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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 turnround, 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.

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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 Borrovian 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

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.

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

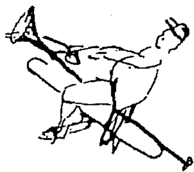
1940-1949 - 596

1950-1958 - 612

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.



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

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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

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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 memorable and also 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 symphonicism 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 bungaloid 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 possible 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

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Five Mystical Songs

An Introduction and CD Review

by Jonathan Pearson

'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 Britten[2] (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 Adeline[3] 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 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 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 Kreisler[9] 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 *Aïda*, *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

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[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.

[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.

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 Khayyám*, 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 'stretchéd 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 I! 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 Algernon 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.