

# Journal of the RVW Society

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**EDITOR**

*William Hedley*

## Albion Records plans four CDs

The RVW Society is to go ahead with its own CD label called Albion Records. A dedicated fund has been set up to support this exciting venture and money has been provided by The Garland Appeal to get things going. Our first recording project will be the complete songs of Ralph Vaughan Williams

Over 100 songs will be included in the four CDs and they will be grouped as follows:

Songs from the Operas  
Youth and Beauty – The early years  
Songs of Romance and Nobility  
Songs of Maturity

There will be many world première recordings in these CDs including *Willow Wood*, for baritone and piano – this work was recently recorded by Roderick Williams and conducted by David Lloyd-Jones in the orchestral version for Naxos. The *Dirge for Fidele* will be recorded in the original version for two mezzo-sopranos. Some of the early Tennyson songs will also be world premieres.

### Do but look on her eyes

We will launch our CD project with the *Songs from the Operas*. This includes:

Ten songs from *Hugh the Drover*  
Two songs from *Sir John in Love*  
Seven songs from *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Eleven of these songs will be world première recordings in this format. The seven songs from *The Pilgrim's Progress* have only been recorded once, on a long deleted Argo LP with John Cameron, Iris Kells and Patricia Bartlett accompanied by Gordon Watson (Argo RG 20). We all believe this will be a winning CD with which to launch Albion Records, especially with the tenor and piano recording of the wonderful *See the Chariot at hand* from *Sir John in Love*. We are also considering – subject to the necessary permissions – arranging some of the lovely songs from *The Poisoned Kiss* for inclusion in this CD. Top of our list for such arrangements would be the *Serenade* from Act II.

### High standards

Discussions are well advanced on the appointment of both an Artistic Director and Recording Producer for the four CD set. We will sub-contract the technical and manufacturing aspects of recording whilst aiming for high artistic and production standards. Our production run will be 1000 and we hope our members will support this venture by at least buying the CDs. We are hoping for the recording of the *Songs from the Operas* to be undertaken in the spring of 2006 with release aimed at Christmas of 2006.

### The light that burns so clear

Members should note that our next AGM is on Sunday 9 October at the Performing Arts Library in Dorking. We are delighted that James Day will be our guest speaker, on the subject of *Vaughan Williams and Englishness in Music*. The afternoon will be completed by the Warlock Singers presenting an *a capella* recital of RVW songs, including the *Five English Folk Songs* and the version of the song *The New Commonwealth*, unaccompanied, in G major.

### Proms, 2005

It is heart-warming to have three RVW symphonies at this year's Proms, including the original version of *A London Symphony*. With the RVW Society even being mentioned in the Proms booklet (on page 86), hope is indeed shining.

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# RVW AND RELIGION

## RVW and Religion: A Documentary Survey

I have admired Vaughan Williams's music from the time in the early 1950s when I first heard *Sine Nomine* eloquently affirm the hymn text, "For all the saints." Later in college I heard the Roger Wagner Chorale sing the *Mass in G Minor* for double chorus. As I subsequently heard this work many times by recording, I remember perceiving it as a reverent setting and that Vaughan Williams must have been a devout churchman of the Anglican tradition. When VW died in 1958, my uncle, a choral conductor and hymnologist said to me, "Vaughan Williams was a great soul." Then in the late 1960s I was startled by another knowledgeable musician who, to a group of which I was a part, informed us that "Vaughan Williams was an atheist." At this time in 2005 I believe that most of the above is true, however a closer look is needed to gain an accurately focused "picture" of Vaughan Williams's complex, but unified personality.

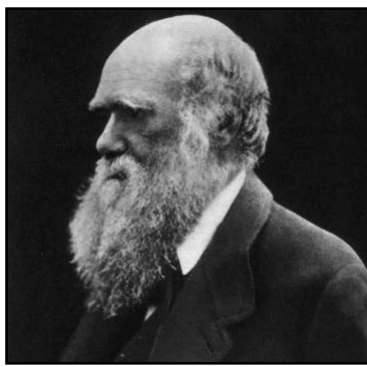
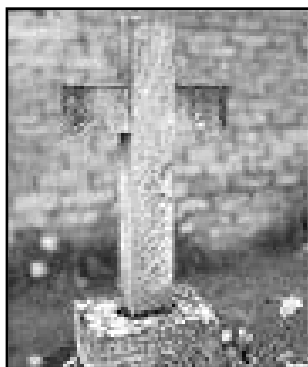
To take a closer look it would be well to repeat what Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote about her husband's religious position in her definitive biography of 1964. "He was an atheist during his later years at Charterhouse and at Cambridge, though he later drifted into a cheerful agnosticism: he was never a professing Christian." (UVW, p. 29) As accurate as this defining statement is, it would be interesting to trace biographically some of the events that helped to determine VW's beliefs and actions in relation to religious faith.

It is well known that RVW was born into the family of Rev. Arthur Vaughan Williams on October 12 1872 and was christened three weeks later. (Moore, p.8) Since Ralph's father died in 1875 he could not have had any extensive influence on the composer's childhood.

Ralph's mother, Mrs. Margaret Vaughan Williams, has been reported to have been a strict Christian with evangelical leanings. (I could not locate where I read this.)

Margaret's influences on her son were positive even if he did not adopt orthodox Christianity. Her uncle Charles Darwin had published in 1859 *On the Origin of Species*... which had, to say the least, a disturbing effect on their family and the country.

But when Ralph asked his mother what it meant, "she answered, 'The Bible says that God made the world in six days, Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer: but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way.' This answer completely satisfied Ralph at the time: nor did he ever forget it, for it seemed typical of her good sense, bringing difficult problems within the scope of the children's understanding." (UVW pp. 12-13)



Arthur Vaughan Williams' Grave at Down Ampney  
and Charles Darwin, RVW's great uncle

By the time he was seven, hymn singing was an activity in Ralph's home on Sundays after tea. Although he enjoyed singing, he would play a voice part on the violin and in his copy of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* he made a list called "Hymns I like" which included *Miles Lane*, the *Old Hundredth*, and the *Old Hundred and Fourth*. (UVW pp. 19-20). All of these tunes found their way into some of his mature compositions.

Ralph's first exposure to atheism may likely have been during his time at the school, Field House, Rottingdean between 1883 and 1887. Having been brought up in a less conservative family, Ralph was exposed to the radical political opinions of his nurse, Sarah Wager. (UVW p.11) At Field House, "...he met rabid conservatism, as well as class consciousness and snobbery which shocked him. One boy was fascinatingly an atheist who said: 'If I go to war and they pray for the soldiers they must leave me out of their prayers, *I will not* be prayed for.' Ralph found this both impressive and reasonable." (UVW p. 24)

When Ralph was eighteen in the summer holidays of 1890 having completed his education at Charterhouse he, along with his aunt, mother, sister and brother traveled to Oberammergau for the Passion Play. Of this experience Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote: "Ralph did not enjoy the experience. He found the play tedious, and disliked all the beards and the fervent and rapturous atmosphere... This visit made him realize how little religion meant to him. He had been confirmed at Charterhouse, taking it as a matter of course in his school career, and he continued to go to church fairly regularly 'so as not to upset the family.' This attitude did not affect his love of the Authorized Version of the Bible. The beauty of the idiom of the Jacobean English was established in his mind long before he went away to school and, like the music of Bach, remained as one of his essential companions through life. He was far too deeply absorbed by music to feel any need of religious observance." (UVW p. 29)

Vaughan Williams entered Trinity College, Cambridge in 1892. There "he had a reputation as a 'most determined atheist,' according to Bertrand Russell who was at Trinity at the same time, and he was noted for having walked into Hall one evening saying in a loud voice, 'Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know?'" (Kennedy, *The Works* p. 42) Kennedy's subsequent explanation merits exact quotation: "It is important to realize, and it cannot be over-emphasized, that the religion of Vaughan Williams's life was music. He was that extremely English product the natural nonconformist with a conservative regard for the best tradition. In the music of the Church he recognized the only continuous musical tradition in English life. When he was at Cambridge he would go to Ely Cathedral in time for morning service and sit at the back of that beautiful church listening to the chants echoing among the lofty recesses of the roof. The marvellous prose of the Authorized Version, the fundamental simplicities of *The Pilgrim's Progress* – these were necessary food for his artistic spirit, and he himself responded to their proclamation of the ultimate mysteries as artists have done throughout the ages. There is no lack of sincerity in his religious music almost all of which is strongly affirmative. The atheism of the undergraduate was replaced by a more mature Christian agnosticism, as Sir Stewart Wilson has brilliantly described it. He had a deep-rooted humanitarian faith: beyond that, he would not go." (Kennedy, *The Works* p. 42)

VW had demonstrated his potential as a good string player and particularly loved the viola and would really have liked to be an orchestral player. His family felt, however, that if he was to have a professionally respectable musical career, he must be an organist.

Therefore he worked determinedly on the organ which his family put in the hall of Leith Hill Place and also on the organ at the church at Coldharbour. (UVW p. 30)

In 1895 he became organist at St. Barnabas Church, South Lambeth, London, a position he held with no particular delight in his duties which consisted of training the choir, giving organ recitals and accompanying the services. (Kennedy, *The Works* p.41). He later wrote "...I never could play the organ, but this appointment gave me an insight into good and bad church music which stood me in good stead later on." (RVW, Foss, p. 29) His duties at the church became increasingly irksome. He took communion only as "part of the show," as he put it, but later on decided not to continue this. His resignation in 1899 was prompted when the new Vicar insisted that taking communion be a condition for his continuance as organist. Perhaps VW's last contact with this church was the delivery of a large box of "French novels, chiefly Maupassant, Zola, and Balzac...with a chilly note saying that, as they were found in the organ loft, they were presumably his." (UVW p. 58)

The experience of this completed tenure at St. Barnabas was to benefit VW for a period of two years beginning in 1904 when he accepted Rev. Percy Dearmer's invitation to be musical editor for a new collection of hymns which resulted in *The English Hymnal*, 1906. Kennedy commented that VW accepted this task, "not because of any strong religious opinion, but because it offended his artistic sense that such a national feature as the Established Church should propagate bad music." (Kennedy, *The Works* p. 67-68) Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote: "Ralph was in fact trying to put right some of the things that he had found wrong with Church music in his short career as an organist. The eventual value of that uncomfortable job was his discovery that for many people the music the Church gave them each week was the only music in their lives and that it was all too often unworthy of their faith and of music itself." (UVW p. 72) In the two above episodes we find VW resigning his organist position by honestly acknowledging his denial of the value of Holy Communion for him, but yet involving himself in the selection and editing of hymn tunes due to his sensitivity to the Christian faith of others. These two qualities, honesty and sensitivity to others, were characteristic of the man.

The position of VW on religion remained rather settled from here on throughout his career. Some interactions between his work and religious attitude, however remain to be observed.

VW's *Mass in G Minor* was probably composed during 1920 and 1921. It was dedicated to Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers although the first performance was given by the City of Birmingham Choir in their Town Hall, on December 6 1922. The first liturgical performance was 12 March 1923 in Westminster Cathedral, London. (Kennedy, *A Catalogue* pp. 91-92) The conductor of this performance, R.R. Terry, commented in *Cathedral Chronicle* that the critics were practically unanimous "in noting its devotional spirit and strictly liturgical character..." (Kennedy *The Works*...p. 160) A printer at the publishers detected an omission in the Credo of the words "et apostolicam" from the line "Et unum sanctam et apostolicam Ecclesiam" but VW inserted them into the bass part on page 27 of the score. (Kennedy *The Works*...p. 161) Not necessarily in connection with this incident, VW "said cheerfully, 'There is no reason why an atheist could not write a good mass.'" (UVW p. 138)

Another work composed soon after the *Mass* was *Sancta Civitas (The Holy City)* written between 1923 and 1925. (Kennedy, *A Catalogue* p. 108). The Latin title was used because the English one had already been a title for Alfred Gaul's cantata of 1882. Vaughan Williams's *Sancta Civitas* is a work of extensive choral and instrumental forces conveying the essence of the book of Revelation, "...the fall of Babylon and the new heaven and the new earth. The great armies are slain, the angel standing in the sun summons the fowls of the air to devour the carrion, and the holy city descends 'as a bride adorned for her husband' where the glory and the honour of the nations are brought into the eternal light of rejoicing."

Through the haze of the alleluias at the end, the time of fulfillment and the time when all that has happened in the vision has not yet happened in reality meet for a moment, as a single voice promises, [the tenor has waited in silence for about 29 minutes to sing these words] 'Behold I come quickly, I am the bright and morning star. Surely I come quickly.' The voices of the chorus answer 'Even so come, Lord.' (UVW pp. 162-163) This work was published by the end of 1925. "On the fly-leaf, printed in the original Greek, is a quotation from the *Phaedo* of Plato which was the nearest Vaughan Williams was ever to come to an explicit

avowal of his agnosticism. Socrates, awaiting execution, wishes to prove the immortality of the soul and gives the geography of the regions in which spirits must move before they can enter the Elysian Fields. He continues: 'Now to assert that these things are exactly as I have described would not be reasonable. But that these things, or something like them, are true concerning the souls of men and their habitations after death, especially since the soul is shown to be immortal, this seems to me fitting and worth risking to believe. For the risk is honorable, and a man should sing such things in the manner of an incantation to himself.' (Kennedy, *The Works* pp.193-194)

Kennedy points out that this quote from Plato explains how VW could set to music a text in which he did not literally believe. VW's involvement with this and other visionary texts would seem to indicate a positive direction of thought on his part. Indeed this work was his favorite among his own choral compositions. His honesty, however, causes him to withdraw from claiming too much in the unknowable field of ultimate reality. In his article, "Who Wants the English Composer?" which he wrote in 1912 for the *R.C.M. Magazine*, he said: "There is no form of insincerity more subtle than that which is coupled with great earnestness of purpose and determination to do only the best and the highest – this unconscious insincerity which leads us to build up great designs which we cannot fill and to simulate emotions which we can only feel vicariously." (Quoted in Kennedy, *The Works*...p. 194) At the time VW was beginning to compose *Sancta Civitas* he wrote an article in *Music and Letters* entitled "The Letter and the Spirit." The following quotation from this article summarizes, according to Ursula Vaughan Williams, what he believed then and for the rest of his life concerning the nature of art. (UVW p. 163) He wrote: "Before going any further may we take it that the object of all art is to obtain a partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and human faculties – of that in fact which is spiritual? And that 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 knowledge."

A creative project that occupied Vaughan Williams for virtually his entire career involved John Bunyan's allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. While working as musical editor from 1904 to 1906 on *The English Hymnal*, he adapted an English traditional melody (no. 403) for Dearmer's bowdlerized version of Bunyan's song "Who would true valour see". In 1906 he wrote incidental music for a dramatization of Bunyan's book which took place at Reigate Priory in December of that year. At some point after World War I he composed a one-act pastoral episode, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*, where Pilgrim concluded his earthly journey. It was first performed in 1922. Between 1925 and 1936 the composer wrote considerable parts of Acts One and Two of a large opera. Seemingly because he doubted this work would ever be produced he used many of the opera's musical themes in his *Symphony No. 5 in D* which he began in 1938 and completed in 1943. In 1940 he composed a motet for mixed chorus in which Bunyan's words for Mr. Valiant-for-Truth describe Pilgrim's passing over the river of death while "all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side." In 1942 Vaughan Williams composed music for a BBC radio production of an adaptation of Bunyan's book by Edward Sackville-West. (Kennedy *A Catalogue* p.172) By this point he had composed music which encompassed the Bunyan allegory though not to an exhaustive extent. Nevertheless he continued to work on his complete operatic version of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and completed it in 1949 except for adding an extra song, *Nocturne*, in 1951 and expanding the Vanity Fair section in 1951-52. (Kennedy *A Catalogue* p.192) This opera, though actually called a "morality" by VW, was Covent Garden's main contribution to the Festival of Britain and was first performed 26 April 1951.

This writer is interested in the fact that the composer, never a professing Christian, expended so much time on a piece of Christian literature written by a Puritan preacher. Vaughan Williams compiled his libretto by choosing and omitting sections of Bunyan's allegory and by adding various Psalms and other biblical sources to complement and provide continuity and illumination to the plot. Before the critical reviews of the first performance appeared VW said, "They won't like it, they don't want an opera with no heroine and love duets – and I don't care, it's what I meant, and here it is." (UVW p. 308) What did he mean by this work?

It is clear that VW did not have an exclusive Christian view of Bunyan's work. He changed the name of the principle character from Bunyan's "Christian" to his own choice, "Pilgrim." The reason for this intentional change was, as the composer wrote, "because I want the idea to be universal and to apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life whether he is Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Shintoist or Fifth Day Adventist." (Kennedy, EMI CD booklet notes, p. 7) We may ask, could not the composer have added to this list the category of agnostic? One critic wrote of the composer as part of an extended critical review, "This is something always to be wondered at – that he should have entered an arena traditionally meretricious and have imposed sublimity upon it" (Kennedy *The Works...* p. 311) This quote indicates that VW brought religious piety as a sincere offering to the secular opera house and public as one of the late achievements of his long public career.

So what can we conclude from these successions of documented quotes of the composer himself and those close to him? The quotes themselves enlighten us who seek to examine and understand Vaughan Williams's complex manner of thinking and feeling. We must conclude that he was an agnostic, but one who cared deeply about the human condition, physically, socially, intellectually and spiritually. His music feeds all these aspects of life for those who have ears to hear, minds to perceive, and hearts to feel.

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John Bunyan

## To be a Pilgrim: A Meditation on Vaughan Williams and Religion

"There is no reason why an atheist could not write a good Mass."<sup>1</sup> With this declaration, Vaughan Williams, with characteristic forthrightness, gets right to the heart of one of the great paradoxes concerning his life and music: how could an agnostic composer use religious texts so consistently and set them with such evident skill, inspiration and sincerity? As so often with assertions by this particular composer, a superficial bluntness conceals a depth of contradiction and ambiguity. And the provocative nature of Vaughan Williams's statement – for he was nothing if not a teasing and restless intellectual – deflects the question that should arise logically as a corollary: why should an atheist want to write a Mass in the first place?

Many listeners and commentators, especially those whose Christian faith leads them to admire Vaughan Williams's religious music, often wish away the contradiction between the composer's words and works by postulating that he was a "closet Christian," someone who failed to

recognize the reality of his own belief. One needs only to recall the words of Stuart Wilson, the great tenor, who opined that Vaughan Williams's belief system was one of Christian agnosticism.<sup>2</sup> What such an assertion actually signifies in terms of belief is anyone's guess; Wilson's description is as vague as it is untenable theologically. Over the years, Vaughan Williams's supposed Christian outlook has been often alluded to in liner notes, program essays, and in sermons by Anglican clergy with an interest in music.

In fact, Vaughan Williams was deeply interested in religion – all of them, and not just exclusively Christianity. As he wrote to the communist composer Rutland Boughton concerning his operatic morality *The Pilgrim's Progress*, "I on purpose did not call the Pilgrim 'Christian' because I want the idea to be universal and apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life whether he is Xtian, Jew, Buddhist, Shintoist or 5th Day Adventist."<sup>3</sup> What a list! The breadth of Vaughan Williams's interest in religion was doubtless given added impetus by his friendship with Holst. Holst was raised by a Theosophist stepmother, was fascinated by Gnosticism, and learnt Sanskrit in order to read Hindu scripture. (One of the fruits of his study was a radiant opera, *Savitri*, based on an episode from the *Mahabharata*.) Holst and Vaughan Williams, friends who spent days tramping about the countryside passionately exploring musical, political and philosophical questions, may well have had long discussions about the infinite varieties of religious experience.

And Vaughan Williams was, in his own inimitable way, a deeply and reflexively religious man, and no truly broad-minded person, Christian believer or otherwise, need be disturbed by the seeming contradiction between Vaughan Williams's spiritual nature and his position, held consistently for over sixty years, as a freethinking liberal humanist and leftist political radical. This essay will explore the issue of the composer's mutable beliefs, without attempting to come to an overarching conclusion concerning the complex inner life of a complicated and often ambivalent man.

To restate the basic question that has provided the point of departure for this investigation, why, indeed, would an atheist want to write a Mass, or, indeed, any religious music? And, further, was Vaughan Williams necessarily referring to himself as an atheist when he made this declaration? The composer's second wife, the poet Ursula Vaughan Williams, has written in her biography of her husband that "He was an atheist during his later years at Charterhouse and at Cambridge, though he later drifted into a cheerful agnosticism: he was never a professing Christian."<sup>4</sup> In a piquant story from his early years at school, Vaughan Williams recalled being fascinated by a boy who declared, "If I go to war and they pray for the soldiers they must leave me out of their prayers, I will not be prayed for."<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Michael Kennedy from 1963, now in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, Bertrand Russell, the great philosopher who was a contemporary of Vaughan Williams's at Cambridge in the 1890s, testified that the composer enjoyed a daring reputation as a "most determined atheist." Russell reported that Vaughan Williams was known to have strolled into Hall at Trinity College announcing loudly "Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know?"<sup>6</sup> The palpable amazement that Russell retained over more than a half-century at this rhetorical flourish was clearly not due to the sentiment, which the philosopher shared, but that Vaughan Williams was so militant – and public – about declaring his lack of faith.

Vaughan Williams was hardly the only composer in the history of music to articulate heterodox religious beliefs while creating music expressive of deeply held faith. Brahms was an agnostic who yet composed the supremely affecting *Ein deutsches Requiem*, op. 45. Like Vaughan Williams, Brahms hoped that this score would appeal to spiritual people of all faiths. (It is certainly true, however, that the pessimism expressed in several of the German master's later choral works, such as his *Schicksalslied*, are not consonant with Christian belief in any way.) As the American scholar Carlo Caballero has revealed, Brahms's great French contemporary, Gabriel Faure, was far from a doctrinaire believer: "With its arrangement of liturgical texts, the music of Faure's [*Requiem*] revealed a personal vision of the afterlife which stood apart from conventional Christian views of death and judgment."<sup>7</sup> Even closer to Vaughan Williams's personal experience, his teacher Hubert Parry endured great familial upheaval when he declared his unorthodox religious opinions to his rigidly pious father.<sup>8</sup> While Parry attended

Sunday services in his role as squire at Highnam, he refused to say the Athanasian Creed.<sup>9</sup>

As noted above by Ursula Vaughan Williams, her husband's early atheism was mitigated over his long life, mutating into a "cheerful agnosticism." The reasons for this incremental change were various, as is the case with any thoughtful person who seeks to live an examined life, including, most profoundly, his active service in the First World War and his dismay and anger over the butchery he saw daily as a member of the Royal Medical Corps. But Vaughan Williams's agnosticism was not invariably cheerful in the face of tragedy. If anything, the despair the composer experienced at the start of the Second World War brought him to the brink of black nihilism: the Epilogue of the Sixth Symphony is surely one of the eeriest depictions of an inner landscape devoid of consolation ever penned. Vaughan Williams made the dark meaning of this movement explicit, when he confessed that its nearest literary analogue is found in Prospero's speech to Ferdinand at the end of the magical masque in Act IV of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the very globe itself shall dissolve and leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Equally disturbing is the conclusion of the Seventh Symphony, the *Sinfonia Antartica*. Here there is no faith, no hope, nor love: the implicit nihilistic despair expressed in these late symphonies is antithetical to the hope that lies close to the heart of the Christian message.

As noted above, Vaughan Williams's need to interrogate received faith was a lifelong compulsion, a pattern of behavior so deeply ingrained that it cannot be ignored or explained away. Indeed, Vaughan Williams reflexive need to question received opinion was so consistent that it is difficult to be surprised by his heterodox opinions – whether expressed early or late in life – in the way that one may be shocked to learn that the elderly Herbert Howells, after a lifetime of composing eloquent religious music and a very public espousal of the tenets of Anglicanism, blurted out to his daughter that he did not believe in an afterlife.<sup>10</sup>

Part of Vaughan Williams's skepticism surely arose as a reaction against aspects of his childhood. Although one of Charles Darwin's beloved nieces, Vaughan Williams's mother – and his eccentric Aunt Sophy who helped raise her sister's three children after the death of the composer's father – held strict and unwavering Low Church convictions. While Vaughan Williams's mother was a loving, attentive and sensible parent, her youngest son must have chafed under the severity of Leith Hill Place.<sup>11</sup> A visit to the unrelentingly austere parish church attended by Margaret Vaughan Williams and her children still provides a powerful visual representation of the almost puritanical atmosphere that surrounded the composer during his early years. Vaughan Williams, who instinctively relished the sensuous pleasures of music, art and literature (not to mention good food, fine wine and the company of beautiful women), eventually renounced with all his soul the puritanical self-denial encouraged by his early religious education.

Vaughan Williams did not completely jettison the institution of the Anglican Church however; he did discard the evangelical piety of his childhood for something more aesthetically alluring. As a cultural nationalist who deeply loved English institutions, Vaughan Williams was gradually reconciled to the Anglican Church, which he apprehended rightly was in integral part of English national identity. He was not uncritical of the Anglican Church by any means: writing to Michael Kennedy of Elgar's oratorio *The Apostles*, he tartly remarked, "I always feel that [Elgar] was oppressed by the fact that he was writing for the Church of England and could not get rid of the bombazine and bonnets of the Anglican Sunday morning service."<sup>12</sup> Whether Elgar, a Roman Catholic who would have attended Anglican Sunday morning services rarely if at all, was ever thus oppressed on a Sabbath is less than plausible; that the elderly writer of this sentence had been so oppressed is all too clear. Further, writing to Holst about his sexy and wildly heterodox *Magnificat* of 1932, Vaughan Williams testified that he had attempted to "lift the words out of the smug atmosphere which had settled down on it from being sung at evening service for so long."<sup>13</sup> (Such sentiments hardly constitute a ringing endorsement of the enchantments of Evensong, and may explain why Vaughan Williams, in contrast to Howells, published only one, quite earthbound, Evening Service in 1925.)

Why, then, did Vaughan Williams spend the years from 1904 to 1906 editing *The English Hymnal* and later adorning the Anglican Church with glorious anthems and other service music? One possible answer is suggested by an examination of that hymnal and the clergyman behind its creation, Percy Dearmer. Dearmer, along with other High Church clergy of his generation, was a spiritual heir to Tractarians such as Keble, Froude, and before his conversion to Rome, John Henry Newman. Contemplating the Oxford Movement created by Newman and his friends, Dearmer discovered a strain of ecclesiastical aestheticism that could potentially lift the Anglican Church from its Low Church smugness as well as its political conservatism. It may seem paradoxical that High Churchmen would have been socialists intent on educating, uplifting and inspiring working-class men and women, but Dearmer, like Newman and the Tractarians, was not just a liturgical but a social reformer.

The ideals of Dearmer and other like-minded clergy, such as Scott Holland, chimed perfectly with Vaughan Williams's commitment to social reform as well as to his developing taste for sumptuous ritual. In an elegantly researched essay, Julian Onderdonck has documented how Vaughan Williams imported folksongs into *The English Hymnal* not just by giving them sacred texts, but reshaping the melodies as he saw fit.<sup>14</sup> Both Dearmer and Vaughan Williams sought to beautify the Anglican Church through purging its music of the stodgy Victorianisms found in the immensely popular *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. For Vaughan Williams, this beautification of the Church of England would further abet his ambition to introduce folksong into the very lifeblood of his nation. By so doing, the composer aimed to propagate knowledge of folksong and Tudor music through all strata of British society. For Dearmer and Vaughan Williams, *The English Hymnal* was a democratic and egalitarian endeavor.<sup>15</sup> But Vaughan Williams's agenda as a cultural nationalist is only part of the reason for his attraction to High Church ceremony. The composer's fascination with High Church ritual is evident intermittently from 1904, when began work on *The English Hymnal* to the 1951 premiere of his operatic 'Morality,' *The Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>16</sup> For a composer whose work was enriched by a keen apprehension of the importance of symbols, Vaughan Williams was clearly fascinated with the symbolic resonance of ritual and liturgy; after all, he once wrote that 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 knowledge." Later in the same essay, Vaughan Williams stated, "the symbols of the musical composer are those of the ear – musical sounds in their various combinations."<sup>17</sup> Music, in this context, consists of a series of symbolic gestures that can be related to the symbols found in other (especially literary) contexts, as, for example, in the Gospel narrative that so moved Vaughan Williams when retold by Bach in his great *St. Matthew Passion* and the symbolic ritual that he discerned in the mystery of the Mass.

Vaughan Williams may well have had his first introduction to the ravishing aesthetic experience of the Tridentine Mass<sup>18</sup> at the hands of his teacher Charles Villiers Stanford, who was, ironically, a most determinedly Protestant Irishman. One of the most enlightened aspects of Stanford's teaching, rare for the time, was his insistence that his pupils study the choral music of the 16th century. Stanford admired the pioneering work of the scholar and choral conductor R. R. Terry, who was choirmaster for Westminster Cathedral, the Roman Catholic cathedral in London. Stanford sent his students to attend Mass at the Cathedral so that they could hear the choir sing Palestrina, Byrd, Tallis and other 16th-century composers. Although Vaughan Williams, already too immersed in the ecclesiastical modes for his teacher's comfort, was not one of the students to whom Stanford specifically recommended study of modal counterpoint, the young composer did in fact follow the example of Stanford's other students, and attend Mass at Westminster Cathedral. At the completion of the cathedral, which was consecrated in 1903, the artistic Cardinal Vaughan, who oversaw the construction and adornment of the great sanctuary, ensured that the music presented in his cathedral was of the highest quality by attracting Terry from Downside School.<sup>19</sup> Cardinal Vaughan insisted that both music and spoken liturgy in the cathedral were presented with an attention to detail that rivaled, if not surpassed, the liturgical elegance of Brompton Oratory. For Vaughan Williams, brought up in the Low Church severity of Leith Hill Place, the

solemn, rich and impersonal beauty of High Mass at Westminster Cathedral must have been an overwhelming sensory, symbolic and aesthetic experience.<sup>20</sup> Hearing Tudor music in such a setting allowed the young composer to make an essential connection with the musical traditions of pre-Reformation England. That Vaughan Williams was deeply impressed by Terry and his choir is evident from the two works that came as direct fruits of his visits to Westminster Cathedral: the somber and beautiful Passiontide motet, *O vos omnes*, and the *Mass in G minor*<sup>21</sup>, both from 1922.

While Vaughan Williams variously engaged at different times with the symbolism of the Mass, with High Church Anglican ceremony, with the Gospel narratives and with the Bible, these aesthetic experiences never resulted in any sort of religious conversion. For Vaughan Williams, the centrality of the symbol was the key that allowed him to enter into the life and psychological validity of religion. As a philosophical skeptic who was also a trained historian, Vaughan Williams never allowed himself to become enmeshed in the “concretistic fallacy,” which has been defined by American psychologist Edward F. Edinger as the impulse to interpret the truths of religious symbolism in a literal, materialistic manner as historical “truth.”

Turning in 1922 from the tragic waste and horror of the First World War, Vaughan Williams may have sought to restore and deepen his understanding of Byrd and other Tudor composers by connecting with the richness of Catholic England in a contemporary manner through the symbolism of the Mass. Michael Kennedy has noted that the *Mass in G minor* is “in some respects the most anonymous of Vaughan Williams’s works . . . he wrote it for liturgical use, the music being subservient to religious ceremony.”<sup>22</sup> Traces of the composer’s own wartime experience remain, however, especially in the impassioned prayer for peace, “dona nobis pacem,” which concludes the tonally restless and highly expressive Agnus Dei. And this final section contains within it a haunting recall of the dark music with which the score opens: Kyrie eleison, “Lord, have mercy.”

Vaughan Williams, who obliquely referred to himself as an “atheist,” did indeed write a good Mass, one adorned the potent symbolism that the composer found in the ancient liturgy, and through which he wished to express the symbolic truth of religious experience. At the same time, as a cultural nationalist, he reached back through time to make a connection with the living tradition of the Tudor composers whose music he loved and revered as an example. Despite rare flashes of impatience with the followers of organized religion, one suspects that Vaughan Williams, the inveterate and ambivalent skeptic, was rarely bothered that Christian believers should be uplifted by his music. His desire, stated repeatedly, was that his religious scores would have significance for all those who sought to follow a spiritual path, including those sympathetic listeners and performers who find themselves unable – or unwilling – to believe unquestioningly in the literal, historical truth of any religious tradition. For, in one of the most generous and broadly religious sentences that he ever penned, Vaughan Williams declared, “a work of art is like a theophany which takes different forms to different beholders.”<sup>23</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 138.
- 2 Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 42.
- 3 Quoted in Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 313.
- 4 U. Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, 29.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 6 Kennedy, *Works*, 42.
- 7 Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 189. Few have pointed out Fauré’s decided influence upon the development of Vaughan Williams’s mature style, an influence transmitted to the English composer in 1907 by the older French composer’s favorite student, Maurice Ravel.

- 8 Jeremy Dibble, *C. Hubert H. Parry: His Life and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 109-112.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 392.
- 10 Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press Ltd., 1998), 110.
- 11 An amusing instance of the differences in taste between mother and son is related by Ursula Vaughan Williams: “When Ralph was in London he ordered some of his Christmas presents at Lamley’s bookshop. He had a copy of A.P. Herbert’s *Water Gipsies* posted to his mother. He had bought a copy for himself, which he started to read on the train – when he arrived home he rushed to the telephone to tell his sister to intercept the parcel for he realized that it was a book that would qualify as ‘horrid’ in the Leith Hill Place idiom. He and Adeline enjoyed it very much.” U. Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, 185.
- 12 3 March 1957 in Kennedy, *Works*, 388.
- 13 Kennedy, *Works*, 230.
- 14 Julian Onderdonck, “Hymn Tunes from Folk-songs: Vaughan Williams and English Hymnody,” in *Vaughan Williams Essays*, ed. Byron Adams and Robin Wells (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 103 –128.
- 15 I am grateful to Julian Onderdonck for this insight.
- 16 In a subtle reception history of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Nathaniel Lew has argued persuasively that echoes of Anglo-catholic ritual pervade the opera. See Nathaniel G. Lew, “‘Words and music that are forever England’: *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and the pitfalls of nostalgia,” in *Vaughan Williams Essays*, 196-198.
- 17 Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 2nd revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 122.
- 18 The Tridentine Mass is the Mass in Latin as established by the Council of Trent.
- 19 Michael Kennedy, *Works*, 158-159.
- 20 So impressed was the composer that decades later, when composing his final symphony, *the Ninth*, written between 1956 and 1958, he affixed a phrase from the Tridentine Mass to the sketches of the theme found in the final movement: ‘Introibo ad altare Dei’ (‘I go before the altar of God’). See Alain Frogley, *Vaughan Williams’s Ninth Symphony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 278.
- 21 While the *Mass in G minor* is dedicated to Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers, it is clear from Terry’s correspondence with Vaughan Williams that the work was originally intended for the choir of Westminster Cathedral. See Kennedy, *Works*, 159-160.
- 22 Kennedy, *Works*, 174.
- 23 Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 3.

## A Christian Atheist

To the innocent eye, there isn’t a problem; just look at what Vaughan Williams wrote: a Mass, a *Magnificat*, oratorios called *Sancta Civitas* and *Dona Nobis Pacem* and *Hodie* (looks pretty Catholic to me so far), orchestral pieces called *Flos Campi* and *Job*, a ‘morality’ called *Pilgrim’s Progress*. And, of course he was musical editor of the *English Hymnal* and, later, *Songs of Praise*, and wrote some splendid hymn tunes himself. In addition to these, there are *Five Mystical Songs*, settings of George Herbert who was, of course, one of the finest poets of religious verse in English, and lovely things like the tiny, but perfect, *O Taste and See*. No wonder that, shortly after Vaughan Williams’ death, I heard the minister at a church service call him “a great Christian”.

Yet for much of his life Vaughan Williams described himself as an atheist, later settling down to a ‘cheerful agnosticism’. Ursula Vaughan Williams states that he was “never a professing Christian”. So why all this concentration on the Judaeo-Christian heritage? Why all these works?

Come at the matter sideways. Look at the output of a contemporary composer, one who outwardly professed his Christian faith, first as a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, later as a Roman Catholic. Igor Stravinsky wrote pieces derived from non-Christian sources – *Apollo*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Persephone* – but nobody goes around suggesting that he believed that Mount Olympus was the home of the gods. For Stravinsky, as for many others of course, such stories admirably suited his purposes and inspired his art. It has to be said that during the period in which he wrote these works – basically the inter-war years – many other artists in different fields were also interested in the Greek stories. Cocteau wrote plays about Oedipus and Orpheus, for instance (as well as the text for Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*); the *Oresteia* was the basis for O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*; Picasso’s paintings at this time are full of figures from Greek myths and legends; Eliot used Greek models for his plays. It is clear that the Greeks were part of the zeitgeist. Of course, Stravinsky wrote Judaeo-Christian pieces as well: the *Symphony of*



*Psalms*, a Mass, *Requiem Canticles*, an opera on *The Flood* and (an equivalent to *Job*, I suppose, though a totally different piece in a different form) *Threni*, a setting of Isaiah. But, with the exception of the first mentioned, these works belong to the post-war years, after his farewell to the neo-classical period with *The Rake's Progress* and that transitional work, *Agon*.

But to return to the Greeks. It is clear that Stravinsky embraced neo-classicism in both its Greco-Latin and "between the baroque and the romantic" senses (and remember that it formed the basis of his music for a greater length of time than either his first, 'Russian', or his later, twelve-tone, periods) because it provided a traditional framework which enabled him to say what he needed to say. It is interesting to remember that Stravinsky was living in France at this time and that his neo-classicism coincided, not only with the examples from other arts quoted above, but with the prevailing mood among French composers (Poulenc *et al*, and not forgetting Ravel's example of the use of a Greek story, *Daphnis and Chloe*, though musically it is very different, and the whole "eighteenth-century" aspect of his art as shown in works like *Le Tombeau de Couperin*). We should remember, too, that Vaughan Williams himself wrote his neo-classical *Violin Concerto*, the *Concerto Accademico*, at this time and Holst experimented with neo-classical models in pieces like the *Fugal Overture*. (Am I alone in thinking that Vaughan Williams's effort at neo-classicism in this concerto is only partially successful?)

So nobody thinks that any of these Greek-influenced artists subscribed to a belief in the reality of Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite and the like. It is just that, like so many other traditions from around the world, the Greek myths provide a store of rich, resonant tales which deal with questions that concern all thinking people. It is undoubtedly true that, for many people for over a century now, the Judaeo-Christian heritage has fulfilled a similar function. For such people, a belief in the literal truth of the Bible, for instance, would be absurd, as absurd as a belief in the literal truth of the Greek myths or the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. However, this does not mean that what is contained in the Bible can be simply ignored or scorned: it, like other cosmological texts, attempts an understanding of great, indeed crucial, matters.

For Vaughan Williams, this would seem to be the basic position. Byron Adams has pointed out [*Scripture, Church and culture: biblical texts in the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, ed. Alain Frogley, Cambridge University Press 1996] that, apart from some juvenilia, Vaughan Williams did not set a Biblical text until he was in his forties: his substitute for the Bible was the poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman (who also fascinated Holst and Delius at this time) spoke of matters close to Vaughan Williams' heart – of social justice and new frontiers, but also of the transcendent within a person – and he spoke in a manner that was powerful, using plain English, refusing adherence to any sect or clan while acknowledging his American-ness. Vaughan Williams pounced on Whitman in the way that so many Germans pounced on Nietzsche. But it is also true that, at around this time while he was still a 'practising atheist', he devoted over two years to the production of the *English Hymnal*. So he doesn't set Biblical texts at this time but he does edit a book containing several hundred hymn tunes. I have written elsewhere on the revolutionary nature of the *English Hymnal* but it is worthwhile stressing this again here. What the book excludes is almost as significant as what it includes: what is left out is the bulk of the Victorian hymns which I tend to lump together under the title "Sankey and Moody". As a whole, I find these to be heavy, dreary and sentimental; pretty clearly that was Ralph Vaughan Williams' opinion too. I reckon he would have been equally scathing of the recent (past twenty years or so) fad for happy-clappy, guitar-strummed inanities as well, written by people who think they can write a good pop song for the Lord. (I wouldn't mind if they could but unfortunately they can't: Gershwin, Cole Porter, Paul Simon or Lennon and McCartney they ain't.)

But let us return to Vaughan Williams's task of a hundred years ago. Why, then, if he doesn't profess the Christian faith, does he devote so much time and effort to this particular project? Obviously he did not like the currently-popular hymn tunes; his objection, rather than one based on theology, must have been an aesthetic one. And this aesthetic objection was powerful enough for him to decide to do something about it, even for a church whose theology he did not accept. So, equally clearly, this church mattered to him. Wilfred Mellers states that this is because the Church of England (especially) stood for something special that spoke to

Vaughan Williams, and spoke as powerfully as did English folksong. Both are part of the peculiar foundation of English life, a foundation which Vaughan Williams saw as threatened by what was happening in the world. Folksong was threatened by the continually increasing growth of industrialisation (and corresponding decrease in the numbers who lived by agriculture); the church was threatened by growing materialism and, of course, by the increase in scientific knowledge and corresponding religious scepticism. So Vaughan Williams' contribution to the rescuing of English folksong (and we must remember that we possibly owe the survival of dozens of such songs to his efforts) was complemented by his editorship of the *English Hymnal*, though this was not so clearly a 'rescue' mission, at least, not a rescue from oblivion; rather, it was a rescue from the pious sentimentalism of Victorian hymnody.

Vaughan Williams was brought up in an interesting household: his father was a clergyman but one of his uncles was Charles Darwin, whose own faith could not survive the force of his own researches and, it must be said, the death of his daughter. When he was at Cambridge Vaughan Williams enjoyed the friendship and company of Bertrand Russell, Ernest Rutherford, G.E Moore, the Trevelyan and others – an extraordinary collection of people to find themselves together, but bound by, amongst other things, a common scepticism concerning Christianity. Vaughan Williams shared the scepticism but could not shake off a sense of the spiritual. That commonsense remark of his mother's about Darwin (indeed about the whole Genesis/Evolution debate) had a profound effect: "The Bible says that God made the world in six days, Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer: but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way." Modern-day Christian fundamentalists, take note. Vaughan Williams was an artist: consequently he was attuned to metaphors, to fables, to parables (it is extraordinary the extent to which so many Christian fundamentalists forget that Jesus was an artist too, in that he used parables to exemplify his moral, ethical, theological and philosophical points: the parable of the Good Samaritan is not literally true but it remains the greatest single statement of what Christianity is about). So for a person like Vaughan Williams the literal truth of something is not unimportant, but no less important was its moral and artistic truth. Leave the Bible aside for a moment; let's look at *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Nobody thinks that that is literally true (Giant Despair and Vanity Fair and Mr Worldly-Wiseman and so on); Bunyan himself declares that it is "only a dream". But what that dream contains is, of course, an allegory on the good life, as Bunyan saw it, and it was a text that fascinated Vaughan Williams throughout his life.

After all, it is perfectly possible to reject the specifically religious beliefs of a creed and yet admire, and seek to follow, its ethical codes. That these are transmitted (and to a lesser extent transmuted) through the medium of a particular expression of the English language is also important to Vaughan Williams. He loved the simple beauties of the *Authorised Version of the Bible*, of the *Book of Common Prayer* and of *A Pilgrim's Progress*. It is significant that these works were produced within a short time of each other and that all three emphasise a noble simplicity of language. (One of the ironies of the present day is that certain folk are continually trying to update the Bible and the Prayer Book, on the – to me – totally spurious grounds that the older versions are 'difficult'.) They were also produced, of course, at the same time as those composers whom he loved so much – Tallis, Weelkes, Byrd – were writing. Bunyan was a little later, of course, and very definitely from the Puritan wing of the church, but his prose shares many of the same qualities. Vaughan Williams apparently was not much in sympathy with the Oxford movement and Anglo-Catholicism – the "bells and smells" wing – so there is a certain irony in the fact that it was that wing that "took up" the *English Hymnal*, though with their interest in medievalism it is hardly surprising.

It is not surprising, either, that a man with Vaughan Williams's background, his sensibilities and personality should proclaim simultaneously his scepticism and his commitment. Byron Adams has noted the agnostic proclamation from Plato which heads the score of Vaughan Williams's *Sancta Civitas*, his only wholly Biblical large-scale work, and the inclusion of Hardy's *The Oxen* "Hoping it might be so" in the Christmas oratorio *Hodie*. It is surely significant that these two works should contain these 'disclaimers', even if only as a superscription in the earlier work.

So he was a man who loved his native land, particularly as it is expressed

through its distinctive culture. The English language is the most significant medium for the expression of this culture and, because Vaughan Williams was a musician, its folksong and its finest composers (who were, for him the likes of Tallis, Byrd and Weelkes) were as indispensable. A recognition of the importance of such a cultural tradition does not mean that he was not forward-looking. Simon Heffer's mistake is to try to equate Vaughan Williams with a conservative (almost a Conservative) outlook on life; he acknowledges that Vaughan Williams professed left-leaning politics all his life but almost suggests that he doesn't really go along with it. Heffer puts less stress on the composer's family's radicalism in a number of spheres (the Darwin, Wedgwood, William Morris connections) and the fact that a concern for folksong is necessarily democratic, if not downright proletarian. All of this adds up to what Mellers calls Vaughan Williams' "doubleness": the radical traditionalist, the town-dwelling countryman, the Christian atheist. It certainly explains why a man who was "never a professing Christian" could write so much music devoted to celebrating Christianity.

Jeffrey Aldridge

## RVW and Religion

Martin Huber said "I don't like religion, I like spirituality" and I wonder whether this might provide us with a clue as to Vaughan Williams' response to such matters. He was a man ahead of his time – he died just before the beginning of the rise of interest in the esoteric traditions of the world's faiths, spirituality and the re-emergence of the feminine – and so it is not at all surprising that we now have a steady rise of interest in Vaughan Williams's works. Recordings of his music are voted into the classical top ten, there are more and more performances of his works around the world, and to say nothing of the birth of the RVW Society. Even the critics are at last tumbling over themselves to acknowledge his greatness! All this would have been unheard of twenty years or so ago.

I am a music lover but a lay person musically, and never met Vaughan Williams, though I saw him on numerous occasions: in the concert hall at performances of his orchestral works, at the opera house (I was at all three performance of *Sir John in Love* at Sadlers Wells the month before he died) and once, while cycling round Regent's Park, I spied him, shuffling out in his slippers to post a couple of letters in the box round the corner from Hanover Terrace!

Now I have loved Vaughan Williams's music since my late teens, and what started me off was being hooked by the opening phrase of the *5th Symphony*, leading inevitably to *Pilgrim* that I first heard in Boulton's Third Programme performance around 1960. I believe the latter has been a misunderstood work and consequently mis-produced. It was not for nothing that Vaughan Williams chose to call his hero *Pilgrim* rather than Bunyan's *Christian*, because it is in a long line of such journeys of the individual soul reaching back to Homer's *Odyssey*, the Five Books of Moses and forward into our own time to William Golding's 1980s trilogy *To the Ends of the Earth*.

In his symphonies Vaughan Williams travelled, as we all must, from the symbolic watery world of the psyche of the *Sea Symphony*, through the physical material level of our being in the *London*, the spiritual world of *No. 5*, the bleak, black hole of *No. 6* and onwards to the divine world of ice of *Antartica*.

Surely, if Vaughan Williams had no use for religion, he would not have given us *Sancta Civitas*, the *Five Mystical Songs*, *Flos Campi* or *Job*, nor even the *Songs of Travel*. He saw beyond the basic, literal level of text.

So if you ask me who was Vaughan Williams my answer must be "The Lark Ascending", soaring ever higher but with his feet firmly planted on Mother Earth. Therein his greatness lies.

Sarah Miller

## Beyond Sense and Knowledge:

### Ralph Vaughan Williams and Religion

#### Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know!

At some point, anyone seeking information about Ralph Vaughan Williams becomes aware of an apparent contradiction between his stated

beliefs and his behaviour. After all, a man who (according to Bertrand Russell) used to stride though hall at Cambridge declaiming, "Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know!" doesn't appear to be the most obvious choice to become music editor of *The English Hymnal*, *Songs of Praise* or *The Oxford Book of Carols*.

Although his roots seem firmly embedded in the subsoil of Anglican tradition, Vaughan Williams is usually identified as either an atheist or an agnostic. And yet, as if to confuse things further, we find within his catalogue of works numerous pieces that seem unambiguously Christian in concept, a *Magnificat* and a Mass, the *Five Mystical Songs*, the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, hymn tunes and much, much more.

Of course, remarks of the sort quoted are often simply attributable to the immoderate attitudes of youth. Many a young atheist has ended up becoming a devout believer and vice versa. Furthermore, as people begin to explore the hinterland of religious faith they often go through numerous questioning processes and ping-pong around between opposing beliefs and views. This doesn't seem to apply to Vaughan Williams however. Once he had arrived at his views, he seems to have remained pretty faithful to them. Despite his background as the son of a vicar his atheism was already well established by the time that he was eighteen and, as far as I am aware, he never again wavered far from that position (although his second wife Ursula was later to describe his beliefs as more like a "cheerful agnosticism").

Over the years a sprinkle of recorded incidents provide evidence to suggest the consistency of his beliefs. For instance, in 1899 he resigned his post as organist at St Barnabus church, South Lambeth rather than take the communion demanded by the new incumbent. Around 1922-23 he remarked (of his *Mass in G minor*), "*There is no reason why an atheist could not write a good Mass*" and indeed, in 1938, when he and Ursula Wood were just getting to know each other, he felt it sufficiently important to enquire whether or not she was a Christian. In her autobiography *Paradise Remembered* she recalls that, as they wandered among the huge man-headed bulls of the Abyssinian galleries in the British Museum, he "seemed relieved when I said that I was not".

### The spiritual life blood of a people

Now, while the idea of an atheist composing religious pieces might *seem* a touch hypocritical, the reality is very different. For Vaughan Williams religious content was relatively incidental since it was always *cultural* aspects that provided his inspiration; English culture specifically, despite its predilection for the sacred with church music, Anglican ritual, the Prayer Book and the King James Bible each forming such an integral part of life in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th.

Vaughan Williams revered tradition and continuity. He felt passionately that the artist should be a valuable, contributing part of the community and be true to its heritage (but found it quite unnecessary to actually "believe" in order to be part of that aspect of heritage deemed religious). Describing the young composer trudging across the Cambridgeshire fens to services at Ely Cathedral Paul Holmes writes, "Those who have never attended such services, especially that of Evensong, cannot completely understand their sheer aesthetic and emotional appeal. This can be appreciated even by those who are not particularly religious. It is an experience which is at the heart of Englishness, and it is one that began a lifelong love and fascination in the young Vaughan Williams..."

Then, in 1903, Vaughan Williams had what was to be for him a definitive life moment when he was introduced to the old song *Bushes and Briars* in the Essex village of Ingrave. He had managed to persuade an elderly resident, a Mr. Charles Potiphar, to sing it over and over again until it was all written down and, after that, there was no stopping him. Sometimes with Gustav Holst and sometimes alone he would cycle off into the country on folk song collecting field trips. He returned to Essex in March 1904 visiting Willingale, Ingrave, Little Burstead, East Horndon and Billericay. Today these places are largely just part of the urban sprawl that feeds the London workforce but, in those days, they were simply tiny rural villages. Within the space of ten days Vaughan Williams had collected the tunes of *Green Bushes*, *John Barleycorn*, *The Farmer's Boy* and four local variants of *The Lost Lady Found*.

For Vaughan Williams the discovery of folk songs was a revelation and



later he remarked that, “*There is in them, as it were, the spiritual life-blood of a people.*”

And, as Paul Holmes writes, “In those simple but natural surroundings, the fresh voice of English folk song was finally presented to him, not in any artificial way, but as the breath of a tradition that underpinned the formal art of that other England he knew: the ecclesiastical and choral music from the Tudors to Purcell. He could now see his way forward. He must find some way to draw these ancient strands together into a seamless flow.”

As he began to explore this new way forward, so Vaughan Williams was developing a voice for English musical nationalism. It was not a voice of pomp and ceremony. The currents of his nationalism ran too deep for that and had little concern for surface jingoism. Like Bartok, Kodaly, Enescu and many others around that time, he found value in the cultural identity of nations. He believed passionately that the artist should remain connected to that cultural wellspring and that is why the traditions of Tudor and church music, combined with his discovery of folk song, provided such inspiration. For Vaughan Williams this did not imply artistic insularity but rather the means to enrich an imagined United States of the World. As he said, “... those will serve that universal state best who bring into the common fund something that they and they only can bring.”

In striving for Englishness he was exploring the landscape of humanity’s potential, perceived through a filter of Englishness. In so doing he was undertaking a spiritual task as meaningful as any sought by more conventionally religious means.

### **A deeply humane figure**

Our beliefs influence every aspect of our lives – everything that we think, feel and do is determined by their nature and the relative patterns of their personal significance. Hence it’s always gratifying when we discover others who share our beliefs, and it can be doubly so if the beliefs in question are deeply felt and the person in question is already held in high regard. This is certainly my experience with Vaughan Williams. Mind you, he’s not a difficult man to admire. It’s now nearly fifty years since he died and, since no skeletons have yet peeped from the woodwork, it’s probably quite safe to assume that there were never any there anyway. He seems to have been held in affection by nearly everyone who crossed his path and, in fact, the worst anyone has been able to recall about him appears to be his occasional tendency to manifest explosive bursts of temper.

Simon Heffer describes Vaughan Williams as “a deeply humane figure, bred with a strong sense of noblesse oblige, and also harbouring a deep sentimentality towards his environment, landscape and fellow countrymen”. To that it may be safely added that he was intelligent, open-minded, energetic, good fun, generous, optimistic, self-effacing and well liked by people of both sexes and all age groups – an unusual and attractive enough combination at any level of the arts but probably almost unique in the temperamentally fragile upper echelons of art’s premier leagues.

Above all Vaughan Williams was a man of honesty and honour. He was loyal and fair and prepared to stand up against injustice. Two instances demonstrate this well. In 1940 the music of Alan Bush was banned by the BBC for political reasons. Vaughan Williams was strongly opposed to Bush’s views but nevertheless protested vigorously on his behalf to the BBC, emphasising his objections by returning the fee for a recently commissioned choral song. Three years later he supported Michael Tippett who, as a conscientious objector, had been directed towards agricultural work. Tippett refused and Vaughan Williams spoke out for him at the tribunal saying, “I think Tippett’s pacifist views entirely wrong, but I respect him very much for holding them so firmly.”

His loyalty to friends was not bound by time limits. Harry Steggles was a comrade in the First World War when both he and Vaughan Williams were serving in the London Field Ambulance unit. Steggles played the mouth organ and soon, despite a twenty-year age difference and the vastly different social worlds that each came from, they became firm friends and were soon involved in morale-boosting musical projects of all sorts. Twenty-four years later, at the start of the Second World War, Vaughan Williams contacted his old comrade to offer an evacuee place

for his daughter Myrtle at The White Gates, Vaughan Williams’s Dorking home. A further fourteen years on, in 1953, they were apparently still in contact as Steggles is reported as being a guest at The White Gates shortly before Vaughan Williams moved to Hanover Terrace near Regent’s Park.

Many would argue that their own particular religion occupies the high ground as far as ethics and spirituality are concerned. Others, happily, are beginning to take a very different view. Richard Holloway, for instance, who stood down as Bishop of Edinburgh and has since written eloquently, arguing that religion is best kept out of both ethics and spirituality. It seems clear to me that anyone seeking a secular role model, someone who embodied the most desirable social behaviours and yet still strove to explore humanity’s spiritual potential, need look no further than Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Vaughan Williams lived his life as a good man without the need of any formal religion to dictate how to do it.

### **What lies beyond sense and knowledge**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *atheism* as “disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God” while an agnostic is “one who holds that the existence of anything beyond and behind material phenomena is unknown and (so far as can be judged) unknowable”. To me neither description really seems appropriate or adequate when applied to Vaughan Williams. Atheism is simply a label for a negative concept – what is *not* believed while agnosticism’s acceptance of the unknowable seems far too passive.

In an article entitled *The Letter and the Spirit* Vaughan Williams outlined what his wife Ursula says, “summed up what he believed, both then and for the rest of his life”.

In it he says, “Before going any further may we take it that the object of all art is to obtain a partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and human faculties – of that in fact which is spiritual? And that 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 knowledge.”

The existence of what lies beyond and behind material phenomena may be unknowable but the whole essence of spirituality is nevertheless to seek to explore that territory, and art is one of the principal means by which this may be done.

However, as so often happens in religions, the danger in doing so is that what we begin to suppose may exist beyond material phenomena becomes treated as established and unchallengeable fact. Evidence and common sense dictate that none of us really has any idea at all about what’s there and, as long as we remember that we don’t know, we allow ourselves to become immeasurably enriched by the exploration. If we begin to think that we do know, or that priests, or vicars or bishops know or that holy books contain all the answers, we run the risk of becoming trapped forever in webs of delusion. As Bertrand Russell pointed out, “We may define faith as a firm belief for which there is no evidence. When there is evidence, no one speaks of faith. We do not speak of faith that two and two are four or that the earth is round. We only speak of faith when we wish to substitute emotion for evidence.”

Human aspiration to seek beyond what seems knowable has been responsible for humanity’s greatest achievements. Sadly, our tendency to treat faith and unsubstantiated belief as established fact has also been responsible for our vilest, most cruel and most barbarous acts, all done in the name of this religion or that.

There is, however, a religion (or, some would say, a philosophy) which has a long and benign history and which seems to fit the bill as far as Vaughan Williams is concerned. Its beliefs and attitudes are empirical. It has no holy books. It has no priests or rituals. It makes no demands other than to look around with awe at what is perceived and understood about the universe and allow that to become the catalyst for whatever other journeys the mind chooses to make.

That religion/philosophy is Pantheism – more specifically Scientific (or Natural) Pantheism. It came into my awareness when I stumbled across the website of the World Pantheist Movement and read the following

words by its founder Dr Paul Harrison, a UN Environment Programme Global 500 award winner.

*"In the midst of nature, in a forest, by the ocean, or on a mountain top, do you feel a deep sense of peace and belonging and wonder? Are you speechless with awe when you look up at the sky on a clear moonless night and see the Milky Way strewn with stars as thick as sand on a beach? When you see breakers crashing on a rocky shore, or hear wind rustling in a poplar's leaves, are you uplifted by the energy and creativity of existence? Finally, do you find it difficult to imagine a God who is different from and separate from the beauty of nature or the power of the universe? If you answered yes to these questions, then you are almost certainly a pantheist."*

Obviously it's an impertinence to imagine oneself qualified to identify and label someone else's beliefs but, nevertheless, I really can't see that Vaughan Williams would have found much argument with that. This description by Ursula of Ralph's love of country walks seems to sit quite happily alongside the point Dr Harrison is making: "The walks were usually in Wiltshire or Dorset, parts of the world Ralph loved: the green roads and open skies of the Great Plain with its summer flowers, thymey smells, and an infinity of larks rising above bleached grass and the pale coloured chalk country were very much to his taste."

This is by no means the first time that the term *pantheism* has been applied to RVW's music. For instance, in his illustrated biography of Vaughan Williams, Paul Holmes uses it in relation to the Pastoral Symphony as a "word used to describe the underlying sense of nature mysticism that some found in the music". For many people *nature mysticism* is probably a pretty good description of much of VW's music, from everyone's favourite, *The Lark Ascending* right through to the enigmatic Salisbury Plain images of the Ninth Symphony. There can be no doubt about the degree of inspiration that nature provided for Vaughan Williams.

How many people in their mid-eighties would have the energy or interest to suggest driving through the night after attending a concert, just to see

the dawn at a particular place? Yet this is what Ralph, Ursula, Gerald and Joy Finzi did one night in 1956 to observe the sunrise at the Finzi's home at Ashmansworth in Hampshire. As Ursula records, "and so we did, and heard the cuckoo in the pear tree before we went to bed by early daylight."

As far as I am concerned, his reservations concerning theism combined with his deep love of landscape and nature make Ralph Vaughan Williams an archetypal pantheist. Of course, never having met him, I might well be concocting a nonsense shaped by my own beliefs. The evidence (such as it is) that I'm using could be interpreted in all sorts of ways but I still believe that my conclusions probably contain rather more substance than some of the things that we are expected to accept for more conventionally religious ends. Nevertheless I stand to be corrected, especially if those who did actually know the great man perceive flaws in these ideas that remain hidden from me.

Finally here is one more quotation from Dr Harrison. "Pantheism is a religious belief that reveres and cares for nature, a religion that joyously accepts this life as our only life, and this earth as our only paradise, if we look after it ... Pantheism believes that all things are linked in a profound unity. All things have a common origin and a common destiny."

In the absence of realistic evidence to the contrary this seems an eminently sensible and practical approach to the mysteries of which we are each a part, and one that dovetails comfortably with the following words from *A Natural History of the Senses* by poet and naturalist Diane Ackerman, words that I feel would have struck a resonant chord with Uncle Ralph.

"It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between."

Oliver Chadwick

## RVW: WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

At the start of his 1976 novel, *The Alteration*, Kingsley Amis describes the funeral of King Stephen III in the "Basilica of St George at Coverley, the mother church of all England and of the English Empire." Among the distinguished guests are the new English King, William V, the Sultan of Turkey and the Dauphin. Wren's basilica boasts vast ceiling paintings by Turner, an *Ecce Homo* mosaic by David Hockney and a *pieta* by Epstone [sic]. The Requiem Mass is celebrated with great pomp by the Cardinal-Archbishop of Canterbury and the music is Mozart's *Second Requiem*, K878, "the crown of his middle age and perhaps of all his choral work." Clearly, we are in a parallel world – one very like our own, but entertainingly different from it. In this world the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution never happened, and Mozart lived to be an old man.

However we may feel about the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution, there can be few music lovers who do not devoutly wish that Mozart had lived as long as, say, Haydn or our own RVW. Amis's fantasy set me thinking about other musical might-have-beens. What might Purcell have written at the age of 50? What masterpieces did the carnage of the Great War deprive us of? What, for instance, might Butterworth's *First Symphony* have been like? Or his fifth, for that matter? As a music-loving but atheist friend of mine once said to me: "How can anyone believe in a God that allowed Salieri to live more than twice as long as Mozart?" Good question!

It is salutary to think about what we would have lost if Vaughan Williams had perished in the Great War. Unlike Purcell and Mozart, he was a late

developer and much of his best music was written after 1918. Yes, we would have the *Tallis Fantasia*, *On Wenlock Edge*, *A Sea Symphony* and the first version of *A London Symphony*. But how awful to think of the seven later symphonies never being written! No *Mass in G Minor*, no *Sancta Civitas* or *Dona Nobis Pacem*, no *Job* or *Riders to the Sea*! It really doesn't bear thinking about.

English music is fortunate, then, that not only was Vaughan Williams's life spared during World War I, he was also endowed with good health and a long creative life after the war ended. It was only recently, however, that it struck me that the Great War did in fact deprive us of a lot of Vaughan Williams's music. Re-reading Ursula's biography it dawned on me with something of a shock that Vaughan Williams wrote nothing between 1914, when he completed *A London Symphony* and 1921 when he wrote the *Mass in G minor* for Holst's Whitsuntide Singers. True, he was incubating *A Pastoral Symphony* while he was in France, but nothing was actually written down – how could it be? He was silenced for nine years! Think of what he might have written during these years, had he done the sensible thing (at the age of 42!) and stayed at home, rather than enlisting.

I love all of Vaughan Williams's music but I have a particular soft-spot for the music he wrote before 1914, when I think his work had a very special magic about it, and I cannot help feeling that that dreadful war must have deprived us of some wonderful pieces. True, *A Pastoral Symphony* – my own favourite of the nine – would have been a very different work had not RVW lived through the horrors of Northern

France: perhaps it would never have been written. But, that work apart, it cannot be denied that the war of 1914-18 blew a huge seven-year-wide crater in his creative output.

The news that English National opera are to revive *Sir John in Love*, the first professional production of the piece in over forty years, set my imagination on another track this week. It is a sad fact that Vaughan Williams's operas have not enjoyed the same success as his concert-music; none has achieved a place in the repertoire and all have more or less fallen into neglect.

Like RVW, many English composers tried and failed to establish a tradition of English Opera in the first half of the 20th century, perhaps believing that the English musical renaissance would be incomplete without a string of fine English operas. But until Britten's *Peter Grimes* the effort was mostly in vain. English opera, pre-*Grimes*, failed to achieve popularity for many reasons. The competition from Germany and Italy was formidable, of course, and the effort, expense, manpower and risk involved in producing a new opera is far greater than that needed to premier a symphony or concerto. And each of Vaughan Williams's operas presents particular problems of its own, of course. *Hugh the Drover* contains ravishing music but has a weak libretto and a fatuous story; *Sir John* has the huge disadvantage of having a rival by Verdi; *The Poisoned Kiss* of 1936 was an attempt at comic operetta twenty years too late, and *The Pilgrim's Progress* was not even called an 'opera'. Having no leading-lady and no love duets, *Pilgrim* received what RVW himself described as a "coldly polite" response from the audience. Even *Riders to the Sea*, which must surely be Vaughan Williams's most successful music-drama, and one of his finest works, is rarely performed because it is too short.

And so I come to my last 'might have been'. What might Vaughan Williams have written, had he not spent so much time and effort on fruitless attempts to achieve success in the opera-house? The operas listed above all contain fine music, which no true admirer of RVW would seriously want to wish had never been written, but I find it tantalizing to daydream about the concert-music Vaughan Williams might have written had he accepted that his talents did not lie in the field of music-drama. We might have had four or five more symphonies, not to mention a range of other orchestral pieces. Maybe he would have written a cello concerto to rival Elgar's, and perhaps a full-scale violin concerto. A Requiem Mass for Westminster Cathedral to go with the *Mass in G minor* would have been nice, too. I daresay readers who have stayed with me this far might have wish-lists of their own!

Purcell, Mozart, Schubert and many other composers were not granted the long life that RVW enjoyed. But, prolific though he was, I for one regret both his decision to go to war in 1914 and the time he chose to spend on opera rather than concert works. Astronomers tell us that the universe contains more planets than there are grains of sand on the Earth. Some say that among this mind-boggling number of possible worlds, it is logical to believe there must be at least one 'parallel world' of the kind imagined by Kinsley Amis in *The Alteration*. Perhaps out there somewhere, trillions of light-years away, there is a world in which Mozart lived to be eighty and where the *Jupiter* is considered the best of his early symphonies; where the Great War really was over by Christmas, where an orchestra is rehearsing Butterworth's *Fifth Symphony* and where my galactic twin stands in a CD shop trying to choose between rival versions of Vaughan Williams's *15th Symphony*! I wish I lived on that planet, or could just visit from time to time!

Colin Lees

## Conducting My First RVW 6 - Carlos Kalmar in Lahti

Carlos Kalmar was born in 1958 in Uruguay to Austrian parents and now lives in Vienna. He won First Prize at the Hans Swarowsky Conducting Competition in Vienna. He has held Music Director positions with the Hamburg Symphoniker (1987-1991), Stuttgart Philharmonic (1991-1995), Annahaltisches Theater and Philharmonic Orchestra in Dessau (1996-2000) and then the Tonkünstlerorchester Niederösterreich in Vienna (2000-2003). He is now Music Director of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra and continues his 4th season as Principal Conductor of the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago.

He spoke to **Richard Mason** about his performance of Vaughan Williams's *Symphony No. 6* with the Lahti Symphony Orchestra in January 2005.



Carlos Kalmar

Photo: Courtesy of  
Seldy Cramer Artists

### A great experience

Conducting Vaughan Williams's *No. 6* was a great experience for me and the orchestra in Lahti, which had not played in this music before. For me, because VW is one of the composers I try to study more closely these days, I think it is vital to know what kind of tradition (in terms of orchestral music) a young musician encounters, when studying in Vienna and starting his career in German-speaking countries afterwards.

British music is not well known. Matter of fact, while I was a student in Vienna, the only pieces I recall being mentioned (even though not played regularly) were *The Planets* by Holst, and Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. After several years as music director in different cities, I became a little more familiar with British composers as I talked to musicians in different countries. So I developed a great interest for the British composers. It was pretty obvious that all this would lead me to know Vaughan Williams as an orchestral composer. And even though I'm always keen to keep my repertoire big and therefore encounter various different types of music, my first encounter with VW was quite remarkable. I conducted his *London Symphony*, which I've done several times ever since, matter of fact next week it will be again on a program I'll be doing in Bern / Switzerland.

Now Nr. 6 was an astonishing thing to learn and perform. My feelings are that this music displays many different aspects of musical expressions. Of course I read about the history of the piece and about the reaction by the media when the piece was premiered. So I knew the controversy about VW Nr.6 being referred to as the "War Symphony". I understand why VW didn't like that approach to his music. In my opinion, even though the presence of drama and threat is very apparent at movements 2 + 3, the first and last movements display a different language. I was surprised how rhythmically challenging and sometimes "dancing" the first movement is. There are at least two sides to that single movement: the "swing" in the middle section, the more robust at the beginning, and, last but not least, the beautiful English manner at the end.

### It still leaves the audience breathless

VW's ability to surprise all of us is definitely outstanding. What would anyone expect after this ironic, angry scherzo? How should this symphony end? Would we even expect all this outburst of energy in the 3rd movement, written by a 74 year old? And then, the tremendous silence, maybe even austerity of the last movement. Of course it was disturbing at the time of the premiere. And it still leaves the audience breathless. The more the orchestra rehearsed it, the more they liked it. Ultimately I feel that VW's hint about what the character of the movement might be is very helpful. It makes all of us avoid any more thoughts of this piece being just a commentary about war and its' aftermath. This is a piece about life, and at the end there is calm and silent wisdom.

# Concert Reviews



## MUSIC WON THE CAUSE

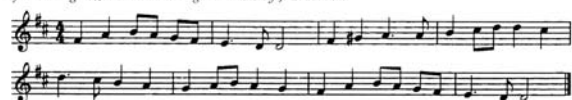
### *A Sea Symphony* concludes the 2005 Leith Hill Musical Festival

There is something very special about the Leith Hill Musical Festival. The spirit of Vaughan Williams was about us. It shows in the great choral tradition, in the choice of programmes, in the happy atmosphere and in the presence of many who knew the composer personally. Deirdre Hicks, the Chairman, should be warmly congratulated by everyone in the Society for her hard work and dedication to this historic festival.

On Saturday 16 April here was *A Sea Symphony* with Susan Gritton and Stephen Gadd as excellent soloists. The English Festival Orchestra was conducted by Brian Kay. He told me it was the first time he had conducted the work. It didn't show for this was a dedicated and inspired performance. The opening was thrilling, the closing moments deeply moving. And there was more. The concert concluded with *Jerusalem* and *God be with you*, RVW's hymn newly orchestrated by William Llewellyn:

#### GOD BE WITH YOU

words by Donald Hughes (reproduced by permission of Paul Hughes), based on the original verses by J. E. Rankin



God be with you till we meet again;  
May he through the days direct you;  
May he in life's storms protect you;  
God be with you till we meet again.

God be with you till we meet again;  
And when doubts and fears oppress you  
May his holy peace possess you;  
God be with you till we meet again.

#### Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

orchestrated by William Llewellyn especially for LHMF

God be with you till we meet again;  
In distress his grace sustain you;  
In success from pride restrain you;  
God be with you till we meet again.

God be with you till we meet again;  
May he go through life beside you,  
And through death in safety guide you;  
God be with you till we meet again. Amen.

The audience stood and sang its heart out under Brian Kay's sensitive direction. Wonderful!

There was one additional magical moment. In the interval we had Michael Kennedy presenting prizes to the best choirs. His was a quite splendid speech, both witty and profound. An evening to cherish.

Stephen Connock

Saturday 2 April 2005

Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool

Jean Sibelius: *Pohjola's Daughter*

Sergei Rachmaninov: *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*, op. 43

Ralph Vaughan Williams: *Job - A Masque for Dancing*

Natasha Paremski, piano

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Vernon Handley CBE

Considering the performance of a major work by a significant British composer in the second half of the concert, the choice of a tone poem by Sibelius as opener was apt. Ever since the belated renaissance of British music at the turn of the century, Sibelius is considered a musical father figure to the host of British composers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – not least Vaughan Williams himself, who was particularly fond of the Finnish composer's music (one thinks of the dedication of his *Fifth Symphony*). And indeed, *Pohjola's Daughter* (1906) is full of what was to become characteristic of British music: melodic lyricism, a certain bypass of symphonic argument (in the Austro-German traditional sense) and a program firmly rooted in folk mysticism, amongst others. This is also Sibelius at his most evocative: the sonorities of *Pohjola's* dark realm were wonderfully realized by the select group of instrumentalists of the RLPO at the beginning of the tone poem. Indeed, the whole work was glistening in a wide array of subtle colors and its fantastic logic (Sibelius used to refer to it as "Symphonic Fantasy") was expertly conveyed by Vernon Handley.

Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* (1934), certainly the most performed piece in that evening's concert, benefitted from the sensitive and intelligent performance by pianist Natasha Paremski (her UK concerto debut). Oddly unsentimental and straightforward, with rare beauty of tone and attention to the score, her interpretation proved to be both involving and moving. The popular variation no. 18 was particularly touching, with the violins of the RLPO adding a Brucknerian glow to the music. Much attention was evidently paid to the interaction between soloist and orchestra, Vernon Handley facing slightly to the left of the orchestra, permanently in contact with Paremski. The audience welcomed her debut warmly, exposing one of the signs of her young age (she is 17): almost embarrassed modesty. However, she did reward the audience with an intimate and well paced performance of Chopin's beloved *Etude op.10, no.3* as an encore. Readers are encouraged to attend her future Wigmore Hall recital!

Although well served on record, Vaughan Williams' *Job: A Masque for Dancing* (1930) is still something of a rarity in concerts. It shares the fate of numerous ballet scores which stand the trial in the cold light of the concert platform with variable success, largely due to their inherent lack of symphonic argument and structurally inconsequent nature. If there were ever such concerns with *Job*, it found its advocates in Vernon Handley and the RLPO. Worldwide recognized as one of the foremost champions of British music, Handley has a long association with Vaughan Williams's music, and is maybe best known to society members through his recordings of the complete symphonies with the same orchestra made in the late 70's/early 80's or even his recording of *Job* with the London Philharmonic, made in 1984 (all EMI).

That night's performance demonstrated both his deep understanding of the score and his intent to relish the particular sound of the orchestra at his disposal. As with the previous pieces, the Philharmonic Hall's sympathetic acoustic proved an asset, and its art deco architecture (after the destruction of the old hall by fire in 1933, the present building was opened in 1939) is a period feature appropriate for Vaughan Williams' work that is unique in the UK.

Time and again the sheer sonic impact of the orchestration proved truly illuminating: the beauty of the string tone in the "*Saraband of the Sons of God*", with the players visibly taking pleasure in its modal inflections, and the "*Galliard of the Sons of the Morning*", the terrifying fanfares in "*Satan's Dance*" and the sordid saxophone and cello solos in the "*Dance of Job's comforters*" (the former traditionally associated with disdain in Vaughan Williams' compositions) all had genuine dramatic impact. I also particularly liked the prominence of the two harps as well as the organ solo in "*A Vision of Satan*", terrifying not only because of its harsh dissonances but also the magnificence of the instrument in the Philharmonic Hall which is concealed behind the façade on stage and certainly took me by surprise. The particular string sound of the orchestra might well be related to the decision to have the strings seated antiphonally, with both the first and second violins close to the audience. Leader Thelma Handy brought that special "Vaughan Williams sonority" that distinguished the finest performances of *The Lark Ascending* or *the Violin Concerto* to her rendering of "*Elihu's Dance of Youth and Beauty*". Handley also successfully disentangled Vaughan Williams' sometimes dense harmonic writing and brought out what is a compositional masterstroke: the epilogue was played (as the composer wrote) *pp* and *ppp* throughout, thus making the repeat of the opening material truly magical – "So the Lord blesses the latter end of Job more than his beginning".

The audience justly broke out into rapturous applause after a short silence. This was an outstanding performance of what, in this reviewer's humble opinion, is Vaughan Williams's greatest orchestral score alongside his *Eighth Symphony*.

Georg Burgstaller

**Britten: Suite on English Folk Tunes (“A time there was....”)**  
**Peter Maxwell Davies: A Dance on the Hill (World Premiere)**  
**Tippett: Fantasia Concertante on a theme of Corelli**  
**Vaughan Williams: A Pastoral Symphony**  
**Richard Hickox: City of London Sinfonia, Lucy Crowe (soprano)**  
**Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2005.**

This enjoyable, all British, concert formed part of a Peter Maxwell Davies series on the South Bank (during the concert, Peter Maxwell Davies was presented with an Ivor Novello Award by the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion).

I had only once before, I think, heard *A Pastoral Symphony* performed live in concert and that was back in the 70s or early 80s when Norman Del Mar (an otherwise excellent conductor) gave, what I thought was a rather uninspiring performance (my brother fell asleep during the concert). In fairness to Norman Del Mar, Anthony Payne wrote a very enthusiastic review of the same performance.

In contrast, I found Richard Hickox’s recent performance, with the City of London Sinfonia and Lucy Crowe to be utterly gripping from beginning to end. As on his thirty-nine minute Chandos recording with the LSO and Rebecca Evans, Hickox adopted comparatively slow tempi throughout the symphony with the exception of the third movement, the central section of which, taken very fast, sounded like something straight out of the *English Folk Song Suite*.

There was some wonderful solo work, especially from the first flautist and the “*Last Post*” off-stage trumpet player at the start of the second movement. Lucy Crowe’s offstage soprano solo was similarly haunting at the start and close of the finale.

In general, the added gravitas in Hickox’s excellent performance of *A Pastoral Symphony*, seemed to relate it much more obviously to the composer’s experience of the First World War, rather than symbolising “a cow looking over a gate” or “VW rolling over and over in a ploughed field on a wet day” to quote two contemporary observations!”

The other pieces were all very well played (Pamela Helen Stephen being the excellent mezzo-soprano in the Maxwell Davies piece), although, in my view, none of these works could hold a candle to *A Pastoral Symphony* (but I am biased!)

Jeffrey Davis

**Sinfonia Antartica in Cardiff**  
**BBC National Orchestra of Wales/Otaka**  
**St David’s Hall, Cardiff**  
**Friday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2005**

This concert was ingeniously planned with Ailish Tynan, the excellent soprano soloist in Ravel’s song cycle *Shehérazade* and Thomas Trotter, the organ soloist in Hoddinott’s *Organ Symphony*, also taking prominent parts in the Vaughan Williams. The concert was broadcast live on BBC Radio 3.

Tadaaki Otaka has done some fine work with the BBCNOW, both as their Principal Conductor and now as Conductor Laureate, and the orchestra have a genuine respect for him. Some wonderful balances were achieved in the sensual Ravel piece, though from our favourite seats in the hall high above the orchestra, the voice did not carry too well.

Alun Hoddinott is enjoying a revival of his music during celebrations for his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the *Symphony No 7* for Organ and Orchestra dates from the early ‘80s. Like a number of his pieces played this year, it was good to hear it again. It shows a technical mastery of the orchestra without being particularly memorable – but all credit to the BBC for promoting our foremost Welsh composer. I think we are still waiting for our James Macmillan or Mark Anthony Turnage to appear!

I don’t know whether the concert was planned with the affinity between the sound worlds of Ravel and Vaughan Williams in mind. It is perhaps more evident in pieces like *A Pastoral Symphony* or *On Wenlock Edge*

than the *Sinfonia Antartica*. Otaka has done some fine work with English music over the years, and holds the Elgar Medal presented by the Elgar Society. His Vaughan Williams is new to me, but his feeling for the music is obvious and he drew a fine performance from the orchestra. Again, balances were ideal, with notable contributions from the offstage Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama Chamber Choir, and Ailish Tynan, the soprano soloist. Tempos were fairly slow, particularly in the Scherzo (more elephant seals than penguins – are there seals in Antarctica? Please don’t write!), but the dynamic range was impressive. The organ contribution from Thomas Trotter was also thrilling.

The symphony is not often played, and it was probably the first time in St David’s Hall, so it was good to hear it live. There was talk some years ago of a cycle under BBCNOW Chief Conductor, Richard Hickox at St David’s Hall, but with him moving to pastures new, that now seems unlikely.

I look forward to hearing more Vaughan Williams from Otaka in the future.

John Durbin

### **Five Mystical Songs in Horsham**

Encouraged by a flyer announcing a performance of *Five Mystical Songs*, I went along to St. Mark’s Church in Horsham, West Sussex, on Saturday, 12th March. The Concordia Singers under the direction of Philip White, who is associated with the Leith Hill Musical Festival, were presenting the second of their three 2004-2005 Season concerts. That evening’s event comprised Purcell’s anthem *O sing unto the Lord a new song*, Haydn’s *Missa in Angustiis (Nelson Mass)* and the item that initially attracted my attention.

The church organ, which accompanied the three pieces, was superbly played by Nicholas O’Neill, FRCO. The fairly dry acoustic of the church, the organ accompaniment and the relatively small (approximately 40) number of singers, gave the performance an almost chamber feel to it. As the printed programme couldn’t have the text for the three pieces, this chamber effect enabled the audience to clearly hear all the words and the ‘grumbling’ bottom E flat on the organ.

Nicholas Warden, bass-baritone, was the soloist in the Vaughan Williams piece and his opening words ‘*Rise Heart thy Lord is risen*’ really did lift the heart. The choir’s obvious but refined accompaniment well made up for the loss of orchestral colouring.

No. 2 was magnificently delicate, with Concordia’s subtle humming in the second part of the song taking us gently through to the emphasis of the last line. In No. 3, the solo part was very personal, due to the singer being given fairly free expression as indicated in the score and the choir almost giving us the required *pppp* towards the end. No. 4, ‘*The Call*’, was a beautiful duet with just the organ and baritone; the ‘tune’, in my opinion, being one of Vaughan Williams’s best. Again in No. 5, ‘*Antiphon*’, the organist was pressed into covering for a full orchestra and with great accomplishment. The choir, after their short rest during ‘*The Call*’, were allowed a degree of controlled exuberance and from the look on their faces, they finished on a ‘high’ that the music was intended to generate.

For the other two works in the programme, Nicholas Warden was joined by Rabihah Davis, soprano, Christopher Field, counter tenor and Humphrey Berney, tenor, all associated with the Royal Academy of Music and again the singing with the organ accompaniment was of an extremely high standard.

The *Five Mystical Songs* that I heard on that evening again emphasises the fact that Ralph Vaughan Williams had the wonderful gift of writing certain music that could be performed by the professional or the amateur choir and could be appreciated by the musician and the layman alike.

Maybe Concordia Singers could consider the *Mass in G minor* or the *Te Deum* and *Benedictus* for part of a future programme.

David Banks-Broome

# Music you Might Like

## American Song

As a classical singer, song obviously plays an important part in my musical life. When planning my recent recital, I wanted to compose a program that would reach out to American classical audiences and in addition attract some newcomers to the genre. I've always loved singing in English, and my own knowledge of English song was very inclined towards "British Song". In fact it was the *Five Mystical Songs* that got me interested in classical singing when I was a teenager. Ever since I was introduced to this glorious music, I have been a Ralph Vaughan Williams devotee. Several years ago while preparing for my Wigmore Hall debut recital Graham Johnson made the statement to me that "America is the current 'hot bed' of song composition". It became evident that it was time for this American singer to dig into his own musical history and see what treasures could be unearthed. To that end I recently released my first independently produced recital CD "Marcus DeLoach: *American Song*".

Embarking on this journey into my own musical heritage, I quickly discovered that the term "*American Song*" was a broad one. It could refer to folk songs, classical art song, Broadway numbers, the blues, spirituals and basically anything with a human singing voice. There was a sea of repertoire to choose from and fusion composers like Bernstein and Gershwin had broken down the barriers of classical and popular song so severely almost anything became fair game. So I set out to create a performance program which would somehow represent the scope and depth of this extensive repertoire, while allowing me to remain true to my artistic agenda which is to sing songs that move me on a profound and personal level. The result has been quite revealing. While the program feels more like a "grab bag" than a "survey" of American song it maintains its own logic and flow moving chronologically from the earliest American song, represented by Foster, Bacon and Copland, to some more recent compositions by Bernstein and Sondheim.

One of the songs in the early music group is *The Streets of Laredo*. This tune is the Americanized cowboy version of a traditional Irish melody. I wanted to include this lyric in the group, but found there were no convincing arrangements that would support my program objectives. So, at the suggestion of my longtime collaborator Thomas Bagwell, I boldly decided to write my own. Taking the lead from Samuel Barber's piano solo based on the same tune (No. 3 *Excursions*) I wanted a somber mood for "*Streets*" whose words have a delicate poignancy summed up in the final line "*we all loved our cowboy although he'd done wrong*". One can certainly detect an RVW influence in my arrangement as during the process I found that his use of mode and rich sonority had a tendency to dominate my compositional consciousness and default tonal language. I would suggest that there are also hints of Satie and possibly "Hollywood" in this particular arrangement. Audiences have been very receptive to this song so far, so the effort seems to have been worth it. I find the piano part most reminiscent of RVW in its weeping parallel motion and Aeolian mode.

Two piano pieces are included to break up the sound palate of the program and showcase the capabilities of Thomas Bagwell as an accomplished solo artist. I chose Copland's *Midday Thoughts* which he completed from a sketch for a ballet from the time of *Appalachian Spring* at the request of a student. It is a beautifully delicate postcard which evokes and paints the hope-filled American landscape in the way RVW might conjure Norfolk or Sussex.

The first piano solo leads into the beautiful introduction to Charles Tomlinson Griffes' *The Lament of Ian the Proud*, one of his three settings of Fiona McLeod. Dedicated to the incomparable Danish recitalist Povla Frijs, this is one of the greatest American art songs ever written. The tonal colors, of *Lament* are quite similar to RVW but I feel Griffes also offers a glimpse of Wagner in his work. In any case, I think any RVW fan would love this song as well as its composer.

A comic song on an Emily Dickinson text by Vincent Persichetti entitled *I'm Nobody* is followed by an Ernst Bacon song with another Dickinson text, *And this of all my hopes*, perhaps the bleakest song on the CD. This piece is quite a different tone from a Bacon farce *My Lulu* presented in an earlier track. Once again, I think RVW admirers will, no doubt, be attracted to *And this of all my hopes* for its somber modality and refined melancholy.

Further along in the program is Samuel Barber's remarkable *Sure on This Shining Night*. I often get the same feelings from Barber's music (an RVW contemporary) as from RVW's works. *Adagio for Strings*, *Sure on this Shining Night*, and *Dover Beach* might easily have been written by Vaughan Williams. In fact, didn't RVW think about setting *Dover Beach* at one point? They are obviously different men, but there are similarities in some of the music to be sure. It is something of a paradox that this song is recommended for so many aspiring young singers because, while short in vocal range, it is depthless in expression and meaning. The poet James Agee's last line "*Sure on this shining night I weep for wonder, wandering far Alone of shadows on the stars.*" is certainly a line of experience and not innocence. Unfortunately, many American vocal students tire of the song early in their studies and don't include it on their post graduate programs. I regard *Sure on this shining night* as a masterpiece of American song and couldn't imagine this program to be complete without it.

I am always particularly moved by RVW's settings of Walt Whitman's poems. From the *Sea Symphony*, to *Two Vocal Duets*, *Toward the Unknown Region* and *Three Whitman Settings* I find an abundance of humanity and love in the writing. RVW's *Joy, Shipmate, Joy!* was actually my first introduction to Walt Whitman – so much for my American public school education! It is a great setting of the text, as is another version (found on my CD) which appears in Lee Hoiby's Whitman song cycle entitled *I Was There*. I don't know how to characterize the difference between the two songs beyond that they both rollick and invoke the exuberance worthy of the text. Perhaps Hoiby's setting has more ocean spray and bigger waves than the RVW version! Also, Hoiby takes the baritone one tone higher making the ultimate note of the song a high G (instead of F in the RVW) bringing the song that much closer to being an aria.

The second portion of the program leads the listener into the world of theater via several transitions. The first shift being a quasi cabaret group by primarily art song composers which is followed by two American opera arias, *There's a law about men* from Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* and an epic solo, *Vanzetti's Last Statement*. *Vanzetti* is taken from Marc Blitzstein's unfinished opera *Sacco and Vanzetti* which was commissioned for the Metropolitan Opera of New York and based on the historic events surrounding the immigrant workers' tragic experience in America. In between these two grand arias is the second piano solo of the program *For Stephen Sondheim* from Bernstein's *Thirteen Anniversaries* which continues the theater theme and subtly comments on the composers at hand. It washes away the manic energy of *Law about men* so that *Vanzetti* (a virtually unknown aria in America) can have its chance to shine.

The last group of 5 songs is entirely theater or "Broadway" and I think of it as a logical conclusion of this journey through American song. There are some famous standards in the group including *Maria* from *West Side Story* and Cole Porter's *Begin the Beguine* from *Jubilee*. These songs are meant to be "dessert" for the listener after a "hefty meal" and they remain solidly in the realm of American song both in music language and theme.

Marcus DeLoach

(Members who like to check out the parallels between Vaughan Williams and some of these songs can acquire Marcus DeLoach's CD through [www.onesoulrecords.com](http://www.onesoulrecords.com) or [www.marcusdeloach.com](http://www.marcusdeloach.com).)



# A “Desert Island” List

## from Jeffrey Davis

In his article in the October 2004 issue of the Journal, Martin Murray suggested that other members might like to submit their own list of “Desert Island” Vaughan Williams discs and so here are my Top 10. I would like to have cheated by including Boult’s Decca box set of the symphonies as my first choice but I see that Martin has not allowed himself this luxury so I have decided to include the symphonies separately.

My choice is obviously focused on the music above all else but as I have limited myself to ten discs, I have also taken into consideration the couplings, presentation etc. They are in no particular order of preference.

### *Epithalamion/Riders to the Sea/Merciless Beauty* (Willcocks) (EMI)

I feel that *Epithalamion* is a relatively unknown work of great beauty. Another attraction of this CD is that the accompanying booklet contains a colour reproduction of the wonderful late portrait of the composer by Sir Gerald Kelly (which was started in 1958 and completed after the composer’s death in 1961). This portrait first appeared on the LP sleeve of Boult’s EMI recording of *Symphony 8* and the *Concerto for Two Pianos* back in the 1970s.

### *Symphony 5 / The Pilgrim Pavement/Hymn Tune Prelude/Psalm 23/ Prelude and Fugue in C Minor/Valiant-for-Truth* (Hickox) (Chandos)

My reasons for choosing this disc are not just for the fine performance of *Symphony 5* but for the fascinating couplings, especially *The Pilgrim’s Pavement* which was a great discovery for me.

### *Symphony 6 / Dona Nobis Pacem* (Abravanel) (Vanguard Classics)

With a selection limited to ten discs, this CD includes (uniquely) two of my favourite VW works: his greatest symphony in a truly great performance and a moving rendition of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, a great disc, currently unavailable except on DVD audio format.

### *A London Symphony* (1913 version)/ *Butterworth: The Banks of the Green Willow* (Hickox) (Chandos)

Self-recommending, I would not want to be without that moving and poignant closing section that VW excised as part of his later revisions to the score.

### *Film Music* (Penny) (Marco Polo)

Much as I like the two Chandos discs of VW’s film music, I prefer the selection here as it contains both *Coastal Command/49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* *Prelude/Three Portraits from the England of Elizabeth* and *Story of a Flemish Farm*, with its resonances of *Symphony 6*.

### *Symphony 9* (Stokowski) (Cala)

This is, I believe, the greatest recorded performance of VW’s late, enigmatic masterpiece (for a superbly insightful review, see that by Robert Matthew-Walker in the December 2004 issue of *International Record Review*).

### *Job/Concerto for Two Pianos* (Boult) (EMI)

I have five CD’s of *Job* conducted by Sir Adrian Boult in my collection (four studio recordings and a live performance recorded at the VW Centenary Concert on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1972 at which I was, at a tender age, present). I think that this, the final studio recording is the best. As *Job* is dedicated to Boult it obviously held a special place in his heart and that is reflected in a performance of enormous eloquence and conviction. I have also been influenced by the coupling. I prefer the two piano version of the concerto and it is here given a powerful performance by two outstanding soloists.

### *Violin Sonata, String Quartet no 2, Six Studies in English Folk-Song, Phantasy Quintet* (Music group of London) (EMI)

I have always liked the craggy piano writing in works like the *Piano Concerto*, *Fantasia on the Old 104<sup>th</sup>* and in the late *Violin Sonata*, my favourite piece of VW’s chamber music. There is an equally desirable Hyperion disc with a similar programme but including the charming piano version of *Lake in the Mountains* from the film *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*.

### *Five Mystical Songs/Finzi: Dies Natalis/Holst: A Choral Fantasia etc.* (Willcocks) (EMI)

This is, I think, the greatest recording of *Five Mystical Songs* and I have chosen this disc also because it contains Wilfred Brown’s unrivalled rendition of Finzi’s masterpiece *Dies Natalis* conducted by the composer’s son. The Holst items also make this an unmissable CD.

### *Sancta Civitas / An Oxford Elegy/Flos Campi* (Willcocks) (EMI)

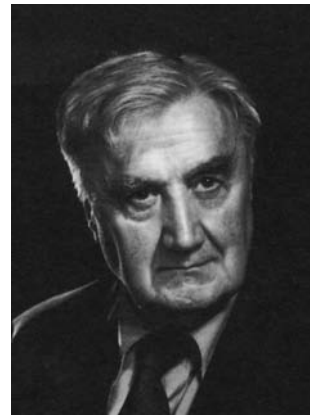
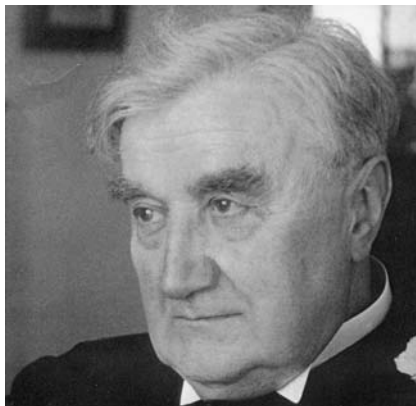
*Sancta Civitas*, together with *Dona Nobis Pacem* are probably VW’s finest choral works and this is a wonderful performance (I was lucky enough to hear a performance a few years ago in the church in Hove where Ralph and Adeline were married). *An Oxford Elegy* is something of a curiosity but a strangely haunting score (partly ruined for me since a friend’s observation that the Matthew Arnold’s line *Up your pathways stray* always reminded him of the late Frankie Howerd!)

Surveying this list I have realised what a debt VW lovers owe to the company EMI, who pioneered so many important VW recordings at a time when there was much less general interest in his music than there is today. EMI alone must have made a crucial contribution to the revival of interest in the music of Vaughan Williams.

**Crossword Solutions:**  
**Across:**  
 1. John Falstaff, 5. Bomb, 7. Nel, 8. Henderson,  
 11. Armstrong, 12. PLC, 13. Dhow, 15. Lionel Tertis.  
**Down:**  
 1. Jean Renaud, 2. Hall, 3. Farrer, 4. Lad, 5. Barn,  
 6. Benedictus, 9. I saw, 10. In tune, 12. Pitt, 14. All.

## TRIAL MEMBERSHIP SCHEME - A VOTE OF THANKS

Members will remember that the last issue of the Journal carried details of a new trial membership scheme. You were invited to nominate someone to receive free membership of the Society for one year. The scheme has so far produced eighty new members, and the Trustees would like to express their thanks to those amongst you who nominated them. We would also like to extend a warm welcome to those new members. The Society exists to promote understanding and enjoyment of the music of a great English composer, and we sincerely hope you will stay with us when your free membership period expires to participate in and help with this task in the longer term.



### FROM THE EDITOR

There can be no doubt that without a computer the job of compiling the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society Journal would be a much more difficult one, particularly when the editor lives in France. Things were simpler, though, in the days of the trusty old Osmiroid. Shortly after the appearance of the last Journal I followed the advice of my computer doctor and changed from one version of Windows to another, carefully saving all my documents. In spite of this I lost a number of other things, notably my entire address book and about forty email messages, some dealt with, some not. An enormous amount of time since then has been spent trying to claw back lost material, and for the most part I think I have succeeded. The most difficult to reconstruct, however, has been the Letters page, particularly irksome since I received a fair number of letters from members responding to my first issue, all of which I was looking forward to publishing. So if you wrote to me, either a letter or even an article – though I think I retrieved all these – and your piece

doesn't appear here, please do get in touch again. In particular I appeal to those two members with whom I was in correspondence about their letters as they raised issues which I found particularly interesting and which I was sure would strike a chord with others. These two people will recognise themselves, I am sure! Apologies all round, for the technical mishap.

For this issue of the Journal you were invited to submit papers on the subject of Vaughan Williams and religion. The result has been fascinating, and there is much here to interest and challenge, with surprisingly little common ground. Please don't hesitate to respond via the Letters page: this is a big, important subject which is definitely not closed. The October Journal will be dealing with Vaughan Williams's concertos, a perfect opportunity to revisit a rather neglected part of the composer's output. "I've never got over him, I'm glad to say." Whether you share Vaughan Williams's view of Walt Whitman, or if, like me, you have trouble with it, please share your thoughts with us in the Journal which will appear in February 2006.

# MORNING HEROES:

## ENGLISH COMPOSERS AND THE GREAT WAR

### Arthur Bliss



Vaughan Williams served on the Western Front (and at Salonika) during World War One, including a period with the 2/4th Field Ambulance at Ecoivres, near Arras.

From 23rd to 27th October Arts in Residence is organising a five-day trip to the area, exploring the places where Vaughan Williams and other English composers served, while also listening (on excellent hi-fi equipment) to their music and discussing the influence of the war on their creative development. The other composers will include George Butterworth, Ivor Gurney and Arthur Bliss.

The venue will be the Hôtel le Prieure at Rancourt, between Bapaume and Peronne. It is well equipped, with en suite bedrooms, an award-winning restaurant and a large conference room. The location is ideal, since Rancourt was in the heart of the Somme offensive, a designated target for the Allies in order to cut the communication link between Bapaume and Peronne. It is also close to the Thiepval Memorial, Vimy Ridge and the town of Albert.

### Thiepval Memorial



Travel will be in shared cars, and a special crossing rate has been arranged with Brittany Ferries on the Portsmouth-Caen route. Once the target number of ten cars has been reached, it will be possible for people to travel on the alternative routes via Dover or the Channel Tunnel, with an appropriate price adjustment. Accommodation at La Prieure is on a half-board basis, since the daytime visits will require other arrangements.

After arrival on Sunday afternoon, dinner will be followed by an introductory session led by Terry Barfoot and David Harrison. David will put the Somme Offensive into context, and introduce the places we will visit, while Terry will explain the choice of music and the relationship to the theme of the week.

The daily pattern will include a morning session of music, before departing to the various destinations, with more music on returning to Rancourt. The plan is for the first day to include Arras, Ecoivres (where RVW was stationed) and Vimy Ridge. The second day will include Delville's Wood, Longueval, Poiziers (the location of the 'Butterworth Trench'), Thiepval and the Newfoundland Memorial Park. The third day will include the Historiale at Peronne, Mametz Wood, La Boisselle crater and the town of Albert.

Terry will introduce the music, which will include RVW's *Pastoral Symphony*, Bliss's *Morning Heroes*, Gurney's *Ludlow and Teme* and Butterworth's *Shropshire Lad*. The programme will be adjusted to accommodate changing weather conditions, but will not need to be substantially altered. Departure will be after breakfast on Thursday.

Terry Barfoot is a founder member of the RVW Society and a well known figure in the musical life of southern England. He writes the programme notes for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and lectures widely at music clubs and other venues. David Harrison is a historian who frequently works with the Imperial War Museum. He has led several trips to the Somme battlefield and knows the area well.

**Price: £395.00 per person**

**For further details contact Arts in Residence on: 02392 383356 or email: [artsinresidence.co.uk](mailto:artsinresidence.co.uk)**

# A “Desert Island” List

## from Eric Seddon

### RVW

Obligatory. I would hate to be hunted down by other Society members for having thoughtlessly placed him anywhere else on this list.

### ERIK SATIE

Satie’s music has a unique sense of detached beauty. His constantly shifting perspective, his use of diversion and irony is really not the slightest bit eccentric, but represents the only way in which he could have communicated the subtleties of his musical thought. That my toddler-aged kids behave particularly well when his music is on doesn’t hurt his placement on my list.

### OLIVIER MESSIAEN

Challenging on the ears, but in a great way. If Messiaen had only written the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, the first of the *Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jesus*, and *Saint Francois d’Assise*, he’d still be on my list. Like haiku, his music is intensely contemplative, even exhausting, but worth the spiritual exercise.

### GIOVANNI PIERLUIGI da PALESTRINA

One piece ought to make my point clear: *Missa Papae Marcelli*. If you don’t believe me, listen to it for yourself!

### CHARLES IVES

Another so-called “eccentric” composer who isn’t the slightest bit eccentric at all. For those uninitiated to the brilliance of this, the greatest of my musical countrymen, I encourage you to listen to the second and third symphonies, *Decoration Day*, *The Unanswered Question*, and, at the very least, “The Alcotts” from the *Concord Sonata*. Once you’ve done this, jumping into the deeper water of the *Symphony No. 4* becomes less frightening. Last week he would have ranked No. 2 on my list. Next week he might be there again.

### JOHN CAGE

Yes, I’m serious. Before listening to Cage, it’s helpful to have read some of his essays. His purpose was not self-expression, but to “quiet the mind

and make it susceptible to divine influences.” When taken seriously, in the manner in which it was intended, Cage’s music gives an experience unlike any other composer. I recommend his book *Silence*, his “Constructions” for percussion ensembles, and his *Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano*.

### CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI

Recommended listening: *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*

### JAMES MACMILLAN

My own poetry, particularly my second book, *Punk Girl: a Rap Oratorio* (still seeking a publisher), has been directly influenced by the work of this contemporary Scot. His sense of peace amidst a swirling chaos: the eye of the storm and the storm itself, particularly as expressed in his masterful *Seven Last Words from the Cross*, is a worthy model for any contemporary artist.

### ANTON BRUCKNER

His symphonies, RVW’s, and Beethoven’s are for me the irreplaceable cycles in the repertoire. Beethoven’s explore the soul by means of the passions, RVW’s explore the soul by means of the exterior world, and Bruckner’s, to me, explore the soul by means of musical prayer. For me, his 9 symphonies are cathedrals of sound, filled with a majesty and peace surpassing any other composer’s symphonic output.

### THOMAS SCHUTTENHELM

Schuttenhelm is a young, emerging American composer. His music is unlike any other that I have heard, but seems to contain a similar element that I find in only very few composers’ work: it’s similar to the quality of detached beauty one finds in Satie, but with an American vernacular always present. I have been fortunate enough to hear his *Pierian Canticles* for String Trio in the concert hall, and hope that one day soon this remarkable piece will be committed to CD, as some of his piano solo pieces have already been. English music fans might find his music particularly interesting, as he is also known for scholarship in the area of Tippett studies, and cites Sir Michael’s music as an influence on his own.

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# IN YOUR HANDS

## - A NEW DIMENSION TO THE RVW SOCIETY

As many of you will know, the Society recently held a highly enjoyable meeting with the Elgar Society at Thame, where Lewis Foreman gave an illustrated talk on "Englishness in Music". This, we hope, heralds a new departure for the Society and reflects our determination to expand our activities by encouraging additional events beyond the AGM and the teas and lunches linked to the Three Choirs Festival. One or two ideas have been suggested, but their ultimate success depends, of course, on your support.

Concerts, for example, are a very useful way of bringing like-minded people together. Members could meet informally at a VW concert and one of them might perhaps write a review for the Journal.

Another idea has been prompted by a call to hold more informal meetings. So, for example, the Regional Chairman or another member might host a small get-together at home (or in a local hired room) for half a dozen enthusiasts to hear a recording and/or have an informal discussion over coffee or wine. This type of event is more easily arranged and cheaper to mount than those of the Thame variety, and could be held more often. It is also a more practical option in areas where members are spread more thinly than they are, for instance, around London.

This brings me to a third suggestion, which capitalises on the fact that there is a relatively high concentration of members in the South-East. It might therefore be convenient to mount a gathering, say three or four times a year, at a venue in central London. This might be, again, a programme of recorded music, with or without a speaker, but with plenty of opportunity for those attending to meet each other and exchange views informally.

So here is a rallying call to the far reaches of VW-dom, wherever you live, here in Britain or abroad. Can you give us any help along the lines suggested above? Do such events appeal to you? Would you (and this is the deciding factor!) actually turn up on the day? Do you have any other workable suggestions? (The difficulty faced by meeting organisers is always one of gauging support.)

On a practical level, we would envisage local meetings being coordinated through the Regional Chairmen, who hold lists of members and who would contact them with specific news of projected events in their area.

So, I invite you all to respond to this appeal. Please email or write to me, with your offers of help, ideas or suggestions, at the address below, or indeed contact any Officer of the Society. Their addresses are in the Journal.

Remember, only with your help, can we bring this new dimension to the RVW Society in its second decade.

**Jonathan Pearson**  
**Regional Chairman,**  
**24 Birdcroft Road, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, AL8 6EQ.**  
**Email: [jrh\\_pearson@hotmail.com](mailto:jrh_pearson@hotmail.com)**

# Letters

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

## RVW Abroad

I was delighted to read the text of Michael Kennedy's address at the tenth anniversary AGM. I suppose inevitably he's not so aware of what happens abroad as he is in this country. I would just like to put the matter of performances a little bit straighter. He mentions a few British conductors, but I am also trying to do my bit. That involves, over the last two or three years, as many as fifty performances of Vaughan Williams' symphonies in other countries.

Here's a brief account:

### *Symphony No. 1*

Two performances in Stuttgart, one in Cologne. A new CD in the offing.

### *Symphony No. 2*

Two performances in Leipzig, four in Philadelphia, three in Stuttgart, three in Los Angeles.

### *Symphony No. 3*

Four performances in Stuttgart, one in Lucerne, one in Vienna, two in Leipzig, two in Amsterdam, one in Cologne, one in Dortmund (and one at the Proms of course with Stuttgart three years ago).

### *Symphony No. 4*

Two performances in Stuttgart, two in Leipzig

### *Symphony No. 5*

Three performances in Stuttgart, two in Leipzig, two in Boston, three in San Francisco

### *Symphony No. 6*

Two performances in Stuttgart, two in Leipzig, one in Tokyo, one in Miyazaki, one in Berlin, one in Leverkusen.

### *Tallis Fantasia*

Three performances in Berlin and two in Salzburg. (Berlin Philharmonic)

Future plans - as many symphonies as possible with Berlin and Vienna in the coming years.

These symphonies invariably go down wonderfully well with German audiences. One critic in Stuttgart said "I cannot imagine why we haven't heard these magnificent and important symphonies before". I hope you may be encouraged that not all British conductors are entirely idle in regard to one of our national heroes!

*Sir Roger Norrington*

## More . . .

I should like to endorse whole-heartedly the sentiments expressed by Michael Kennedy about the dearth of British (or indeed other) conductors in charge of British orchestras who would regularly perform Vaughan Williams' music. Unfortunately, the only symphonies that seem now to be performed with any frequency are the 4th and the 6th, which have an international reputation and which therefore sometimes feature in concerts given by guest conductors, whether British or not. This means that even such acknowledged masterpieces as the *London* and 5th symphonies are now very seldom heard in London concert halls, and there is very little chance of hearing the *Pastoral* or *Sinfonia Antartica*, let alone the 8th or 9th, other than when Richard Hickox is back in London from Australia, or on Vernon Handley's now rare appearances.

It is a matter of profound regret that neither Hickox nor Handley, who have done more for English music than any other conductor alive, have been appointed to permanent positions with one of the major British orchestras, and that they have received only limited recognition from the Honours List. I would suggest that they have done much more for English music than the Davies or Sir Simon Rattle, who were knighted for services to music in Britain rather than for any significant contribution to English music. Indeed, I recall a very young Rattle standing in for Sir Adrian Boult in the mid-1970s for a performance of the 9th, very early in his career, and suspect that he has conducted very few of the symphonies since. I wonder how many performances of Mahler he has given when that composer scarcely needs any further champions.

I find it difficult to imagine Austrian orchestras who rarely play music from the Strauss family, Mozart or Haydn. Indeed, unless a conductor is at home in this repertoire, he is unlikely to be given the opportunity to conduct the Vienna Philharmonic. The same should apply here.

Turning now to Mr Noakes' letter from Australia, I am so used to Sir John Gielgud's magisterial recitation of the superscriptions before each movement of the *Sinfonia Antartica* that I can now hear his voice even when I listen to other performances which are played "straight". My Decca Eclipse record from around 1971 was a revelation to me, and was the record that convinced me that here was a truly great composer and inspired me to explore all 9 symphonies. I already knew the Tallis *Fantasia* and some of the smaller pieces, but this was the most atmospheric music that I had ever heard, and indeed still have ever heard.

In closing, I should like to pay tribute to Michael Kennedy and his superb biography of RVW, which I purchased when it first appeared in paperback in around 1971, through which I felt that I came to know Vaughan Williams as a man, and which gave me an insight into his music. Let us like him hope that British champions of RVW's music will emerge to allow future generations the privilege and pleasure of experiencing some of the finest 20th century music ever written, by one of the greatest Englishmen.

*Nigel Blore*

## RVW on Mull

Whilst taking a winter break nearly twenty years ago for my then wife to recuperate from a recent illness I came across an old book which until joining the RVW Society recently had slipped my mind. We were spending hogmanay in a beautifully situated shoreside cottage in Calgary on the Isle of Mull off the west coast of Scotland. The reception for both tv and radio was non-existent but was of little hardship as there was abundant reading matter, a roaring fire and a bottle of old single malt.

On first arriving I'd noticed in the lobby the well thumbed visitors' book waiting for me to have a good nosey at later! Part way through the first evening of our stay I wandered back to have a perusal of the book, as they have always interested me. My wife said there was a whoop from my general direction and I rushed in to show her the reason. Very near the front, there it was, in heavy pencil, R Vaughan Williams, and a date in the thirties.

First thing next morning I called at the owner's house a few hundred yards up the road, so I hoped, to confirm! She said "Indeed it is" and that he had been a dear old friend of her mother's. The first story she told me was, I think, the most charming. Apparently as children she and her sister would wait outside the bathroom and when RVW had finished bathing he would walk berobed down the landing and the two girls would trace his wet footprints on the floor. "Absolutely massive feet" she added.

The visitors' book it, transpired, had been transferred from the family house in Linlithgow near Edinburgh, where RVW stayed on most of his visits. The lady on Mull who very kindly gave me all this information told me her mother, Eila Mackenzie, had founded the Linlithgow Music Festival in the twenties, with RVW a regular visitor, along with other



eminent musicians. Armstrong Gibbs and Dunhill were often adjudicators, as was Jean Stewart the viola player.

When the Second World War broke out the family moved south, and once the War was over attended the Dorking Festival frequently. The lady had seen RVW conducting many times. She concluded with "He was a great lovely bear of a man with huge holes in his woolly jumpers!"

I've poured over quite a few visitors' books in my time but none have given me the thrill that that particular one did at that particular time on a very dark, very quiet New Year's Eve twenty years ago.

David Penney  
Stockport

## Request for Information

In the notes for Bryn Terfel's DG CD *'The Vagabond'*, George Hall mentions that the RVW song *The Vagabond* was 'written to an air by Schubert'.

I have searched several books on Vaughan Williams, including the excellent one by Michael Kennedy, but have yet to find any other mention of this fact or what the Schubert air might have been. I wonder if any of the Society members can clarify this further.

Richard Lewis

# Book Review



When a new member joins the Elgar Society he or she has the opportunity to join one or more of the various branches too. These subdivisions of the Society tend to be very active, and this book is a collection of lectures given over a number of years to the London Branch. There are nine of them, plus an introductory chapter by Kevin Mitchell outlining the long, complex and rather ambivalent relationship between Elgar and the capital city. Andrew Neill, Chairman of the Elgar Society, contributes a straightforward and most readable history of the Elgar Birthplace Museum. Readers will not have forgotten the controversy surrounding the creation of the Elgar Centre, surely one of the few occasions when the great composer featured in the Sun. Mr. Neill deals with this without drawing undue attention to it, and though the trustees of the RVW Society would scarcely wish to be presented with such a high-profile problem, the Elgar Birthplace itself is certainly a facility to envy. Another one is Michael Kennedy, and RVW enthusiasts are only too eager to claim him as "one of us". His presence in this book, however, reminds us not only of his magnificent work on Elgar, but also on Strauss, as his chapter deals with the relationship between the two composers, as well as that of their rather formidable wives! Carl Newton's essay is entitled *Now he Belongs to the Big World: The Historical Elgar*. The composer's place in posterity is examined in detail and many interesting conclusions are drawn, but in truth I think the London members must have been bemused by the negative and cynical tone adopted throughout much of his address. David Bury writes about A C Benson, the librettist of the *Coronation Ode*, and John Kelly contributes a meticulously thought out article entitled *Windflowers*, a detailed examination of the Violin Concerto especially in respect of the soul enshrined therein. Under the title *Elgar's Passage to India*, Robert Anderson discusses the origins of *The Crown of India*, a story he took up again, and took further at the joint Elgar and Vaughan Williams symposium in London in March 2003. That address can be read in *A Special Flame – The Music of Elgar and Vaughan Williams*, a collection of talks from that symposium also published under the Elgar Editions imprint. In the following chapter, Arthur Reynolds tells us of his surprise at finding a page from the manuscript score of *Falstaff* announced for sale in Sotheby's catalogue. Thus began a trail which reads like a detective story, entertaining, even rather gripping if you like that kind of thing. Michael Holroyd elegantly evokes the intriguing friendship between Elgar and George Bernard Shaw, and the volume closes with the earliest of these talks, a perceptive and frequently challenging piece from the late Michael Oliver entitled *Elgar's Legacy*.

A book of this kind is not going to lend itself to any particular theme, though the editor explains that he has chosen the talks not only on their own merit, but also to draw attention to subjects which have been rarely addressed elsewhere in the Elgar literature. The book is an important one, then, if for this reason alone. Its format is convenient for dipping into, but I read it from beginning to end, and despite the absence of a single voice or idea found my view of the composer and his historical context much enhanced by the experience. I also encountered a large amount of

information for the first time, some of it important, some less so. A single, charming example will have to suffice. Did you know that at the Elgar Birthplace, as you go into the garden, you will see a small sign inviting you, please, to "Boult the gate"?

We should not go away with the idea that this is a cosy, self-congratulatory volume of talks for like-minded enthusiasts. Carl Newton's ("Elgar himself had a very clear idea of how he wanted his life to read and from the beginning of his fame set about creating a suitable mythical version.") is not the only challenging voice here. We have Elgar's own, amongst others, quoted at the dinner table referring to painting as an art form as "damned imitation".

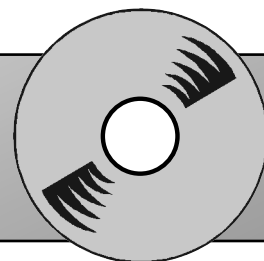
It's tiresome to look for and report on errors. I'm indebted, nonetheless, to Geoffrey Hodgkins in his review in the Elgar Society Journal for pointing out the delightful "the trees are signing my music" as I can't imagine I would have spotted it myself. Readers are advised, however, that if they want to admire Turner's painting *Rain, Steam and Speed – the Great Western Railway* they are better advised to go to the National Gallery in London and not the Tate as indicated.

When the Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams Societies held their joint symposium "A Special Flame" in 2003 there was a certain amount of friendly banter – mainly from the platform! – between the two camps. RVW Society members have a fierce love for the music of their chosen composer, something which, in its intensity, goes well beyond admiration. Vaughan Williams himself seems to have been a person at one with himself, confident, good-natured, generous, grand in all senses of the term. At the same time he never ceased to undervalue his work, to play it down in public, to minimise his own greatness. Elgar seems to have been quite a different kind of character, neurotic, self-doubting, aspiring, a dreamer, more likely to criticise the public when a new work did not find favour. What is endlessly fascinating about both composers is how often we find in their music the exact opposite of what their characters would lead us to look for. Thus we encounter Vaughan Williams the questioning visionary, his music so secretive yet clearly delving deep into matters he would never have put into words. (I believe it could be convincingly argued that he was the more complex character of the two.) Elgar, by comparison, so convincing when exercising his grand, positive manner, the composer as a public figure so very different from the private person. It is interesting that we who take the music of one of these very different figures to our hearts are so often more than happy to allow the other in there too. This beautifully produced book will help all those who seek further understanding of one of them.

William Hedley

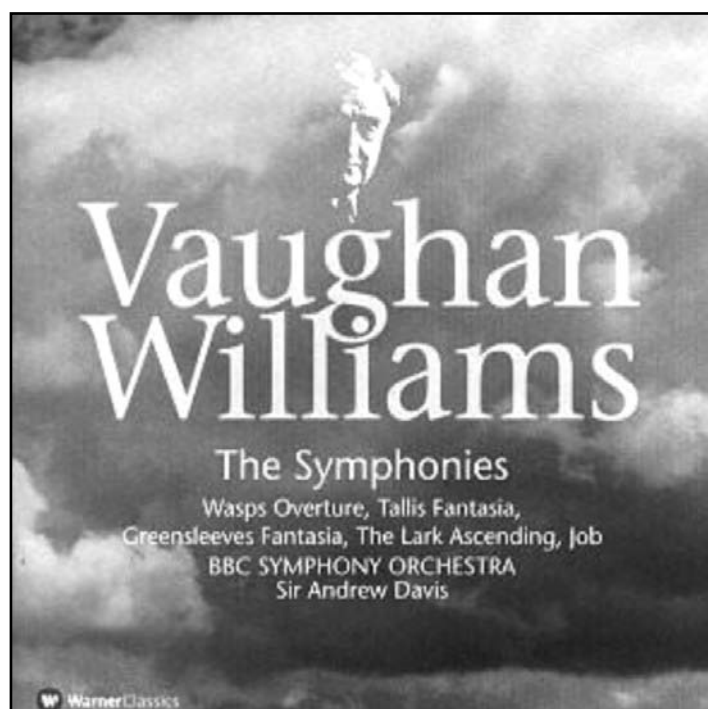
COCKAIGNE - ESSAYS ON ELGAR "IN LONDON TOWN"  
Edited by Kevin D. Mitchell  
Elgar Editions, £20

# CD Reviews



**RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Symphonies 1-9; Job; Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis; The Lark Ascending; The Wasps, Overture: Fantasia on "Greensleeves".**

**Amanda Roocroft (soprano), Thomas Hampson (baritone), Patricia Rozario (soprano), Tasmin Little (violin), Women of the BBC Symphony Chorus, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sir Andrew Davis. Warner Classics 2564 61730-2 (6CDs).**



The initial release in this series, *Symphony No 6*, coupled with the *Tallis Fantasia* and *The Lark Ascending* was greeted with enormous enthusiasm when it was released in 1991. It remains an outstanding performance in every way.

Unfortunately, the subsequent releases tended to generate a sense of anticlimax and disappointment after such high expectations had been aroused with the epic performance of the *Sixth Symphony*. This was a rather unusual situation since otherwise excellent surveys of the Vaughan Williams symphonies (Bakels on Naxos, Norrington on Decca, Slatkin on RCA and even the usually terrific Hickox on Chandos) have paradoxically tended to come unstuck in their recordings of Vaughan Williams's finest symphony.

The rather poor reviews of the later Andrew Davis recordings had put me off listening to them until now and I am therefore pleased to be able to report that, in my opinion, most of these performances are considerably better than originally given credit for.

Andrew Davis recorded the symphonies between 1990-1996, mostly at St Augustine's church in London. The quality of the recording is generally fine with occasionally recessed sound.

The *Sea Symphony* is comparatively disappointing. The opening should overwhelm the listener, but this is hardly the case here, and despite some fine singing from Thomas Hampson (an imaginative touch to have an American baritone singing the Walt Whitman verse) and Amanda

Roocroft, the performance never really catches fire. Boult on Decca or Haitink are to be preferred.

The performance of *A London Symphony* is less dramatic than some but it is presented as a true symphonic (as opposed to episodic) score, culminating in a magnificent climax in the finale. The chimes of Big Ben in that movement, taken slower than usual, acquire an added poignancy and the epilogue is extremely satisfying, conveying, more than in any other recorded performance, a sense of the river passing through the great city and out to sea. I have to say, however, that having now become so familiar with Richard Hickox's wonderful CD version of the original version of *A London Symphony* I do feel a bit short-changed when the symphony concludes without that moving poetic sequence that VW excised from the score as part of his final revision. Still, Andrew Davis conducts a fine performance of this great symphony.

*A Pastoral Symphony* is, however, a disappointment and perhaps the least successful of the performances. Despite some fine solo playing the orchestra sounds curiously disengaged from the start and the end result is routine. The scherzo is the most effective movement but the performance, as a whole, cannot hold a candle to that of Richard Hickox on Chandos or André Previn on RCA.

There is a rather thin sound quality at the start of Andrew Davis's recording of *Symphony No 4*, with limited depth. The performance as a whole, whilst not as dramatic as, say, the terrific new Paul Daniel recording on Naxos, comes off well in my view. In the *Andante Moderato*, Davis is able to convey a searching, visionary quality, which is so important if this movement is to "come off". This performance may lack something of the visceral excitement to be found in recordings by Mitropoulos, Bryden Thomson or Boult (EMI) but, like Neville Marriner's recording of the *Sixth Symphony* it provides a thoughtful alternative view of this symphony. The "oompah bass" towards the end is rather toned down but the last two movements are generally successful and not without excitement (a teenage friend of my daughter asked if I was listening to the soundtrack from "Star Wars"!)

Andrew Davis's performance of *Symphony No 5* makes for a rather frustrating listening experience, as parts of it are very good indeed. The *Passacaglia*, for example, develops with a growing sense of inevitability into a thoroughly life-assertive conclusion. In contrast the "dirge-like" Romanza (according to William Hedley writing in his survey in Issue No 22), is incredibly drawn out. Again, quoting William Hedley "in the song at the end (of the Scherzo) Davis is more affectionate, more flexible and expressive than any other conductor". In general, despite incidental moments of considerable beauty, the sum is less than the parts in this performance.

In Issue No 27, I have already conveyed my enthusiasm for Andrew Davis's recording of Vaughan Williams's *Sixth Symphony*. It is one of the very few successful modern recordings of the work (the late Bryden Thomson and Bernard Haitink are the only other modern competitors). The recording is excellent, with wailing brass and fully realised bass drum thwacks in the first movement, furthermore, Davis crucially sustains the tension throughout the long epilogue. The great reprise of the second subject at the end of the first movement, is slightly understated, investing it with even greater poignancy and dignity.

The late Christopher Palmer's eloquent sleeve note is worth a mention here. He describes the *Sixth Symphony's* extraordinary Epilogue as "all paradox: quiet but not peaceful; calm but not serene; melodic but non

expressive. It journeys unceasingly but never arrives anywhere. It is the ultimate negation of *The Lark Ascending*."

This performance is undoubtedly the highlight of the set and if you want it alone, it is available (coupled with heart warming performances of *The Lark Ascending*, *Tallis Fantasia*, *Greensleeves* and *Wasps Overture*) on the super-budget Apex label; surely one of the great VW CD bargains!

The version of *Sinfonia Antartica* was especially poorly received on original release. Jonathan Pearson, reviewing it as part of a survey of *Antartica* recordings in Issue 21 of this journal found it "lugubrious" and mentioned the "comatose" penguins. I wouldn't disagree with this but, on balance, I rather enjoyed this version. Davis's performance seemed less "symphonic" than some other recordings (Haitink's for example) and more closely related to the film score from which it originated. I found that the comparatively slow tempo in the Scherzo, for example, actually added to the growing sense of threat and menace. The women's voices and doomed processional in the last movement also reminded me of episodes in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the symphony concludes with a virtuoso performance by the wind-machine player, perhaps the most haunting on CD.

Writing in the BBC Music Magazine Guide, Anthony Payne described Andrew Davis's recording of the *Eighth Symphony* in the following terms: "The opening variations are confirmed as one of the composer's finest symphonic achievements, and the finale reveals its true mettle-not the casual romp of some interpretations, but a determined outburst of energy and joy for which conductor and engineers have created the perfect sound...."

I would not disagree with this although, personally, I prefer the more haunting, poetic quality to be found in Andre Previn's RCA recording and the old Barbirolli version on Dutton.

Finally, we come to a generally fine performance of the valedictory *Symphony No 9*, which is rapidly becoming, alongside *Symphony No 6*, my favourite work by Vaughan Williams.

Davis provides a cogent and thoughtful traversal of this epic landscape. Writing in Issue No 25, Robin Barber commented on the beautiful flugelhorn playing which is undoubtedly a highlight of the performance. I also enjoyed the slower, more deliberate treatment of the "Ghostly Drummer of Salisbury Plain" episode in the second movement. The end is very moving (the harps, however, are much clearer in the Vernon Handley CFP version) although there is perhaps a lesser sense of glowering darkness than in some recordings.

As in the Vernon Handley boxed set, the fill-ups include a fine performance of *Job*. The Handley version is marginally the better of the two but I liked the way in which Andrew Davis adopts a deliberate, square pacing in the "*Saraband of the Sons of God*" and "*Altar Dance*" episodes. The dramatic organ entry is also effectively dubbed from King's College, Cambridge.

I have already made brief mention of the other works included here but would pick out Tasmin Little's warm-hearted performance of *The Lark Ascending* which is perhaps the best version since Hugh Bean recorded the work, on EMI, with Sir Adrian Boult. A great performance of the *Tallis Fantasia* is presented wonderfully mellow sound and even the ubiquitous *Greensleeves* piece sounds fresh and inspired.

The, already mentioned, notes from Christopher Palmer and Anthony Burton are excellent. The original issues were exceptionally well packaged; the *Antartica* release, for example, contained extracts from Captain Scott's diary, photos from the expedition etc. Obviously not everything can be replicated in a budget priced boxed set but the full text of *A Sea Symphony* and the superscriptions from *Sinfonia Antartica* are included, along with a curiously under-exposed, bleached out looking version of a classic photograph of Vaughan Williams, dressed in characteristic tweed type farmer garb, slumped in a bench outside The White Gates, his home for many years in Dorking. This characteristic

image of Vaughan Williams seems very popular with CD booklet designers at the moment as the identical photograph appears (looking too dark and over-exposed this time) in the EMI/Haitink boxed set. It appears again (at a much higher quality of reproduction) in two recent Hyperion releases of Vaughan Williams's chamber music and in a just issued recording of his Mass.

The front cover of the box features a black and white landscape photograph (more of a cloudscape actually) with the face of Vaughan Williams benevolently appearing out of the clouds. Maybe the black and white image is supposed to suggest the 1930s and 40s when Vaughan Williams's finest symphonies were composed but, unfortunately, to me at least, it looks uncomfortably like a photo-copied image of a colour original, as if you had borrowed the original set from a friend and illegally copied it! (not that I would do such a thing of course.)

In conclusion, I would recommend this inexpensive set, alongside that of Vernon Handley on CFP, to anyone wishing to explore the symphonies of Vaughan Williams. The performance of *Symphony No 6* is outstanding in every way and the others are all enjoyable. I would still rate Sir Adrian Boult's Decca box as my number one choice for the Vaughan Williams symphonies, but I do feel that there are many fine qualities in Andrew Davis's recordings, which should continue to give much pleasure in the future.

Jeffrey Davis

#### **RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS**

*Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis*

*Five Variants of "Dives and Lazarus"*

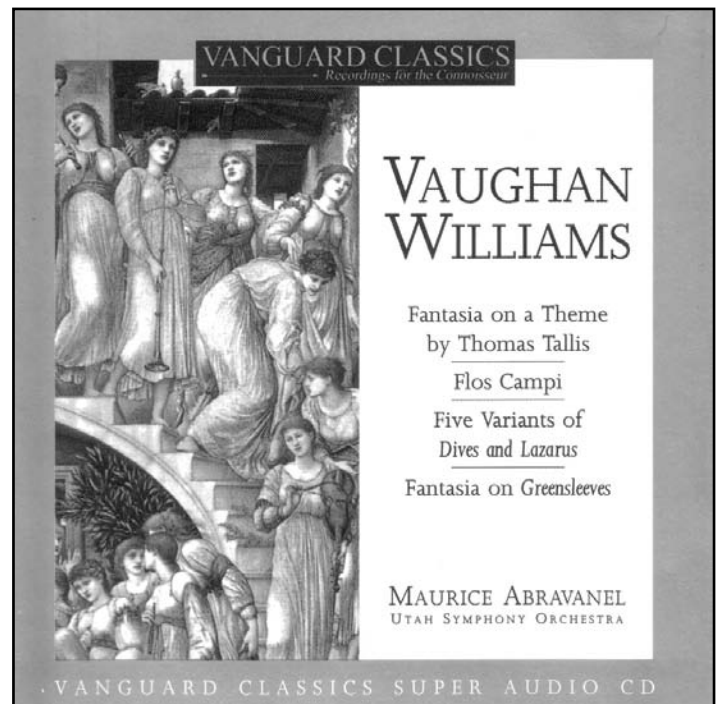
*Flos Campi*

*Fantasia on "Greensleeves"*

**Utah Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Maurice Abravanel, with Sally Peck Lentz (viola) and the University of Utah Chamber Choir.**

**Recorded 1966 and 1967**

**VANGUARD CLASSICS ATM CD 1507**



The sheer amount of material available to record collectors these days can be bewildering, and those of us who like to keep an eye on reissues of older performances are worthy of special forgiveness for getting lost in it all. Members of a certain vintage – such as myself – will remember these performances from LP, and would have been as happy as I was to stumble on this CD in a mail order list. It was issued in 2004, so I was

surprised to see some of these works available (and reviewed) in yet another coupling on another Vanguard disc. As if that weren't enough, this is not even a CD, but a Super Audio CD, though we shouldn't let this worry us as it may be played, so the label assures us, "on any standard compact disc player."

Maurice Abravanel was music director of the Utah Symphony Orchestra for over thirty years and among his achievements was a pioneering recorded cycle of the Mahler symphonies. I feel sure that his readings of these Vaughan Williams works will appeal to members.

The *Tallis Fantasia* receives a performance worthy to stand alongside the finest. Abravanel takes almost exactly the same time over it as does Barbirolli in his celebrated reading, and he brings out both the mysticism and the passion of the piece almost as successfully as does Sir John. There is no higher praise than that. The strings play beautifully, richly sonorous, as they also do in the ensuing *Variants*, though Abravanel's way at the opening is perhaps rather heavy, lacking the simplicity of utterance essential to the first statement of the tune. The rest of the piece goes well, though, and the close is very touching.

*Flos Campi* is such a mysterious, enigmatic work that we might expect conductors to have trouble with it. Curiously I know of no unsuccessful recorded performance and many of them are quite outstanding. This one joins that list. Sally Peck Lentz was the principal viola player of the Utah Symphony Orchestra, and had been, according to the booklet notes, a pupil of William Primrose. She is fully in tune with this remarkable work, as is the conductor. The choir sings superbly too, and is recorded rather more forwardly than is often the case in this work, so that we hear more detail in the inner parts – the triplet figures in the second section, for example, where the choir accompanies the soloist – than is usual. The sopranos and altos are excellent in the difficult third section, and here, as elsewhere, the analytic recorded sound again allows us to hear more detail – harp, celesta – than we are used to. The sound overall is outstanding, some background noise, probably traffic, being the only slight inconvenience. There is passion, even ecstasy, aplenty in the fifth section – "Return, return, that we may look upon thee..." – and a nicely audible tabor, leading to Vaughan Williams' response to the famous words "Set me as a seal upon thy heart", as beautiful and moving as anything in his output. I regret here some intrusive vibrato in the subdivided voices of the chorus, but otherwise the close of the work is most eloquently delivered by these wonderful artists.

The programme ends with an affectionate performance of *Greensleeves*.

*William Hedley*

## SONGS OF THE BRITISH ISLES

**Traditional songs and others including *Silent Noon* (Vaughan Williams) and songs by Quilter, Stanford, Parry, Bridge and Warlock.**

**Kathleen Ferrier, accompanied by Phyllis Spurr, John Newmark and Frederick Stone.**

**Recorded 1949 to 1952**

**NAXOS HISTORICAL 8.111081**

Both Ferrier fans and lovers of English solo song will appreciate this wonderful disc from Naxos Historical, in the Great Singers series. Traditional songs comprise the bulk of the music presented here, with a few songs by Quilter, Stanford, Parry, Vaughan Williams, Bridge and Warlock also featured.

The first thing that one notices is that the sound quality for the time (between 1949 and 1952) is excellent. Apart from a few crackles, particularly in Stanford's *A Soft Day*, an occasional squeaky wheel and a slightly remote sound in the Quilter, the disc is free of the intrusive noises that those who tend to listen to modern recordings find so disturbing, and aficionados of historical recordings have learnt to tolerate. Ferrier's rather dated prominent vibrato does not detract, either, but suits the style of the pieces.

One is immediately struck by Ferrier's lovely rich tone, liteness and sweetness of voice, and how she invests all of the traditional songs with great character and sensitivity. The merrier ones, such as *Keel Row*, dance, sparkling with vivacity, and in the more melancholic ones she is beautifully tender – as in *O Waly Waly*, and a version of *Blow the Wind Southerly* without accompaniment. Warmth, laughter and joy flood out in more light-hearted songs – the *Stuttering Lovers* and the concluding *Kitty my Love* – mirth radiating across to the listener. The regional accents she adopts are a true delight, particularly the fantastic Scottish one in *The Fidgety Bairn*. Her enunciation, too, is a joy to hear – crystal clarity reigns supreme here, which is all the more remarkable when one considers that some singers of the same period – naming no names! – occasionally sound as if they are singing with their kerchiefs in their mouths!



I was slightly less impressed by the performances of the original compositions. Admittedly this is not the best selection of Quilter songs (with the exception, of course, of his miniature masterpiece *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*!), yet these are all works that typically have the effect of hitting me in the solar plexus, sending me reeling back with emotion. I'm sorry to say that Ferrier was unable to squeeze anything resembling a tear from my nonchalantly dry eye. Not only does she take these songs too slowly – thus losing momentum and direction, but she does not invest them with enough feeling, doesn't quite manage to bring them to life or capture their soul. Although certainly the greatest female rendition I've ever heard, Ferrier cannot scale the heights of John Mark Ainsley (on Hyperion), and songs that are meltingly, heart-breakingly beautiful under his touch become more pedestrian and less awesome (in the real sense of the word) with her.

Vaughan Williams's *Silent Noon* is similarly not as dramatic as with a male voice – but then I was brought up with Tear on the London label, a version I would still instantaneously recommend to anyone. Ferrier's version is too slow to flow, and lacks Tear's atmosphere and colourful contrasts. Bridge's vivacious *Go not, Happy day* also suffers from a too leisurely pace, and comes across as a little too heavy and laboured. I would once more advise turning to John Mark Ainsley on Hyperion for the two Warlock songs. Ferrier sings *Sleep* too straight – she does not give it the haunting, dark quality that it needs, and *Pretty ring-time* is here too earth-bound. On the other hand, Stanford's *Fairy Lough* is given a light and delicate rendition that is quite beautiful.

One does feel, however, that it is in the traditional songs that Ferrier really shines, which she seems to endow with greater emotion, capturing the mood of the songs perfectly. Unlike the original compositions, where the lagging tempo hampered the expressions, the traditional songs are fairly well-paced. The tendency to be a little on the slow side here

translates as unhurried, relaxed and serenely confident.

The three pianists – Phyllis Spurr, John Newmark and Frederick Stone provide sympathetic and unobtrusive accompaniment throughout, excelling in a few places - the *Lover's Curse*, for example, where passion bursts through in the piano as well as in the voice. Despite my reservations about the Quilter, Bridge, Vaughan Williams and Warlock, I can thoroughly recommend this disc, as Ferrier's craftsmanship in the traditional songs alone is quite incredible. One need only listen to *Willow Willow* to be amazed at her remarkable control, and her masterful, spirited and dynamic touch.

Em Marshall

#### The Great War Remembered

Music by Ivor Gurney, John Ireland and others with Jeremy Huw Williams (baritone) and Nigel Foster (piano) on Dunelm Records DRD0239 (available from 2 Park Close, Glossop, Derbyshire SK13 7RQ at £10.95 including p&p)

Dunelm Records have followed up their *Lights Out* CD (DRD0200) with this anthology. Music by Ivor Gurney and John Ireland is included alongside songs from a competition organised by the English Poetry and Song Society. The first prize was awarded to Elaine Hugh-Jones for her setting of Wilfred Owen's *The End*. It is a fine song, yet the judges must have had a difficult time because all the listed songs impress. John Williamson's *Before the Battle*, for example, is a deeply serious setting of Sassoon's poem.

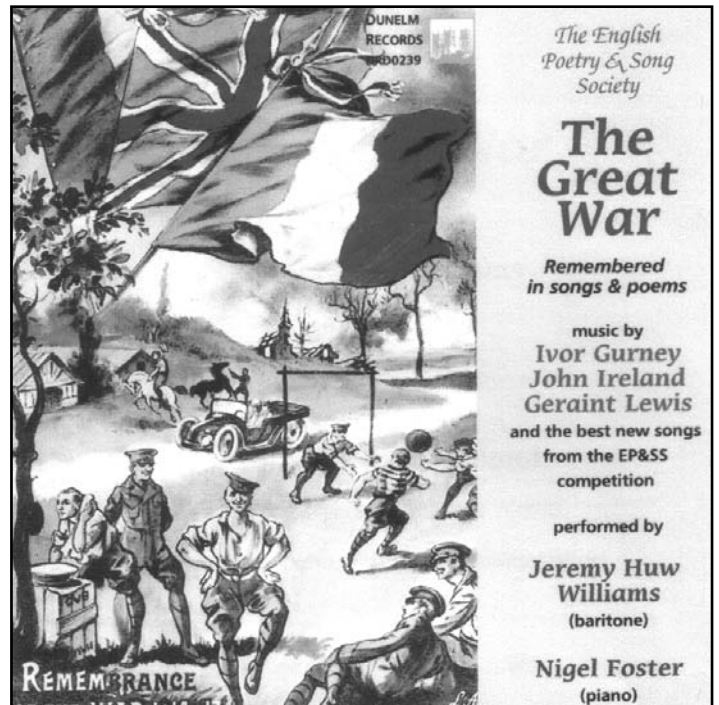
In the Ivor Gurney songs, the aptness of the musical responses to the impressive poems is particularly noteworthy. *The Dying Patriot* is a splendid marching song whilst *In Flanders* is quite lovely to the words by F W Harvey beginning:

I am homesick for my hills again,  
My hills again!

Jeremy Huw Williams's style is well suited to this poignant music. However, the recording was made live and there is a slight sense of distance with ambient noise in the recording. At least the audience was well behaved.

The CD ends with Jerome Kern's *They didn't believe me*, a lighthearted conclusion to an otherwise moving set.

Stephen Connock



## Cockaigne

Essays on Elgar 'In London Town'



Lectures given to the Elgar Society, London Branch

edited by

Kevin D. Mitchell

## Cockaigne - Essays on Elgar 'In London Town'

edited by Kevin D. Mitchell

256 pages of text;  
32 pages of illustrations

ISBN: 0 9548553 0 2

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Ralph Vaughan Williams photographed in February 1954 on the occasion of the first recording of *Along the field*. With him is mezzo-soprano Nancy Evans and violinist Granville Jones.

## ***Pilgrimage after RVW***

Another summer sunset burns  
and I am right and wrong, by turns,  
and down the road I wander on,  
to hear the old familiar song.

It mingles with the evening air,  
sublimating like a prayer;  
a memory disguised as sound  
that never can be written down.

Another secret silent call,  
inaudible, yet it entralls  
this soul who stumbles down the lane  
in hopes of yet another strain.

I move along, as in a dream,  
and walk within this fading stream,  
and I am right and wrong by turns,  
another summer sunset burns.

*by Eric Seddon*

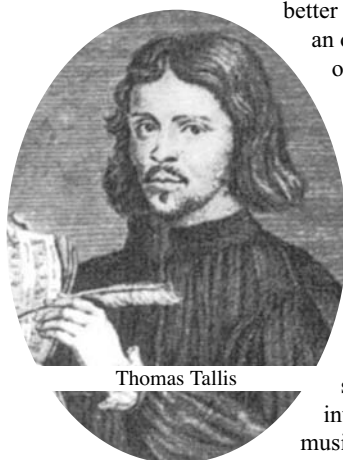


# The Listener's Repertoire:

Key Works Discussed by Experts from the Past

*Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*

by Eric Blom



Thomas Tallis

No modern English composer could have been better fitted than Vaughan Williams to write an orchestral work of this kind. Which is, of course, as good as saying that no composer at all could have done it as well as he. That it had to be an Englishman is obvious enough, and that only a modern Englishman would do it is almost as clear, since earlier generations of composers in this country, swayed now by Italian music and now by German, had little inclination to study their greater forerunners, or when they did study them, sadly misinterpreted their intentions by attempting to make the music conform to the foreign conventions to which they were accustomed. But why

Vaughan Williams of all people? Because no other composer has steeped himself so thoroughly in old English music – though some non-creative specialists may have done so – Cecil Sharp in folk song, for instance, and the Rev. Edmund H. Fellowes in the works of the madrigalists and lutenists.

There are four different ways of serving the old English masters. The first and simplest (which does not necessarily mean the least difficult) is that of reviving their music as nearly as possible as it was played and sung in their own time. That is the way of Mr. Arnold Dolmetsch. The second is the publication of new editions which reproduce in modern notation, with as few alterations as possible of such passages as cannot be performed on modern instruments, exactly what the composer wrote. It is what Philip Heseltine and others have done. The third and least satisfactory way is that of arrangement, the transcribing of early music into something approximating to an up-to-date idiom. The authors and perpetrators of this kind of thing are too numerous and in many cases too ignominious to mention. The fourth is the way here chosen by Vaughan Williams – that of what one may call evocation. The modern composer first steepes himself in the music of a bygone period and then writes, not as musicians wrote then, but very much as they felt and not improbably as they would actually write if they had transferred their existence to the present day without fundamentally changing their mentality. But although this *Fantasia* may vividly conjure up for the hearer the England of Henry VIII or of Elizabeth, it must be listened to as a modern work and, but for the theme it borrows, an entirely original composition.

## Thomas Tallis

Thomas Tallis was born in the first decade of the sixteenth century, probably about 1505, in the closing years of Henry VII's reign. His birthplace is conjectured, but without more than a shadow of evidence, to have been in Leicestershire. Neither can the historians support the surmise that he was one of the children of the Chapel Royal or sang under Thomas Mulliner at St. Paul's Cathedral – the glorious Gothic St. Paul's that was lost to us in 1666 in the Fire of London. He is, however, found in his younger days at Waltham Abbey, at the dissolution of which, in 1540, if not before, he was sworn a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. He was afterwards attached in succession to the households of Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth.

In 1575, Tallis and William Byrd, his junior by nearly forty years, were granted a royal licence whereby they alone were allowed to print music and music paper in England. He and Byrd, who had been at Lincoln Cathedral, became joint organists of the Chapel Royal, and together they

published a volume of *Sacred Songs for 5 and 6 voices*, sixteen of which were by Tallis and eighteen by Byrd. Only one other work, if one excepts the unimportant one about to be mentioned and relevant to this note, came out in the composer's lifetime: five Anthems contributed to John Day's *Certain Notes*, first issued in 1560. In his last years Tallis had a house at Greenwich, and he died there on November 23rd, 1585.

## Tunes to the Metrical Psalter

In 1567 Tallis wrote eight tunes, each in a different mode, for Archbishop Parker's Metrical Psalter, which is to be found in the Grenville Library at the British Museum. Tallis's melodies are given at the end of the volume in four-part harmony, each part being printed separately. The *cantus firmus* is in the tenor part, as may be gathered from this quaint note: "The Tenor of these partes (*sic*) be for the people when they will syng alone, the other parts (*sic*), put for greater queers, or to such as will syng or play priuately"; and the nature of the eight tunes is described in the following curious verses, which throw an interesting light on the distinct mood attributed to the different ecclesiastical modes in Tallis's time:

*The first is meek: deuout to see,*

*The second sad; in maiesty.*

*The third doth rage: and roughly brayth,*

*The fourth doth fawne: and flattry playth.*

*The fifth delight: and laugheth the more,*

*The sixth bewayleth: it weepeth full sore.*

*The seuenth tredeth stoute: in forward race,*

*The eyght goeth milde: in modest pace.*

The present work is based on the third melody, which will hardly strike modern ears as "raging" and "roughly braying". That must have made such an impression in the sixteenth century is made sufficiently clear by the fact that Tallis thought it an appropriate setting for the second Psalm, a few lines of which may be quoted here, as a curiosity, in Archbishop Parker's version:

*Why fumeth in sight: the Gentils spite,*

*In fury raging stout?*

*Why taketh in hond: the people fond,*

*Vayne thinges to bring about?*

*The kinges arise: the lordes deuyse,*

*In counsayles mett thereto:*

*Agaynst the Lord: with false accord,*

*Agaynst his Christ they go.*

## Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia*

The *Fantasia*, which was written for the Gloucester Festival of 1910, and received its first performance in Gloucester Cathedral, is scored for a double string orchestra. Variety of tone-colour is gained by a liberal use of solo instruments, both singly and in quartet combination.

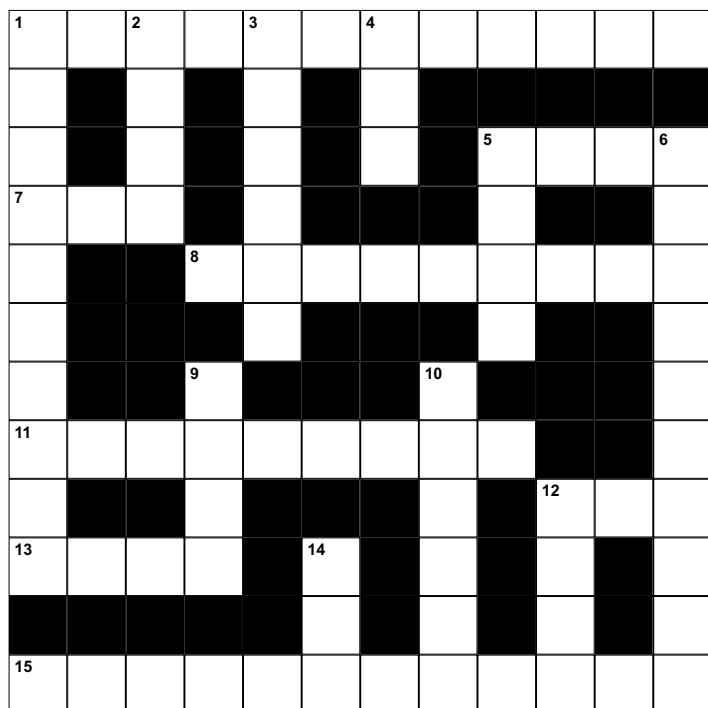
After a sustained opening phrase, the first strain of the theme is foreshadowed, *pizzicato*, by the lower strings, who then take up their bows to play a soft answering phrase. The whole tune is heard shortly afterwards in the middle register of the orchestra.

To this exposition succeeds a freer and more impassioned restatement of the material by the whole body of players. A dying fall of the violas and cellos then leads to a new section, where the two orchestras reply to each other antiphonally with thematic fragments.

Soon after, the tempo grows more animated, and a solo viola enters with a singing phrase that has grown out of the second strain of Tallis's melody. The first solo violin takes it up next, and presently the solo quartet weaves it into a polyphonic texture. From this point the musical fabric becomes ever richer in design and more varied in colour. Portions of the tune and its variants are continually in evidence in numerous interesting combinations. [The solo viola's melody] is used for a sonorous climax. Towards the close there is an important passage for solo violin and viola in counterpoint, and the *Fantasia* ends impressively on a plagal cadence.

(Slightly abridged from *The Music Teacher*, May 1931)

## RVW Crossword No. 19 by Michael Gainsford



### Across

1. Hero of RVW Opera first performed in 1929 (4, 8)
5. A German one did for the Queen's Hall (4)
7. \*\*\* *cor piu* (Mozart) (3)
8. Roy, the baritone in the first performance of *Sancta Civitas* (9)
11. Sir Thomas Wait, friend of RVW (9)
12. Limited company (1, 1, 1)
13. Arabic vessel (4)
15. Violist dedicatee of *Flos Campi* (6, 6)

### Down

1. French 15<sup>th</sup> century song arranged by RVW in 1904 (4, 6)
2. Third movement of *Partita* is homage to Henry (4)
3. Dame Frances, dedicatee of *O How Amiable* (6)
4. Young male from Salop (3)
5. Maria Marten perished in a red one (4)
6. With *Te Deum*, was published in 1954 (10)
9. \*\*\*\* *three ships* (Nine Carols, of 1942) (1, 3)
10. In his exercise book of 1882 RVW exhorts us to play this way (2, 4)
12. Percy, the conductor at the first performance of RVW's arrangement of Purcell's *Evening Hymn* (4)
14. First word of *Old Hundredth* (3)

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