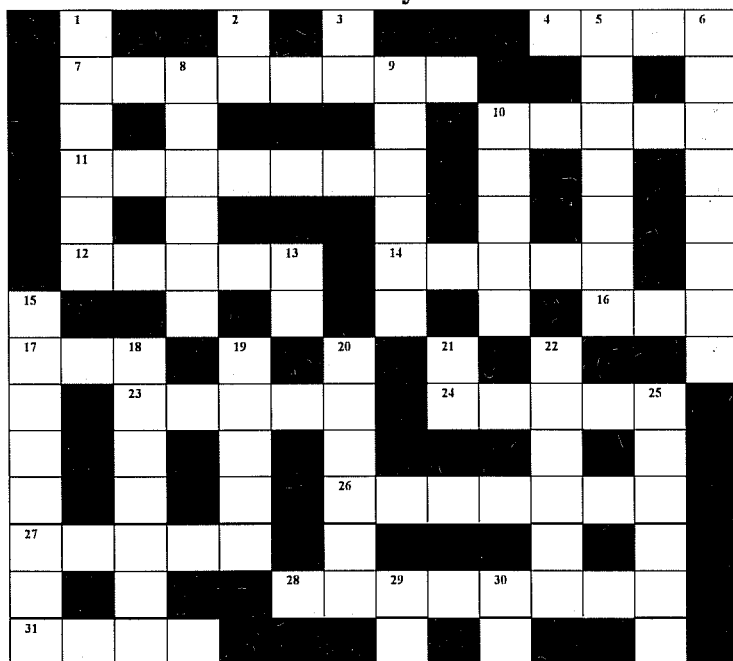
All those attending the Summer School are invited to sing in the final concert. Further details are contained within the Summer School brochure available from:

The Music Office, Charterhouse, Godalming, Surrey GU7 2DX. Tel: 01483 291696

The residential course fee will be £295 and offers full board and accommodation in single en-suite rooms, attendance at all summer school concerts, selected rehearsals, lectures, seminars and excursions without further charge. Non-resident charge (no accommodation or meals) will be £145.

Discounts are offered to members of the RVW Society.

RVW Crossword No. 3 by Michael Gainsford



News and Notes

- The Hutton and Shenfield Choral Society and Southend Bach Choir are performing *A Sea Symphony* on Saturday 1st April at 7.30 pm at the Brentwood Centre, Brentwood, Essex. The Aurelian Ensemble will be conducted by Gerald Bates. (Tickets from 01277 219916).
- The Band of the Grenadier Guards have recorded all of VW's military music with some other items arranged for band. It is now available on Bandleader Emblem EMBL 8001.
- Vaughan Williams's *Fifth Symphony* was voted joint second in the *BBC Music Magazine* survey of favourite pieces of music, whilst VW himself was voted the second favourite composer.
- *A History of Down Ampney* has been compiled by Pamela Varey and is available for £12.50 from Jon Edgson, The Byre, Church Lane, Down Ampney, Cirencester, Gloucestershire, GL7 5QW. Cheques to be made payable to the Down Ampney History Project.
- Richard Hickox is conducting The Philharmonia in a semi-staged performance of *The Pilgrim's Progress* at the Three Choirs Festival in 2001.

Across:

4. Type of catalogue number not given to RVW works (4)
7. (with 9 down and 14 across) this one is in D minor (8, 5, 6)
10. Obscure-sounding organist at first performance of *Sea Symphony* (5)
11. Pavement found in St John the Divine, NYC (7)
12. Domesticated cousin of *The Wasps*, found lounging about in the hive (5)
14. See 7 across
16. What the comely young lady was taking when she met *The Dark-Eyed Sailor* (3)
17. RVW would have travelled by this former line to the première of the eight (1, 1, 1)
23. *The Pastoral Symphony* (5)
24. Had Hugh taken lessons from this Tom, the Champ? (5)
26. Eric rotting about the piano at the first performance of the *Viola Romance* (7)
27. O Joy! Sir Arthur conducted the first performance of *Old King Cole* (5)
28. One for cello was left incomplete (8)
31. The second one in E minor (4)

Down:

1. Not one of *The Wasps*, but a wood louse (6)
2. Direction of *The Lark* (2)
3. Hugh beat John the Butcher by one (1, 1)
5. This started out as a double trio (7)
6. One from the Delectable Mountains? (8)
8. John wrote the words set in *Nothing is here for Tears* (6)
9. See 7 across
10. Could be for *Two Veterans*, or *Fidele* (5)
13. *O Taste and See* was written for her Coronation (1, 1)
15. Did Bill race about for the song first performed in 1904? (8)
18. There are six of these of English folk song (7)
19. Shrubsole's Lane, praised by RVW (5)
20. Speed of the *Sanctus (Mass in Gm)* (6)
21. The words inspiring *Flos Campi* were written about 950** (1, 1)
22. RVW wrote tunes for these springs in 1950 (6)
25. Lionel, the dedicatee of *Ring out your Bells*, and *Rest* (1902)
29. Note well! (1, 1)
30. This clue, for example (1, 1)

Answers on page 26

Call for Papers!

The October 2000 edition of the Journal will examine *Job*.

The deadline for contributions is September 10th, 2000.

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June 2000

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