

Journal of the **RVW** Society

No.36 June 2006

In this issue...

- Four articles on the *Pastoral Symphony*
- A major contribution to the religion debate from Eric Seddon
- Michael Kennedy and Stephen Connock on *Sir John in Love*

and more . . .

Focus on the early orchestral works

The success of the Naxos recording of *Willow Wood* has led the Society to examine in more detail the early orchestral works. The American conductor and musicologist Jon Ceander Mitchell has, at our request, researched all the scores at the British Library and is excited by what he has found.

The works he concentrated on were:

- *The Garden of Proserpine* (1899): Jon Mitchell describes this setting of Swinburne as 'impressive' and Michael Kennedy has said it is superior to *Willow Wood*. It is a substantial piece - perhaps 15-20 minutes in duration and set for soprano, chorus and orchestra
- *Fantasia for piano and orchestra*: (1902, revised 1904): Jon Mitchell says of this 15 minute piece that it is 'romantic showing the marked influence of Brahms'. The early *Piano Quintet* had a similar influence, but as the Hyperion recording demonstrates it has its own individual voice.
- *Harnham Down* (1904-07): This 'Impression' for orchestra lasts 6½ minutes and resembles the style of *In the Fen Country* (1904).
- *The Solent* (1902-3): This 'dignified' piece shares its main theme with a melody in *A Sea Symphony* and the *Ninth Symphony*.
- *Bucolic Suite* (1900): Jon Mitchell believes this work to be the best of the early orchestral pieces. He times the work at 20 minutes.

The RVW Society is very encouraged by this research. We offer our warm thanks to Jon Mitchell for his help and support. We now need to secure a recording contract and prepare the orchestral parts. Excellent progress is being made on both fronts. Another American conductor, James Sinclair, is developing plans for a recording of the *Serenade* for small orchestra (1898) and *Heroic Elegy* and *Triumphal Epilogue* (1900). We wish him success in this project.

This is thy hour, O Soul

The Trustees are thrilled by our members' response to the plea for donations towards the recording of the early songs. At the time of writing, over £5,000 has been raised and cheques are still arriving! This heart-warming response has given the Trustees the confidence to go ahead with the project and a specialist has been appointed to prepare performing editions of the unpublished songs, held at the British Library. Our sincere gratitude to all those members who have made the project possible.

'The best of me?'

Members will find a leaflet in the Journal providing full details of our latest Symposium being jointly run with the Elgar Society. This will be held on 28-29 November 2006. With speakers like Michael Kennedy, Diana McVeagh, James Day and Andrew Neill, it is likely to be a remarkable weekend. Places are limited, so please book early!

**Remember: Our 2006 AGM is on 8th October at Denbies in Dorking.
Guest speak is Simona Pakenham on *The First Nowell*.**

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From the Editor



Vaughan Williams avoided discussion of “meaning” in his works. The programme notes he provided for first performances, for example, were brief, functional, sometimes even flippant. Only occasionally, to people close to him, did he confide that there might be ideas behind the notes, aspects to the music other than the simple search for the beautiful. So it was that in 1938 he allowed Ursula Wood to know of the nights he passed with the ambulance wagon at Ecoivres in Northern France, and the “wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset” he contemplated there, perhaps rather like the one above. For those of us who find that the beauty of Vaughan Williams’ music, sublime though it be, is not enough, this is an important statement. By giving his symphony a name the composer had already confessed to extra-musical associations, but the fact that the pastoral elements are French and not English, as well as their placing in time, is highly significant. The consequent interpretation of the *Pastoral Symphony* as a work written in reaction to the First World War, and perhaps in memory of the fallen, those he knew and those he didn’t, helps enormously in understanding and appreciating the work. Is there any music, anywhere, more sad than the second movement? Yet there is something universal about this sadness; it is, as it were, a celebration of human dignity and grandeur. There is not a trace of self-indulgence in it. And with the finale comes something else, a kind of turning of the page, a renewal.

There is nothing here of lessons learned, yet it is not hopeless music either. Neither does the composer invite us to be stoical in acceptance: the music is far in advance of that. There is terrible

anguish in that final unison climax, but not, I think, anger, and this is extraordinary. The symphony subsides in an atmosphere of understanding; the knowledge, almost comforting, in spite of man’s tendency to destroy, that things continue, always. About the *Sixth Symphony* Vaughan Williams wrote: “It never seems to occur to people that a man might just want to write a piece of music.” He might just as well have written those words about the *Pastoral*. It is, after all, “a piece of music”, but it is also, in my view, one of the most searching philosophical meditations ever produced by an artist, a work which proves, as do so many of the greatest pages of Beethoven, that music is at once more oblique and more precise than words can ever be.

For the coming issue of the Journal members are invited to contribute to a survey of the smaller choral works. There is an enormous amount of wonderful music there, and many are those members who have performed these pieces, either as singers or conductors. Please share your thoughts on this extraordinarily rich repertoire.

And for the following Journal, another monument. Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was a book which occupied Vaughan Williams’ mind for most of his life. I hope someone will write next time about that small masterpiece *Valiant-for-Truth*, but Vaughan Williams and Bunyan will be the theme for February 2007.

William Hedley

Listening to the *Pastoral Symphony*

by David Manning

Vaughan Williams provided a brief programme note for the first performance of his *Pastoral Symphony* on 26 January 1922. This note lists the main themes and some basic features of each movement's structure. There is little discussion of the work as a whole; in fact, Vaughan Williams' general remarks are limited to the opening three sentences:

The mood of this Symphony is, as its title suggests, almost entirely quiet and contemplative – there are few fortissimos and few allegros. The only really quick passage is the coda to the third movement, and that is all pianissimo.

In form it follows fairly closely the classical pattern, and is in four movements.¹

In these opening comments, and the rest of the programme note, Vaughan Williams provides the reader with an outline sketch of the work in question. The basic shape is discernable, but the textures, colours and style are not explored. It is unsurprising that Vaughan Williams gives little away in words, especially if we refer back to an interview he gave two years earlier. Katharine Eggar, writing for *The Music Student*, asked the composer what his music meant to him. That question was briskly dismissed:

My business is to write music...not to talk about it. And if my music doesn't make itself understood as music without any tributary explanation – well, it's a failure as music, and there's nothing more to be said. It matters, of course, enormously to the composer what he was thinking about when he was writing a particular work; but to no one else in this world does it matter one jot.²

Vaughan Williams' programme note for the *Pastoral Symphony* upholds this belief and does not engage in questions of meaning. Of course there is no single, objective meaning behind this musical work; and it is understandable that Vaughan Williams did not want to create the impression that there was. Instead, we can enjoy our subjective responses to the work, and the way these change over time.

I imagine that most readers will be revisiting the *Pastoral Symphony* as an old friend. Or is this one of the works you have rarely encountered? Either way, the following commentary is provided for listeners who want to explore the musical relationships within this symphony a little further than Vaughan Williams' programme note allows. The aim will be to further our own appreciation of the work, not to try and uncover some underlying meaning. Timing references are given to Richard Hickox's recent recording of the work (conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, soprano soloist Rebecca Evans, on Chandos CHAN 10001). However the commentary should still make sense without reference to that particular recording as the main themes are also quoted in the musical examples.

Mood and form: the symphony as a whole

Even though it does not give much away, Vaughan Williams' programme note still provides a good starting point for exploring *A Pastoral Symphony*. In the passage quoted above the composer begins to unpack his title: 'pastoral' suggests a contemplative mood, wonder at the beauty of landscape, and an escape from the stress of everyday life; what 'symphony' suggests in 1922 is a good question, but it is still more likely than not to be a large work for orchestra in four movements, and while the 'classical pattern', to use Vaughan Williams' phrase, may be broadly

followed, it is also reasonable to expect it will be varied to suit the composer's purpose. The question is, what effect is created when you bring together the contemplative, pastoral mood with the structural form of the symphony? There will not necessarily be a contradiction. After all, Beethoven had demonstrated that the two could combine with great effect in his *Pastoral Symphony*. From the title, and Vaughan Williams' description, we might expect that the relationship of the pastoral style and the symphony genre will be one of fruitful interaction.

First movement: *Molto moderato*

The opening bars clearly establish a pastoral mood: during the first 30 seconds the winds gently undulate, returning frequently and easily to the opening chord, and the low strings enter, coloured by the harp, introducing a simply melody (theme 1). Then some more voices join the texture – a solo horn, a solo violin and a solo oboe – in a manner typical of Vaughan Williams' pastoral scoring. They use modal melodic patterns, which sound as if they are derived from folk song but do not quote an individual tune, and the dynamic remains *piano*. So far, so pastoral. Or is it? A very subtle element of instability begins at 0.34, as the violas and cellos play a stream of chords that don't fit with the upper parts. They clash in tonal terms because the upper voices are in the key of G, while the lower strings are in E flat. This is quickly resolved so that the harmonies all fit together again at 0.45. That is not an end to the matter, because the violas and cellos begin another chain of chords in E flat at 0.58, while the upper strings and woodwind continue in G in their pastoral vein, repeating and developing the symphony's opening theme. These two elements coexist during this opening section without generating an overt sense of conflict.

The two separate elements are brought together in the distinctive cadence pattern which ends this opening section (1.29-1.50). Normally we would expect a cadence to close a phrase or section with a conventional harmonic progression, but here the progression is B flat minor – G major which is an unusual way of affirming the tonic. This cadence reflects the fact that two harmonic streams have been present simultaneously. The first chord, B flat minor, can be understood to represent the low strings, and this resolves into the second chord, G major, tonic chord of the upper voices. The first time we hear this progression (1.29) it sounds as a convincing resolution; the progression is repeated and this affirms the sense of closure. But then the alternation of the two chords continues, and a new melody enters on the cor anglais. The alternation ends at 1.50 with a B flat minor chord, not G major, and the relationship between the two elements is less clear than at the beginning of the cadential phrase.

During the opening two minutes of this symphony, G major and the upper voice pastoral melodies have been clearly established as the most prominent elements but not all the material has been contained within this home key. It appears that dissonant elements can enter the texture without fully resolving into the tonic. I have discussed the opening in detail because there will be a number of points where tension is generated without it being immediately resolved. As a result, it emerges that this pastoral work will not be without its moments of drama.

The first movement continues with a succession of lyrical, pastoral themes, including the one that dovetails from the preceding section (1.52; second theme), followed by a theme on the cellos at 2.28 (third theme). Then there is another cadential phrase that starts off sounding like an ending (2.55), but then goes on to pose more questions than it answers.

This cadential phrase is a pivotal point in the movement: it brings the exposition of thematic material to an end, and begins the development

section. It starts to emerge that sonata form (part of the ‘classical pattern’ referred to by Vaughan Williams) will play a role in the movement. A development section would normally lead back to a clear return of the tonic and the main theme. Vaughan Williams does eventually return to the main theme and the tonic, but it is notable that the return seems to occur by stealth; we find ourselves back at the opening material almost without noticing it. Let’s trace that path.

The prolonged cadential material that started at 2.55 eventually merges into a return of the opening undulating triads at 3.45. Then a solo violin begins a new period of thematic development at 4.15. A greater sense of forward motion is introduced and the dynamic increases to *forte* for the first time at 5.15. We would expect a dramatic climax such as this one to occur in the development section. A *diminuendo* follows, and this leads to a return of the tonic key in the upper voices playing material from the exposition at 6.09. This is the beginning of the recapitulation section which arrives in an entirely unobtrusive fashion. Once again the lower strings are in E flat, playing material that does not fit harmonically with the upper voices. But this time the unusual cadence ends on the G chord, providing a satisfying resolution in G major.

The recapitulation continues in rather more conventional style, with a return of the other pastoral themes (beginning at 6.51 and 7.21). This leads to a climactic passage at 7.51 and a cadence in the tonic. All that remains, according to the sonata form model, is for a coda to close the movement in the tonic, perhaps with reference to some or all of the preceding themes, or using its own closing material. Vaughan Williams opts to bring back a version of the undulating quavers from the beginning of the movement to begin his coda (8.31); this time the triads are at a lower pitch in the clarinets, cellos and double basses. The coda proceeds, apparently in search of a dramatic highpoint. The tension builds and by 9.34 it seems certain we are about to arrive at a loud climax; however the music becomes quieter, the tempo slows and we return once more to the distinctive B flat minor – G major cadence. This does close on the tonic, G, rather than B flat, but the movement then concludes in fragmentary manner with one of the pastoral themes, and finally a snippet of the first theme in the low strings. We end in the tonic, but the search for a climax was apparently in vein.

Reviewing this movement as a whole, it is clearly possible to identify the main elements of a first movement sonata form which we would expect in a symphony that claims to use the ‘classical pattern’. But Vaughan Williams does not simply follow a formula, he adapts it to his specific purpose. In this case sonata form features a distinctive thematic pattern and the recapitulation resolves tensions from earlier in the movement. But there is something else left over, signified by the rapid *diminuendo* in the final climax passage, and the return of those thematic fragments at the very end. We are left with a reminder that points of resolution in the tonic may be achieved but they cannot seemingly encompass all the tensions from within the movement. Likewise, a pastoral serenity can be established fairly easily and sustained for periods of time, but latent tensions will also be present; resolution of such tensions will not always be achieved.

First movement: Molto moderato

First theme (0.13)

Second theme (1.52)

Third theme (2.28)

Second movement: Lento moderato

The second movement begins with a beautiful, slow pentatonic theme on the horns. It uses the scale C-D-E-G-A, but this is supported by a chord of F minor (F-A flat-C) in the strings. The effect is that the self-contained horn melody gently grates against the underlying harmony. Both elements seem unperturbed by the other, but the overall effect is that an underlying tension is generated while a lyrical melody remains

predominant. A linking phrase in the violins leads to a repetition of the opening melody by solo oboe and clarinet. This haunting theme will inspire much of the rest of the movement.

A new theme begins at 1.50 (theme 2), which is similar in style to the opening melody. It is one of those melodies that seems infinitely extendable (an echo, perhaps, of Wagner’s technique of ‘endless melody’), as it is passed around the instruments of the orchestra. A number of solo string instruments are heard, often combined with the winds, as if to imitate the sound of individual human voices singing in answer to one another.

The third theme in this movement is its most famous, the solo fanfare, played by a trumpet in E flat (4.44). This passage has a specific resonance with Vaughan Williams’ experience of service in the First World War. The composer heard a bugler practising his fanfares; the player kept mistakenly hitting the seventh degree as he played, rather than the intended octave. Vaughan Williams later decided to incorporate that effect in these bars.³

This rather oblique reference to the composer’s experience of war is highly suggestive. Of course the musical pattern itself, created unintentionally, is rather beautiful, especially when it is heard in the plaintive and reflective context of this movement. But the fanfare sounding awry is also a powerful metaphor for the folly of war. The pastoral context of the French countryside was the theatre of this particular war, where the trumpet call sounds as the cry of humanity, amidst man’s self-inflicted destruction.

The fanfare leads to an outburst of frustration, as the horn’s theme reappears in an angry, *fortissimo* restatement. The transformation of scoring almost entirely disguises the relationship of this passage to the opening theme, but it is the same melody nonetheless. The ‘endless’ theme subsequently returns, and this leads to the fanfare restatement, now played by a solo horn. This time the fanfare is juxtaposed with the opening theme, and the movement ends by restating a passage that previously functioned as ‘linking material’. At the end of this movement we seem to be back at the beginning again. There has been a wealth of haunting melody, of human cries, but no answers or resolution. Two movements of this symphony have now ended in fragmentary fashion.

Second movement: Lento moderato

First theme (0.00)

Second theme (1.50)

Third theme (4.44)

Third movement: Moderato pesante - Presto

This movement is a Scherzo in all but name, and contrasts strongly with the other three movements thanks to its lively tempi and expressive character. The ‘Scherzo’ material comprises two melodic elements: a heavy dance theme using a distinctive downwards leap (first theme) and a lighter, more obviously pastoral, theme using a dotted rhythm, first played by a flute and answered by a solo violin (1.00; second theme). These two themes are heard in succession and lead to the Trio. A new melody is first played by the brass (theme 3), before being repeated by full orchestra with deliberately exaggerated off-beat emphases. The first theme returns, and the cycle of Scherzo-Trio is repeated. The second return of the opening theme leads into a *presto* coda (4.54). This is characterised by light scoring, a *pianissimo* dynamic, and a fast exchange of material between the instruments. This movement, like the first, ends with a fragmentary reminiscence of its opening theme.

Third movement: Moderato pesante - Presto

First theme (0.00)



Second theme (1.00)



Third theme (1.42)



Fourth movement: Lento - Moderato maestoso

The opening of the final movement invites comparison with the solo for natural trumpet: this time the cadenza is performed by a solo soprano, accompanied by timpani (theme 1). The melody floats in free time, and provides another example of folk-song inspired original melodic writing. This particular passage manages to avoid settling clearly in any one key; while the timpani pedal note on A provides a constant reference point the melodic patterns imply a variety of white-note triadic harmonies. The phrase as a whole creates an other-worldly effect, the soprano (or tenor) soloist providing a voice from beyond, both mystical and passionate.

The main orchestral theme of this movement (2.12, theme 2) is a more typically pastoral theme, with a simple melodic shape and clear patterns of return to the opening pitch centre. The harmony is slightly more ambiguous without being dissonant or unsettling; it emphasises a variety of potential tonics and there seems no need to determine once and for all the predominant key centre of this passage.

The movement's opening melody now returns in a passage of frequently fluctuating tempo and agitated expression (4.26). Suddenly a great deal of frustration emerges; temporary repose is achieved as a variant on the opening theme is played first by cellos then the flute, accompanied by harp (5.24); but the agitated material keeps returning. Eventually this leads to the movement's terrible, passionate climax (7.08), where the strings and upper woodwind repeat the opening theme in high octaves, with the violas and cellos straining near the top of their instruments' range. The mystical quality of the opening theme is stripped away, as if its message was not heard or understood, and the phrase is repeated insistently with an increased sense of urgency. Then the main orchestral theme returns at 7.37. But it cannot establish calm as easily as it did in the first half of the movement; the strained version of the first theme won't go away, refashioning itself as a prominent quaver accompaniment to the recapitulation of the orchestral theme. The passage builds to a full-blown climax and highly effective synthesis of the two themes (8.48).

This is surely the dramatic apex of the entire symphony; but once again, it is quickly followed by a *diminuendo*. The opening theme returns in its mystical version for solo voice, now accompanied by a high tremolo pedal in the strings. The theme hovers metaphorically and spiritually over the movement, the work and ourselves; the movement may have fashioned a synthesis of thematic material and a dramatic climax, but this cannot contain all the tensions of this work; the final soprano solo cadenza remains a symbol of what lies beyond, essential and inaccessible.

Fourth movement: Lento - Moderato pesante

First theme (0.00)



Second theme (2.12)



Mood and form: the Symphony as a whole

This work successfully infuses the symphonic plan of four movements with a pastoral mood, but that is only part of the story. Pastoralism is transformed, as the symphony not only idealises nature and escapes the reality of urban living, but also critiques the social experience of war and contextualises the limitations of human acts, placing them within a broader spiritual framework. Now pastoralism is not simple escapism; it invokes a vision of our futures, too.

David Manning is Teaching Fellow and CHOMBEC Development Officer at the Department of Music, University of Bristol. CHOMBEC is the newly established Centre for the History of Music in Britain, the Empire and the Commonwealth. David's research interests are in theory and analysis, and the music of Vaughan Williams. Current projects include editing Vaughan Williams on Music, a collection of the composer's writings to be published in 2007-08.

NOTES

- 1 Vaughan Williams programme note in Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87-9.
- 2 Katharine E. Eggar, 'Ralph Vaughan Williams: Some Reflections on His Work', *The Music Student*, 12/9 (1920), p. 515-19 at 515.
- 3 Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 170-1.

A new direction in Vaughan Williams' symphonic thinking

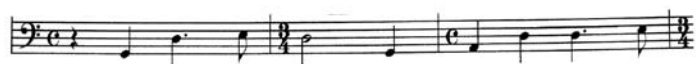
by Jeffrey Aldridge

Some five years ago, I wrote a piece for this journal about Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral Symphony*. It was, strangely, derived from something I had noticed some forty years earlier, which, as far as I could tell, nobody else had seen, or at least had gone into print about. Over the years, I read various books and articles about Vaughan Williams and his music but I still did not come across precisely this thing that I had noticed. Consequently, when my friend John Hamilton persuaded me (I am very glad to say) to join the RVW Society, the first thing I did was to look again at the *Pastoral Symphony*. I was astonished to find that my original 'eureka' moment of so many years before had revealed just a part

of the extraordinarily concentrated organisation of the symphony. Having noticed that the Journal was to feature this work, I thought I might have another look at what I had written before and re-present it in a slightly different form. So here goes.

The *Pastoral Symphony*, appearing almost a decade after its predecessor, marks a shift on the part of the composer towards a more rigorous approach to symphonic form. Not only is it about half the length of the *London Symphony*, its thematic material is more concentrated and can be summarised as consisting of four basic fragments from which nearly all

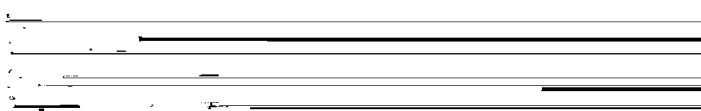
the thematic material is derived. The first of these appears in the opening bars:



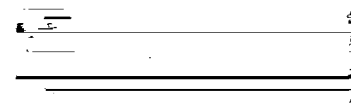
As can be seen, it consists of the notes GADDED (or, to get over problems of transposition, notes 125565 of the pentatonic scale) and appears on the cellos and basses at the very beginning of the symphony (in the first bars simplified to GDED – or notes 1565 of the pentatonic scale). It is immediately answered by the solo violin, playing almost the same thing backwards (DCDG = 5451):



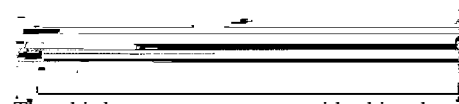
Later it takes a decorated form, only slightly disguising the GDED sequence:



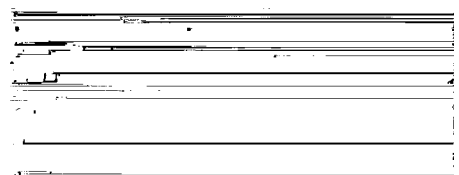
At one bar before figure E in the score the notes (minus the G) appear in a descending sequence:



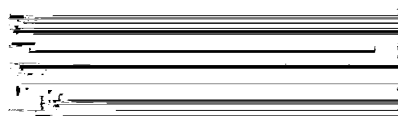
These versions of our first example recur throughout the first movement, which is hardly surprising, since the theme may well be termed the “first subject”. However, it must be noticed that the theme reappears in all three subsequent movements. At the very opening of the second movement, it is almost unchanged, the notes 1256 becoming 1265 :



The third movement opens with this, the violin solo quoted above (DCDG) becoming CDDG:



In the fourth movement, the following are found:



and:



These examples demonstrate that this small fragment of melody is being used to bind the whole work together. But in fact the whole work is conceived in this way. Consider this tune, the second of our four fragments, that first appears at letter D in the first movement. Note in particular the first five notes (134557 etc):



Skip ahead to the main tune of the last movement and it is clear that,

although rhythmically very different, the first five notes are identical (13445754341):



Again, look at this third theme that makes its first appearance three bars after letter E in the first movement (124521 etc):



Compare it with this which appears two bars after letter B in the second movement; once again the opening notes are the same (1242112454212):



Yet again, the flute figure that, as I said in my earlier piece, seems to appear in a rather inconsequential way in the third movement (four bars before letter C) is made of the same stuff, first using the sequence of notes in a downward direction, then returning to the pattern established in previous examples (5421245421 etc):



There is one further fragment that appears in all four movements; it is the one I noticed all those years ago – nearly fifty, I now realise. It is interesting that it appears, once only, I seem to remember, near the beginning of the last movement of the *London Symphony*. Its first appearance in the *Pastoral* is also seemingly casual, what I described before as a “Vaughan Williamsy cadence”:



There are echoes of it later in this sequence :



And again, one bar before the appearance of example above:



Similarly, two bars before letter F:



In the second movement, it behaves rather as it did on its very first appearance, as a cadence-cum-link between one section and the next:



What immediately follows is the famous passage for solo trumpet. The figure performs a similar function in introducing the horn's version of the trumpet's “Last Post”, which of course is combined with the opening motif of the second movement. When we get to the third movement, the

reappearance of this motif is truly startling:



It can be seen that this very fast passage starts with the immediately-quoted motif, followed by the downward version of the third fragment. Because the music is so fast and delicate at this point, it would be easy to miss the links, though Vaughan Williams accentuates them by playing the third fragment more slowly on the flute:



When we get to the final movement, the appearance is almost impossible not to spot. Again it is used as a link between the slow processional passage that follows the opening soprano solo and the more agitated section that follows; this time it is not used as a cadence but more as an introduction:



At the height of the agitated section, the third fragment reappears, leaving out the third note in the sequence when rising but including it when descending:



All of the above could be dismissed as dry analysis, but I like to think that it is more than that. It demonstrates that Vaughan Williams had developed his composing techniques during those seemingly unproductive war years between the second and third symphonies. Compared with the *London Symphony*, the *Pastoral* is a model of economy, particularly when we now have the inestimable benefit of being able to hear the original version of that wonderful second symphony. Wonderful it is, but no one would describe it as economic in its use of material. Indeed, over a period of twenty years, Vaughan Williams himself cut great swathes out of the work, one which he described as his favourite among his symphonies. This pruning was not because the work as it originally appeared was no good; Gustav Holst, remember, told Vaughan Williams immediately after the first performance, "You have really done it this time." And Stephen Connock added many years later, "And he had." No, the changes were made because Vaughan Williams' approach to the symphony had changed, and this is shown by the economy of means demonstrated in the *Pastoral Symphony*. This economical framework was continued, of course, in the Fourth, where the thematic links between movements are clear, if not downright obvious at times. Both works certainly contrast markedly with the great profusion of material that went into the *London Symphony*. Incidentally, I seem to remember Michael Kennedy remarking, in his first review of the now-famous Hickox recording of the original version of the *London*, that he wasn't sure whether Vaughan Williams was right in making his cuts and thinking the 1913 version was richer, almost Mahlerian in its ambition and compass. I wonder, given Vaughan Williams' change of tack as exemplified in the third and fourth symphonies, whether it explained his mischievous remark about Mahler being a tolerable imitation of a composer.

Anyway, I leave it to others to write about other aspects of the *Pastoral* – its Flanders, rather than Cotswold, associations; the influence of Debussy and Ravel; its memorial, rather than landscape, elements. I think it is worth remembering that the work also marks a new development in Vaughan Williams' symphonic output.

The Grandeur of Desolation: A ruminations on the Pastoral Symphony

by Rolf Jordan

We have a great walk to see the ruins of Mont St Eloi. Picked our way around the wide plain where the battle was, through the old farmyard as silent as a grave, the ruined church, the deep grove.
Thomas Franklin Townsend, *Ecoivres*, 1916

Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony* has intrigued and fascinated me ever since first hearing, on only the second-ever Vaughan Williams disc I bought, around fifteen years ago. The piece became increasingly visible on my disc rotor, and interest in both music and composer took hold: books, discs, concerts and pilgrimages have all followed. This article is an attempt at forming an opinion from its mysteries – it could have been much longer, but I have not included contemporary poetic parallels – such as Ivor Gurney's *Collected Poems* or Edmund Blunden's volume *The Shepherd* of 1922 which I can only urge readers to seek out. That will have to wait until another attempt, for the symphony is an ongoing passion.

A look at many liner notes while doing research has revealed very little but recycled information. Critics have been pilfering from one another when writing about this work from the very start, and this article is emphatically no exception – but my own excuse is that I am not a critic but a layman, not even a musician, and critics with integrity are people we must turn to for guidance. So I draw from several different sources in

an attempt to see clearly; in one case citing one writer who goes on to cite another. I make no apology for this, but as a concession have steered away from more obvious sources.

There is no need tiresomely to repeat the most well-known jibes directed at this symphony, most of them unfair to their originators. They can be found in any liner note. Vaughan Williams's own programme notes from the first performance in 1922 are fairly opaque, as was his practice, and it would be a squandering of space to lift sentences from Ursula Vaughan Williams' 1938 letter yet again. They too can be found in any liner note.

In the classical sense, the *Pastoral* may well be a 'romanticism of rural themes' to some listeners. It may seem to some to be an abstract spiritual landscape. Was Vaughan Williams commenting on the destruction of so much of the rural scene along the Western Front by citizens of the nation that produced the most famous *Pastoral Symphony* of all? Or is it merely a recollection of pleasant countryside? Some of this depends on how deeply a listener chooses to dig into the work's Great War connection. Vaughan Williams' military career started on the last day of 1914 when he left his house on Cheyne Walk in Chelsea and signed up as a Private in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He first joined his unit, the 2/4th London Field Ambulance, at Dorking in January 1915. The first eighteen months of Vaughan Williams' war were spent partly in billets, and partly

under canvas in various parts of southern England. During that time he did not neglect music, and helped form a choir and band. Instruments were paid for partly by canteen profits:

[The] choir was first formed at Saffron Walden, and we practiced at all available opportunities wherever we were, Bishop Stortford, Sutton Veny, etc. We took a box of music abroad with us, and that box gave us some very happy evenings. It went through France and Salonika with us. On rare occasions when enough of us could be got together we gave concerts. It was a sad loss when we left the music behind at Salonika.
C. R. Wellum (2/4 LFA)



Huts at Sutton Veny

Vaughan Williams was made a Wagon Orderly, which at the very least will have relieved his feet from the incessant marching the Field Ambulance had to endure between camps. When the unit was mobilised in June 1916, they were sent to replace a Highland Field Ambulance at Ecoivres, in the valley of the River Scarpe, in northern France.

The rather dismal looking village, though near the trenches, was strangely peaceful. A streamlet trickled lazily along the narrow valley in the direction of Arras...the valley lay snugly sheltered from hostile gunfire by the rising ground on which stood the village of Mont St. Eloi with its gaunt, battered tower.
'Chip' (2/4 LFA)

This sector had seen heavy fighting in 1915, the village cemetery at Ecoivres now being the final resting place of an unknown number of French soldiers (estimated at 1000 by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission). The newly arrived London Field Ambulance will have been fully aware of the tremendous bombardment on the Somme front in preparation for the massive attack planned on July 1st. The front line trenches they would assist were in a salient around the town of Neuville St Vaast, several miles from their base, the Main Dressing Station at Ecoivres. Medics and stretcher-bearers were immediately sent down communication trenches to Advanced Aid Posts in the town:

I shall never forget my first descent from the open fields into the long communication trench zigzagging ahead and behind, where one's view was bounded by a foot or two on either side and some dozen yards ahead, and where the strip of sky above, with its sense of space, became infinitely more dear to us than ever before.
C. Chitty (2/4 LFA)

It was their first experience of the trenches, and nothing in England had prepared them for conditions in the town:

Nothing stood more than 5 feet high and we lived in cellars and dug-outs. Owing to the heavy losses sustained by the French in holding the position, we were surrounded by buried bodies, and these were troublesome on damp sluggish nights.
'Chip'

From the Advanced Aid Posts, it was still a further journey to the Regimental Aid Posts which served the front line trenches. It could be an agonising twenty-minute journey on foot between these aid posts when burdened with a casualty. A light railway constructed by the French

joined parts of Neuville St Vaast – which had both safe and dangerous sides – and this helped ease the transport of casualties back to the Main Dressing Station. At the end of the town a communication trench rose gradually and finished on a 'good hard road'. Finally, motor ambulances driven by Vaughan Williams and his colleagues would come along this road to relieve stretcher-bearers for last half mile to the Main Dressing Station. This was always done by evening (in practice), as parts of this road were still under enemy observation.

This, then, became the 2/4th London Field Ambulance's routine during the late summer and autumn of 1916. They were another small but essential part of a vast machine operating along the Western Front.

Life proceeded steadily if somewhat placidly at Ecoivres, where there was an apparently endless round of 'fatigues'. If there was no whitewashing, there was always the horselines to be looked after. Nobody was allowed, without special permission, to go outside the Brigade area and the only solace for some time was to play 'house' at the local estaminet.
T. H. Lewis (2/4 LFA)

Harry Steggle, remembering his friend and colleague for the Royal College of Music Magazine, recalled Vaughan Williams at this time: 'The trenches held no terrors for him. On the contrary, he was thrilled one day when he was allowed a peep at the German front line trenches.' The landscape they will have seen was of course crawling with disembodied noise and hidden activity: British Engineers mining under German lines, Artillery firing directly overhead, entire units invisibly working somewhere below eye-level.

The far-off blue horizon melted into a misty golden sky, while the ruined tower of St Eloi, solitary and grand, crowned a nearer slope. All the foreground and the field as far as the eye could reach, were beautiful with flowering plants, poppies, marguerites, the yellow tansy and others far too numerous to specify, all of them invested with that daintiest of fairy raiment, the spider's delicate web, spangled and glittering now with diamonds of dew. After the drumming gun-fire of the night before, the sense of peace, the grandeur of desolation, and the beauty of triumphant Nature sank into my inmost being, exalting it in praise and prayer.
C. Chitty



Mont St. Eloi

Ninety years on, it is very easy to fall into the currently accepted view of that conflict through fiction and film: that combatants were routinely traumatised; that every artistic utterance had been a statement of protest. Ivor Gurney, for instance, who wrote his most enduring work during and immediately after the War, is portrayed as having been driven insane with shell-shock and gas: a more prosaic reading has it that an already unstable mind was tipped over when his heart was broken by a nurse. The famous portrait of Vaughan Williams in uniform at the time when the *Pastoral Symphony* was at its genesis is another example – is it quite as harrowing as it looks? Is it not just an uncommonly good photograph of his eyes, one that we feel lets us see into his very soul? Are they merely those of a tired man? The appearance shifts with every viewing of that

image, every fact we learn about his military service and character, and every hearing of any of his post-war works. The mood, the atmosphere, of such things, is founded on what we think we know of that time. That they are grand, sad, and beautiful, is without question – and more knowledge of the war cannot help but enrich it, for better or worse.

October 23, 1916

We have billet at Tineques and by ambulance go toward Arras. A wonderful road over a gently rolling country. At a cross roads we are unloaded and must march on wearing great coats and kit. Most uncomfortably warm. It seemed a long distance into the village of Ecoivres, where we rested in front of the Main Dressing Station. There is a delightful absence of shell holes and the stories of the [London Field] Ambulance promise a quiet time for us. No casualties in four months, only nine cases through one week.

This is an entry from the diary of Thomas Franklin Townsend, who belonged to the Canadian Field Ambulance unit that took over from the 2/4th London Field Ambulance in late October 1916. The Canadians had just left Albert, where they had treated the harrowing aftermath of gas attacks, which may explain the sense of relief in his entries. He continues:

We passed a large military cemetery which is rather disconcerting after our belief in the stories of few casualties. We come to a road where we must go in groups of four because it is under observation. It seems as if the road is not frequently used. Behind us the country is gently rolling, peasant farm houses, cultivated fields, woods and church spire. Before, a deserted weed covered land lined with the brown earth dug from the trenches. We enter a trench, wide, clean, floored with a trench mat, turnips sown in the parapet...Around curve after curve, on, on, without rest, until one feels it like something in a dream going on forever...After what seemed, by unprejudiced measurement, a couple of miles, we found ourselves at the advanced dressing station relieving an English Ambulance.

Tucker and I are left on duty here while others go on up to the four advanced aid posts and the two collecting posts. We are on duty at night. Nothing to do but sit around the brazier and read and talk.

October 24, 1916.

Sleep, read, write. We question if a war is going on in this part. Only a very few slightly wounded and sick. Our fellows come down from the Regimental Aid Post for rations but seldom else.

So once again, the London Field Ambulance was on the move, heading for transport to Salonika, after four months on duty:

Gradually as hamlet after hamlet was left behind, the old march-rhythm returned and with it a sense of escape from the grip of the trenches. Yet, curiously enough, although the first day's march was not a long one and the sleeping billets comfortable, sleep would not come for hours that evening. The uncanny calm of the countryside was in its way, most disturbing.

T. H. Lewis

The unit will have treated hundreds of men in their time in France, the vast majority of them actually fellow Londoners, men from several small regiments collectively known as the London Regiment. 150 of these were buried in the cemetery at Ecoivres while Vaughan Williams' unit was there. Other casualties comprised mainly of men from the Royal Field Artillery and the Royal Engineers. The London Field Ambulance's most concentrated work had been during late July and early August, when at its height as many as ten burials had been made in one day. Townsend's diary entry above should perhaps be taken to mean 'no *Field Ambulance* casualties in four months', and 'only nine cases through one week' may well have been true of the week prior to his arrival, which had seen a 'mere' five burials at Ecoivres, a low average for the months of September and October. The diary vividly concurs with those valuable records that the London Field Ambulance have left us:

The scene will remain clear in my memory, this Neuville St Vaast. The trenches ruined everywhere, around the cellar walls of houses and down

through the cobblestones of the street. The houses are smashed almost to the last fragment, the great number of French soldiers graves' with the steel helmet lying above and the wreath of flowers made from buds, the dead and shell torn trees. It seems a solitude equalled only by mountaintops, of the desert's centre, yet streams of life pass back and forth supporting the firing line. Rations and supplies each night, regiment relieving regiment, dispatched runners. Smoke rises in thin lines here and there from cellars where men live. A regiment is quartered here somewhere in reserve, a bath, a Y.M. yet at most you can see but two khaki clad figures moving quickly and silently along. At dusk the muffled sound of a gasoline engine drawing cars of supplies along the track or the tramp of the mule trains pulling cars on the same line. The evenings are spent writing, reading and studying. Our beds are the stretchers.



Neuville St. Vaast

But this apparently quiet sector would be transformed into Hell in the coming months, for the new unit was now in place for the Battle of Arras. The cemetery at Ecoivres would be swelled by over 1700 new graves, of Canadians, killed on Vimy Ridge. Thomas Townsend, who fortunately survived the war, became a minister.

The war in Salonika proved rather less challenging to the London Field Ambulance. Despite the extremes of weather and much wearing physical activity, life became 'isolated and humdrum' and there was rarely much more stimulation for Vaughan Williams than puddle-levelling and latrine duty. When the unit moved to Egypt in June 1917, Vaughan Williams was on his way back to England to train as an officer. On his return to France, in March 1918, it was as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery. The 60-pounder guns used by the Royal Garrison Artillery (a factor in his later deafness) required twelve horses to move them, and Vaughan Williams was put in charge of 200 of those hard-working animals, the most overlooked creatures that suffered on the Western Front.

Between the Armistice in November and demobilisation in February 1919, Vaughan Williams' passage back to civilian – and musical – life will have been eased somewhat by his return to organising musical activity for the troops. But once the continually unsettled lifestyle with its incessant routine and movement was over, he must, like so many other ex-military personnel have found adjustment to relative freedom a trial.

On his return to England he moved directly to Sheringham to be with his wife Adeline, who had taken furnished rooms to care for her invalid brother, Hervey. Sheringham, seen no doubt as a good 'seaside cure' town favoured at the time, was a small fishing community on the Norfolk coast surrounded by lowland fens and attractive hills and woods. It will have seemed unimaginably quiet after France – one wonders whether Adeline was thinking of peace for her husband too. Vaughan Williams, gradually returning to musical normality, took on teaching at the Royal College of Music in the autumn of 1919, though the couple of days a week spent in London every week involved a return journey of over 200 miles back to Norfolk. Hervey died in May 1921, and it was to Vaughan Williams' 'utmost relief' that he was finally able to return permanently to Cheyne Walk. This, then, was the first true stability in his life since the end of

1914. Over six years' worth of exhaustion, boredom, loss, and frustration is the background to the *Pastoral Symphony*, which Vaughan Williams finished in June 1921.

'Suggestive of a man thrown back on his innermost resources' is one classic description of the symphony. It was written by Hugh Ottaway in 1972. The same writer had said twenty years earlier that 'in seeking to evoke spaciousness – the timeless landscape – the composer has failed to make the *Pastoral* musically spacious'. Had he revised this observation after it was generally accepted as a 'war symphony'? The critical shift from misunderstood nature-evocation has been slow, critics expecting, but not getting, an inland *La Mer* from the composer of *Bredon Hill* and the *London Symphony*. Michael Kennedy wrote in 1964 that even 'sympathetic commentators...have given the impression, unwittingly, that it is a dull, grey, uneventful work, thirty-five minutes of dreamy rhapsodising on folk song.' Neville Cardus described it as 'a monochrome in music' – if not an impressionist masterpiece, but certainly an underpainting of distinction to many an early critic.

But there is a kind of impressionism that even a layman can detect. The weaving nature of the themes in the first movement, and other 'tributary' themes tend to suggest a slow-water landscape – the gentle hills and brooks critics most often describe. The anonymous writer of the liner notes for the first recording of the *Pastoral* likened the effect to a small West Country river. Donald Tovey said in *Essays in Musical Analysis* that 'two or even three melodic threads may run simultaneously, each loaded with its own chord, utterly regardless of how their chords collide.' This 'pure' description could have been written with a water analogy in mind: the strongest images are in the structure.

Frank Howes went one step further in search of a locality by saying 'the absence of mortar between the main stones of which the [first] movement is built suggests the dry-walling of the Cotswolds'. Herbert Howells, one of the earliest positive commentators, found themes with the undemonstrative lines of 'the Malvern hills when seen from afar'. But Howes is right to see a certain spareness of texture, for as Howells notes about the first movement '[one is carried] through a short section where the weaving of the theme with itself by one solo instrument after another seems gradually to dismiss the orchestral thought and substitute chamber-music.' Melisma adds a natural shimmer to this transparency. Hubert Foss recognised that in this work: "Melisma abounds, both in the form of figuration in accompaniment and in the veiling of subsidiary melodic phrases, and also in frequent recitative passages for solo instruments, which find their final development in the long solo passages for single soprano voice that envelop the last movement."

The repeated use of melisma strongly suggests devotional music, or, at least a certain mysticism. Compare, for instance, the very opening of the symphony to the opening of the *Sanctus* in the *Mass in G Minor*, written at the same time. It is important to be aware of this mystical opening passage, which instantly suggests active contemplation, an immediate entry into the avowedly contemplative nature of the work. This oscillating pattern soon dissolves into softer contours, an effect not unlike that of looking out of a window into a new landscape. But quickly, this pictorial element is smoothed away too, and pure music dominates – the monochrome effect Cardus described. For such gentle music, it is an uncompromising move.

The second movement opens onto a wider scene, but stays resolutely intimate in feeling too. It is a remarkably still piece, though initially lacking the depth of field of, say, *The Lark Ascending*. Pictorial depth is reserved for the trumpet solo, mostly unmeasured (like the voice in the finale) and described by Vaughan Williams as a 'fanfare-like passage'. Is this *really* a fanfare? One suspects Vaughan Williams was putting his first audience off the scent. The *Last Post*, which it clearly resembles, is hardly a fanfare. It should be clear to any listener, however, that the end of a soldier's day is at hand. Howes thought the practising bugler (eventually admitted to be the inspiration) was recorded at Bordon Camp in Hampshire (thus in 1917). Kennedy tells us it is Salisbury Plain, but also suggests Ecoivres, and Ursula Vaughan Williams suggests Ecoivres. One imagines Vaughan Williams, in a moment of intense inspiration, taking his musical notebook and pencil out, just like he did at a Greek

café in Salonika in front of Harry Steggles. However, if Vaughan Williams had wanted the *Last Post*, he would have used it. Now demilitarised, it now becomes a universal call, answered by a cry from the orchestra.

The third movement, with its 'friendly' tunes 'seems to me to come much nearer than the rest of the work to being on speaking terms with ordinary man', declared Howells. The marking is *moderato pesante* – though *pesante* has nothing to do with peasants, simply meaning 'heavy'. A superficial internet search for composers using this combination of markings finds a few clearly weighty parallels: in the opening of Ervin Schulhoff's 'jazz oratorio' *HMS Royal Oak*, and the *Storming of Kazan* in Prokofiev's *Ivan the Terrible*. *Bydlo*, depicting oxen, in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is directed *sempre moderato, pesante*, practically the same thing. It is no great stretch of the imagination to change Mussorgsky's oxen to horses. Sir Arthur Bliss (in a radio talk I am unable to date) said that Vaughan Williams' music had 'much of the strong, slow rhythm of nature', which again draws me to abstract thoughts of horses. Vaughan Williams wrote that this movement had 'the nature of a slow dance', a comment which unfortunately drew much criticism. Marion Scott used either insider knowledge or intuition to mute the dance suggestion in her review of the first performance: "This [movement] has been a good deal commented on, some critics objecting that it is too heavy for a dance, others urging its claims as the most attractive movement of the symphony. When its affinity with East Anglian folk song is recognised, both points of view are explicable. East Anglia is a pastoral country, it is true, but it also has a seaboard, bare and stern, and half its inhabitants are seafaring folk."

Michael Kennedy has revealed that 'Some of the material was sketched before 1914 when Vaughan Williams was music director at Stratford-upon-Avon and was contemplating a setting of Falstaff and the fairies in the Windsor Forest scene of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.' It seems difficult to accept the protagonists as fairies (or Falstaff) in this symphony though. Animals large and small, maybe; because not even the gossamer textures of the fast end section really suggest the supernatural. One certainty is that these creatures are absolutely not 'merrymaking peasants'.

The widest panorama of the entire work is heard in the fourth movement. Ursula Vaughan Williams called the solo voice 'that essence of summer where a girl passes singing', which immediately brings Wordsworth's solitary reaper to mind:

*Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again!*

*Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;
I listened till I had my fill:
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.*

This wordless voice so easily could have been a folksong, but it clearly is not. It leads into a slow moving tune, which, as Howells tells us, is succeeded 'with some abruptness, by an episode agitated in feeling. [The vocal theme becomes] more and more urgently insisted upon, lifting itself on the whole body of strings and the higher wood-wind to a great pitch of intensity.' Kennedy sees a resemblance to Butterworth's *Shropshire Lad Rhapsody* and finally, the vocal theme is 'declaimed in unison in a *fortissimo* outburst to which the whole work, we can now realise, has been leading.' When the solo voice returns it is still expressing itself without song, in what I can only describe as a radiant

depiction of a feeling that paradoxically remains secret.

Though suggested in the score, I am not aware of any performance where the usual soprano has been performed by a tenor; but am intrigued to know how that would sound, potentially altering the emotional feel of the entire work. Howes said that 'in practice it is never so sung', but why *not* a male voice? Perhaps an enterprising record company may be enlightened enough to issue an 'alternative' track for listeners to try.

The 'sympathetic commentators' who failed to assist the reputation of Vaughan Williams' symphony quite possibly include his fellow composers. For no sooner had the *Pastoral* appeared than homages to his work were being written. Herbert Howells's extended orchestral piece, the *Pastoral Rhapsody* of 1923, sounds distinctly as if he was using Vaughan Williams' new language as a way to express his own nature-mysticism. Rather blithely he incorporated a section of his own work into the *Rhapsody* that actually pre-dates the symphony. Taken from his student suite *The B's* (a depiction of his friends at the Royal College of Music, including Bliss and Gurney), it's as if a figure is dropped into the landscape, that of himself: the tune is from his own section of the suite.

The *Pastoral Rhapsody* may have inspired a work in turn. E.J. Moeran, already producing rhapsodies of his own, probably heard Howells' piece performed at Bournemouth in 1924, and set down his earliest draft of the folk song work *Lonely Waters*. Though the piece was not unveiled until the early 30s, Howells' piece was by then otherwise forgotten (and withdrawn by the composer). But the connection with Vaughan Williams' symphony is more overt than a simple resemblance to Howells' piece, for *Lonely Waters* opens with the same oscillating figure as the *Pastoral* – though on strings instead of woodwind. Moeran will undoubtedly have been aware of the Norfolk associations in the *Pastoral*, and will naturally have identified with them, for he grew up at Bacton, less than fifteen miles along the coast from Sheringham. Moeran was known to have revered the *Pastoral Symphony*, and *Lonely Waters* is dedicated to its composer.

Howells' second extended essay in nature mysticism resembles the *Pastoral* even more than his first – almost outrageously so. But this piece, the *Paradise Rondel* of 1925, is as much like his own *Rhapsody* (presumably the reason why the earlier work was withdrawn) with a sunnier *Pastoral Symphony* growing through it. Howells added a piano to the texture, and with it a more overt impressionism – could it be that Howells was revelling his own brilliant technique by making Vaughan Williams' soft-edged vision glitter? Once again, Howells utilises his own self-portrait lifted from *The B's*, considerably less disguised, like the symphony references. *Paradise Rondel* is the most full-on landscape canvas of all – this particular Paradise actually being a tiny hamlet near Painswick in both composers' native Gloucestershire.

Another early imitator was Gerald Finzi. Though Moeran and Howells would impress their own personalities on what they had learned from Vaughan Williams, the young Finzi, in his thoughtful way, would perhaps come closest of all to realising a vision of the *Pastoral* in its more modern 'meaning'. Both his *A Severn Rhapsody* of 1923, and related *Requiem da Camera*, written in 1924, for baritone, chorus and orchestra, not only resemble the *Pastoral* in certain textures, but relate distinctly to the War. The *Requiem* (unperformed until long after Finzi's death) sets Masfield, Gibson and Hardy, but also quotes the *Last Post* (as the *Requiem* is dedicated to Ernest Farrar, Finzi's teacher killed in the War). Additionally, both the *Severn Rhapsody* and *Requiem* quote Butterworth's *Loveliest of trees*. It must be noted that a lovely setting of

Edward Thomas's *Tall Nettles* that Finzi made predates the symphony – but Christian Alexander's recent orchestration of the song as part of the *In Years Defaced* cycle is indebted to it.

The above well-known composers' works are surely just a small example of the influence of the *Pastoral Symphony*, which will nevertheless have served to put the symphony at the top of a garland of supposedly bucolic 'nature works' which gathered dust during the grip of the late atonal period. We owe several small record labels a huge debt of gratitude for their rehabilitation.

There are two ways to approach this work, both equally enriching. In Hubert Foss's words: 'There is no "meaning" save in the music, which is logical and not impressionistic.' '[Vaughan Williams] uses no symbols, calls up no memories by audible reference to known objects, paints us no picture of his or others' delight in the events of the season or the occurrences of climate.' Yet Michael Kennedy's more pictorial description of the first movement is equally true: 'there is a free evolution of one tune from another, a process of regeneration, like streams flowing into each other, coalescing and going on their way. A few pages later he describes the same movement in physical terms as 'like the cloud-shadows moving over a summer landscape'.

It is this clarity of structures based on natural form – things flowing unchecked into one another – that I feel is the true 'meaning' of the title *Pastoral*. 'Organic' may have saved a lot of critics a lot of trouble. Yet we must still find in it the *genius loci* of the time it was written; some elements make that inescapable. But ultimately, it must be understood that it was intended to resemble Beethoven more than Debussy.

A tragic spirit, an indescribable sense of ruin, too sad for words, pervades the scene and broods upon the land, stamping all things with the ruthless seal of War. And yet, in this reversion to the primitive, there is romance.

C. Chitty

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With thanks to Pam Blevins, Tom Hutchinson, and Philip Lancaster.

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Crossword Solutions:
Across: 1. Blackmores, 5. NT, 6. ETA, 7. SKY, 8. Dyall, 9. King, 10. Trio, 11. NZ, 12. Ho, 13. Tend, 14. Dale, 15. Seeds, 16. Orb, 17. Hat, 19. Ag, 20. Sine Nominis.
Down: 1. Basket of Eggs, 2. Cat, 3. Woodgate, 4. England, Artist, 9. Roadside, 18. Arm.

A Clutch of “Favourite” *Pastorals*

The paradox of Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral Symphony* (Symphony no. 3, 1922) is that it is not “pastoral” at all, at least in the sense of frisking lambskins. Neither is it at all close to Beethoven's “Pastorale” Symphony: no farmers dancing after a thundershower for Vaughan Williams. Conceived in the killing fields of the First World War, Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral Symphony* has a hard core of darkness that is only partially belied by the rich beauty of its surface.

And what a technique Vaughan Williams had amassed by the time he composed the *Pastoral Symphony*! Much nonsense, often from people who should know better, has been written about Vaughan Williams' supposed lack of technical acumen - let them try to write a symphony of such daring and originality. A mixture of lapidary orchestration, learnt by Vaughan Williams from Ravel, and thematic interrelationships worthy of Beethoven, this symphony is utterly *sui generis*.

And yet, this universal work – perhaps as relevant a requiem for all dead soldiers now, in the midst of yet another insane and unnecessary war created by bumbling politicians, as it was at its premiere in 1922 – is essentially and deeply English. Not in that it musically limns an English landscape, for we know from Ursula Vaughan Williams that the symphony was conceived in the trenches of northern France. No, the spiritual heritage of England traced by Peter Ackroyd in his book *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* is pertinent to this great work. For here intense poignancy lies beneath a substratum of restraint; a thorough assimilation of Continental models is welded into an inimitable design; and, finally, an essential connection is made to the songs and dances that made up the now vanished folk life of England.



Sir Roger Norrington

It is this point that brings me to my ostensible topic, which is that of selecting my favorite performance of Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral Symphony* on compact disc. Although I own wonderful performances of this work by Previn, Hickox and others, my preferred recording is that of Sir Roger Norrington conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra on Decca. (I must add, in the spirit of “full disclosure” that I wrote the liner notes for this disc. Sadly, this recording was part of a projected complete traversal of the Vaughan Williams symphonies by Norrington that was unaccountably abandoned by Decca.) In this recording, which is coupled with a radiant performance of the Fifth Symphony, Norrington's antiquarianism – also a particularly English trait – assumes interpretive importance. His keen knowledge of the dances of the Tudor period infuses Vaughan Williams' symphony with an inexorable forward momentum. Under Norrington's baton the great “sarabande” theme of the finale, for example, sounds like a real dance rather than just a symphonic summing up, and moves with a tragic grace that recalls the concluding sarabande of Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*. Ravel's sarabande sings of the melancholy innocence of childhood, however; Vaughan Williams' sarabande is an elegy for English dead: innocence has long fallen away into an eradicable sadness. Norrington understands the import of this great symphony, and the intensity of expression that he elicits from the orchestra is, at times, almost unbearable.

Byron Adams,
UC Riverside, USA

The performance I would choose as my favourite *Pastoral Symphony* is the one recorded by Boult for Decca in 1953, which for me conveys the elegiac nature of the work like no other version. It is after all effectively a Requiem for the fallen, inspired as it was by Vaughan Williams' war service in France. This is possibly because it is conducted by someone who both knew Vaughan Williams and would have heard him conduct the work and no doubt discussed its performance with him, but possibly also because, being himself of the generation that fought in the First World War, he would also have lost friends and colleagues as did Vaughan Williams himself.

For me, Boult, while perhaps not as overtly passionate as some other interpreters, is closer to the spirit of the work, with its pastoral title and apparent pastoral style in fact masking a deep unease lying at the heart of the work.

The soprano soloist, Margaret Ritchie sounds suitably remote, helped probably by the age of the recording, though the sound overall, while obviously lacking the clarity of later versions, is nevertheless sufficiently good to allow this one to be thoroughly enjoyed.

A further reason for choosing this reading is that I heard Boult perform the work in the Royal Festival Hall in the early 1970s. He was well into his 80s and no longer able to stand to conduct, but I marvelled at the beauty of the playing that this most self-effacing and undemonstrative of men could elicit. Having also seen him conduct a blazing and noble performance of Elgar's *First* at a Promenade concert in 1976, virtually his last public performance, I also cherish his subsequent EMI recording.

I have owned 3 different issues of the same recording, having bought my first around 1970, and now listen to the Belart reissue on cassette, coupled as were the Ace of Clubs and electronically produced stereo version on Eclipse, with a serene version of the 5th symphony. I consider the Decca cycle, plus the Everest 9th to be generally more successful than the newer stereo EMI cycle, where some of the performances lack Boult's earlier fire.

Nigel Blore,
Essex, UK



A Younger Sir Adrian

Since the recording of the *Pastoral Symphony* by Andre Previn with the London Symphony Orchestra, conductors have largely followed what might be termed his broad approach to the piece. The merits of this type of interpretation are multitudinous and, for many, Previn's account remains definitive. One of the few unfortunate side effects of this, however, is the overlooking of the truly remarkable recording made by Sir Adrian Boult with the New Philharmonia in 1968, a performance which remains perhaps the finest example of clarity, spontaneity, and the seamless interweaving of diverse elements.

In our post-Previn world, Sir Adrian's tempi might seem a bit crisp, but

the receptive listener will find this only highlights what might be called Boult's "active" rather than "passive" contemplation. From the outset, Boult reveals Vaughan Williams' genius for portraying what George Herbert called "heaven in ordinary." The tempo is not monumental, nor does it seem to be a harbinger of the mystery immediately to follow; instead Boult allows us to come across it, as though by our own discovery, with the rising entrance of the harps and basses. This entrance of harps and basses is perhaps the most important of the piece, as it frames the beautiful mystery of the first movement, returning again as the final unresolved, yet rising, question. In no other recording is it so poignantly and clearly delivered. Within just seconds of the opening bars, then, we have entered a field of rising mystery. The rest of the symphony follows suit: the orchestra so uncannily responsive that it seems the music is being assented to or thought rather than played. As a former orchestral musician myself, this is one of the great joys of the recording. It is a very special moment when one hears an orchestra entirely at rest – the spiritual stillness of the music blossoming, seemingly of its own accord, and moving seamlessly to its conclusion.

One of the hallmarks of Sir Adrian's style as a conductor was his meticulous attention to getting "the swing" of the music, as he put it. From this attention comes the uniquely spontaneous feeling one gets from this performance; as though it is being created again, on the spot, each time one listens to it. Nowhere, save perhaps in his monumental recording of the *Pilgrim*, is this more perfectly executed than in his 1968 recording of the *Pastoral*. The effect becomes analogous to seeing the wind across an open field – no two blades of grass, flowers or branches move in the exactly the same manner; each has its own roots, its particular manifestation of natural strength, its own tendencies. So it seems musically with Boult's *Pastoral* – each of the musical ideas has its own root, its own characteristics in the breeze of Vaughan Williams' inspiration, and yet through this diversity of expression, like the wind rippling across a field, all elements are brought into a natural unity.

Eric Seddon,
Cleveland, Ohio, USA



Kees Bakels

One version of the Pastoral Symphony that I keep coming back to is Kees Bakels on Naxos. Recorded in 1992, the orchestra is the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and they do an excellent job. I simply adore the radiant, luminous, sheer sound that Bakels creates.

His first movement *Molto Moderato* is slower than most, taking 11:10 as opposed to Norrington's 9:21, Hickox's 10:42, Boult's 9:45 in '68 and 9:33 in '52, for example. But although he unashamedly wallows in the glorious orchestral sounds, I love this relaxed, gentle unfolding of the music, and a bit of indulgence doesn't seem to detract at all. In fact, despite taking his time, Bakels never once lets the tension drop, and there is always a wonderful contrast between the searingly tender gentler moments and the overwhelming, fiercely powerful climaxes. Bakels' soloists are good – we get a lovely tone from the solo violin (Brendan O'Brien) in the first movement, although the horn opening of the second movement could be a little more haunting. The *Lento Moderato* is otherwise excellent, with atmospherically spacious pauses, and Bakels

captures the sense of foreboding and unease brilliantly. Yearning and nostalgia pervade this second movement, with wonderful, typically-Vaughan Williams keening sounds from the woodwind and strings. The third movement *Moderato pesante* is suitably astringent – quite harsh and stern, and compellingly driven. The inclusion of Patricia Rozario as soloist in the final movement is one of the reasons for my choice of this recording over others. Her strong and robust voice is completely uncompromising here – bleak and chilling, unlike the sweeter, prettier voices on other recordings (such as Evans on Hickox's Chandos recording), whilst still managing to be beautiful and slightly unearthly. I feel that this stark austerity suits the music superbly. Overall, there is a sublime sense of beauty throughout this supple, fluid recording. A fine performance.

Em Marshall,
London, UK



André Previn

André Previn's 1972 version of *A Pastoral Symphony* with the London Symphony Orchestra is the one I return to as my favourite recording of this reflective masterpiece. At the time he was a relatively unknown American conductor who quickly established a unique relationship with the LSO and made many exciting and acclaimed recordings, particularly of British music. The fact that his pioneering RCA cycle of the nine symphonies (recorded 1968-72) remains in the catalogue today speaks for itself. I believe the *Pastoral* to be one of the greatest recordings they ever made together.

What makes this recording special for me is Previn's incredible insight into a score he must have been new to (only Boult had previously recorded it.) There is a wonderful clarity allowing every detail to be heard. The LSO were clearly on top form with important woodwind contributions from players of the calibre of William Bennett (flute), Gervase de Peyer (clarinet) as well as Ossian Ellis on harp. The opening movement has a wonderfully luminescent feel, the flow and interweaving of themes (Vaughan Williams' *Scene by the brook?*) is superbly realised.

The slow movement is haunting and dark with the famous "bugle calls" not too distantly placed. Previn relaxes the mood in the *scherzo*, where the playing is very delicate. The finale though very tense at times does give eventual resolution to the grief that is inherent in this "requiem" for the Great War, the LSO strings magnificent in the great climaxes. Heather Harper's wordless soprano fades the symphony out to perfection. The digitally re-mastered sound is very good given the original recording date. The symphony can be bought as either a single CD (coupled with No.4) or with the recently re-issued box set of the full cycle, both at budget price on RCA Red Seal.

Not long after the release of this symphony on LP, I heard Previn conduct it with the LSO at the Royal Festival Hall. It was a magical and unforgettable performance, and interestingly, the clarinetist Jack Brymer substituted for the absent soprano soloist (a move sanctioned by the composer in the score.)

Robin Barber,
Somerset, UK

BEYOND WISHFUL THINKING

A re-evaluation of Vaughan Williams and Religion by Eric Seddon

We had the experience but missed the meaning. T. S. Eliot

I remember once sitting in a graduate seminar, listening to student presentations on twentieth-century composers, when a very bright student got up and delivered a thirty-minute presentation on the *Fourth Symphony* of Charles Ives. He went into great detail, but the detail was not exclusively about Ives, nor was it primarily about the piece in question. It was primarily about himself: his experience of the piece, his path toward understanding the complex musical material in front of him and, ultimately, his own philosophical and spiritual understanding of life, of which he more or less used the piece as a proof. By the end of the presentation, the other students had certainly learned about Charles Ives and his music, but if they were listening carefully, they learned even more about their classmate.

Regardless of whether or not such a presentation is of value in a purely musicological sense, it is important to note that this method of analysis is no mere student phenomenon. It is in fact a practical rule, albeit tacit, of musicology itself. Most scholars tend to make a strong pretense to objectivity, but a careful reading of standard musical biographies, general histories of music, and articles will demonstrate that the history of music is often used as an ideological battleground, fraught with the agenda of whatever scholar is at hand, rather than as a true discovery of the musician in question, thoughtfully and carefully placed in his or her own day and age. Thus we have a conflicting and even contradictory history of scholarship on any given composer or subject. For example, if we read enough we can learn of the Marxist Beethoven, the Fascist Beethoven, the Freudian Beethoven, or the Feminist deconstruction of Beethoven. Each of them will claim to give us the “true” Beethoven, or at least purport to have placed him properly for the first time. But in each we will also note that some quotations of the composer will have been exaggerated, others will have been suppressed; some important pieces will have been ignored; other, less significant pieces will have been suddenly discovered for the unheralded masterpieces they truly are. To anyone critically following the bias of the scholar, it will become obvious that in many such cases Beethoven is used less as a subject for study than as an object—even to the point of becoming a pawn in what is often a distinctly non-musical game.

All great composers have been subjected, over and again, to this sort of analysis. These days it can seem as though it is the only analysis that is ever done. But despite all of this, the majority opinion of scholars comes to something like a general agreement on a reasonable position: Reasonable scholars do not regard Bach as a covert atheist, nor Beethoven as a proto-Marxist, though both claims have been made. Likewise a reasonable consensus exists for most of the major composers in the Classical Canon.

Ralph Vaughan Williams, however, is an exception. He is not considered by the majority of scholars to have been one of the most important composers of his era. Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ravel, even Shostakovich and Prokofiev tend to overshadow him in general survey texts. Remembered as a primary factor in the English Musical Renaissance of the early twentieth century, he is studied closely only by a handful of scholars, and all too often relegated to a “second tier” of “nationalist” composers (most of whom are considered, rightly or wrongly, to be derivatives of the “greater” composers). Thus Vaughan Williams hasn’t been as hotly debated; fewer ideologues have tried to claim him as their own; fewer hostile scholars have tried to deconstruct him and his work. In one sense this can be good: in so being considered, his life and music

have avoided a variety of misreadings. But in another way, this can be very bad, and stunt our understanding of his artistic achievement, particularly if all of the small circle of Vaughan Williams scholars hold one narrow ideology, or reductive outlook, unanimously. Imagining this happening to Beethoven demonstrates how detrimental it might be: if all of the major scholars agreed that he was a proto-Marxist, and every quotation of the great composer running counter to this hypothesis was overlooked, others exaggerated, our deeper understanding of his music would suffer. What would happen to interpretation of the *Missa Solemnis*? Likewise if Bach criticism was to be dominated by scholars without sufficient background in Christian thought, our understanding of his artistic achievement would be hindered, if not maimed irreparably. And yet this, without exaggerating matters, is analogous to the situation confronting the person who would seek to understand and appreciate the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Since the time of his death, there has been one scholarly opinion regarding the religious beliefs of Ralph Vaughan Williams: it is taken for granted that he was an atheist as a young man, and that he later drifted into agnosticism defined in a narrow and reductive sense, which he held for the rest of his life. Every other opinion, be it Hubert Foss’s flirtation with the word “pantheism” or Byron Adams’ suggestion that Vaughan Williams used scripture in non-Christian ways, is merely a variation or development on this assumed theme. Over the last half century, the most frequently cited quotations on the subject have become so officially canonized and engrained that no one, to date, has gone back to look at the strength of the quotes themselves. What was their actual context? Who was the source? Are they being presented in a biased manner, or do they come from a biased source? What was Vaughan Williams actually referring to when he made them? None of these questions have been asked, nor has it been pointed out that the reductive view of Vaughan Williams’ supposed atheism and agnosticism has been hung, for over four decades, on the strength (or weakness) of only a handful of these quotes.

More interesting than this, however, are the quotations ignored which seem to weaken (or in some cases contradict) the prevalent theory of Vaughan Williams’ beliefs. Finally, the pieces themselves speak very strongly, and only when we are willing to question the assumptions of the major scholars are we able to uncover the true depths of pieces such as the *Five Mystical Songs*, *Sancta Civitas*, the *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The remedy is not so simple as illuminating the depths of pieces, however, as a great deal of dogma has been written about the religious beliefs of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Scholars seemingly without enough knowledge of Christianity, Church history, theology and mysticism have made pronouncements on the subject, buttressing a narrow understanding of Vaughan Williams’ beliefs with a great deal of misinformation, false assumption, and in some cases, misreadings even of the quotes they have thought supported their conclusions. It will therefore take a great deal of unraveling before the situation can be remedied.

Vaughan Williams the atheist?

In his brief overview of the generally prevalent attitudes towards Vaughan Williams’ beliefs, John Barr sensibly opts for a chronological exposition, documenting the major opinions held by scholars at each stage of the composer’s life.¹

Beginning, then, with Vaughan Williams' childhood, Barr points out that he was the son of an Anglican clergyman who died while Ralph was little more than an infant. Significantly, he also mentions that his mother, Margaret Vaughan Williams, was a Christian with "strict evangelical leanings," though he couldn't remember exactly where he had read this. It is no surprise that it was difficult to locate the exact source for the quote, as it is not to be found in any of the primary materials a Vaughan Williams scholar might immediately reference for childhood material. Rather, the description of Vaughan Williams' mother as a "strict Christian" comes from Byron Adams' article, "Scripture, Church and culture: biblical texts in the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams" published in 1996.²

In our current cultural climate, particularly if one is an American, to call someone a strict Christian with evangelical leanings is hardly neutral. It implies many things, not the least of which is the term "fundamentalist," with all of its historical and cultural baggage. Adams could have chosen the word "devout," of course, but he didn't. As it is, Margaret Vaughan Williams' religious beliefs are shown in what certainly appears to be a negative light. Moreover, the implication that Vaughan Williams' mother was "strict" at all in matters of religion (that she was a rigid enforcer of doctrine or ideas, or a literal interpreter of scripture) seems unfounded. This can be demonstrated by the reply she made to her son when he asked her opinion on the controversy surrounding *The Origin of Species*, his great-uncle's celebrated book:

*The Bible says that God made the world in six days, Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer: but we needn't worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way.*³

This is not the opinion of a woman who was "strict" about her beliefs, intellectually, in any pejorative sense. In fact, it seems to have been drawn from *The Origin of Species* itself, where we read:

*I see no good reason why the views expressed in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any...A celebrated author and divine has written to me that "he has gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe he required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the action of His laws."*⁴

The evidence would therefore suggest that Margaret Vaughan Williams was open-minded on such issues (as are many Christians); one who left room in her faith for intellectual inquiry and debate. Likewise, it seems bizarre that a "strict Christian" would have exposed her son to the radical opinions of his childhood nurse, Sarah Wager, which Ursula Vaughan Williams said were, anyhow, also the opinion of the family.⁵

We are left, then, with a different portrait of Vaughan Williams' family life. What emerges are liberal Anglicans, politically and doctrinally, including the person of his mother. It was probably within this family structure that his allegorical understanding of scripture (discussed later) was first nurtured.

This brief clarification concerning Margaret Vaughan Williams aside, the first mention of an atheistic phase in Vaughan Williams' life usually begins with a discussion of his time at Rottingdean, where he encountered a boy whose atheistic opinions had impressed him. Yet also at Rottingdean, Vaughan Williams had, in his words, a "remarkable undermaster." His memories of this undermaster are of interest to the present discussion, for the composer later said, "I remember once his explaining the philosophy of the thirteenth chapter of *1 Corinthians*. I wish we had had more of him, for this was, of course, all off the record."⁶

These two anecdotes provide a good example of how scholars over the last four decades have presented the development of Vaughan Williams' religious beliefs. The former example (of the atheist boy) is the one frequently cited, while the latter (which actually appears first in Ursula Vaughan Williams' book) is never referenced. Yet the incident is important, as the text which the undermaster elucidated to Vaughan Williams, leaving him wanting more, was a chapter from St Paul's First

Letter to the Corinthians – a fact which would be directly pertinent to any discussion of Vaughan Williams and religion.

There are many other reasons why this is important. First, it belies the common assertion that Vaughan Williams' only attraction to the Bible was literary: that somehow, he was enraptured by the prose of the Authorized Version, while remaining unaffected by the underlying meaning of the text. On the contrary, by this quote we know that Vaughan Williams from a young age was interested in the meaning of scripture. This will become more and more apparent when we consider his mature musical works, such as the *Dona Nobis Pacem*, but it also has implications for his translations of the Bach Passions.

Second, the text itself is important. Vaughan Williams remembered the very book and chapter. Frequently read at weddings, the text is as follows:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

I have quoted here from the Authorized Version that Vaughan Williams is known to have loved. It is tempting to speculate as to what the undermaster said concerning the passage. Was he also using the Authorized Version? And if so, was he elucidating the term "charity", now usually translated as "love"? What was it that so impressed Vaughan Williams that he remembered the experience half a century later? Was it here that he first came into intellectual (rather than merely cultural) contact with the writings of St Paul (one who he was to quote and paraphrase many times throughout his life)? Was it here, in fact, that he fell in love with scripture? Perhaps more importantly than these questions, however, is that here Vaughan Williams might have been exposed to the philosophy he was to hold for course of his career: namely that music is not an end in and of itself. Instead of the nineteenth century concept of "art for art's sake", Vaughan Williams was repeatedly explicit that music was a way of spiritually reaching out to "ultimate reality" beyond music itself.

Yet it remains that scholars have preferred the story of the atheist boy, whose opinions struck him as "impressive and reasonable." It ought to be pointed out, however, that nowhere in Ursula Vaughan Williams' account does it say directly that Vaughan Williams came to share them absolutely. Striking to me is that in Mrs. Vaughan Williams' meticulous biography of her husband, she gives no actual quotations from him directly pertaining to personal atheism on his part. This is significant in that the scholars since Mrs. Vaughan Williams have tended to exaggerate even further the idea and strength of an atheistic phase.

In terms of verbal proof of such a phase, the most heavily relied upon quote comes from Bertrand Russell, who related a story and quote to Michael Kennedy after the composer's death, dating from VW's time at Cambridge in the 1890s. Kennedy writes:

At Cambridge he had 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?'

The anecdote is of interest not simply for its content, but for the person who related it. The storyteller was not neutral to the topic of religious beliefs, though neither Kennedy nor subsequent scholars have mentioned this. In fact, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was distinctly and openly anti-Christian (anti-religious in every sense of the word, actually). A noted philosopher and mathematician, he was also one of the most influential atheists of his day. He campaigned actively, through his writings and lectures, to convert people to non-belief, though he was careful to qualify the statement, admitting that pure atheism was a logically untenable position – his position would be perhaps best described as agnosticism with no real possibility of God's existence. This is an important thing to consider, as "agnosticism" may mean any range of positions. Vaughan Williams' agnosticism, it will be shown, did not resemble Russell's, whose opinions on religion are quoted below:

*I regard [religion] as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race.*⁸

*Fear is the basis of [religion] – fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder that cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand.*⁹

*I think all the great religions of the world – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism – both untrue and harmful.*¹⁰

*The knowledge exists by which universal happiness can be secured; the chief obstacle to its utilization for that purpose is the teaching of religion. ... It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age; but, if so, it will be necessary to first slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion.*¹¹

Setting aside the hyperbole which runs throughout his essays (essays which lampoon a caricature of Christianity rather than engaging actual theology with reasoned argument), what can be seen clearly is a distinct bias against religion on the part of Bertrand Russell. And yet it is this single quote, written to Michael Kennedy approximately seventy years after the supposed incident, which remains our only verbal proof for a strong atheistic phase in Vaughan Williams' development. Perhaps the entire correspondence between Kennedy and Russell regarding this issue would shed more light on the quote. Context, which we sorely lack in this instance, would help us determine its value.

Also interesting is the willingness with which some scholars have accepted this story, interpretation and all, without reservations. Of Vaughan Williams' many biographers and critics, including James Day, Simon Heffer, Byron Adams and others, none has brought up the fact that Russell was a celebrated atheist. On the contrary, some have appeared all too eager to develop the story further. Ultimately, though, the quote is of very little weight, despite the commanding and definitive position it has been awarded for the past forty years. The source was so partisan as to render it suspect, the story was related after the composer's death, some seven decades after the supposed fact, and without context for the comment. And whatever else this quote might be, it is emphatically not a public proclamation of anything so specific as atheism. A devout Christian might have related the same quotation, with a differently implied context, changing the meaning entirely. To this point, the evidence for a youthful atheistic phase of any real determination for Ralph Vaughan Williams has been based on very scant evidence coupled with dogmatic assertions, usually to the exclusion of evidence to the contrary. This is not to rule out the possibility of some legitimacy, but we should be honest and clear about this: nowhere have we been given actual statements, written or spoken by Vaughan Williams, to corroborate blind belief in such a dedicated, atheistic phase of his spiritual development. And as we shall see once we begin analyzing some of the poetic texts he chose for songs, it would have been over by about 1898.

In 1898, as part of a set entitled (somewhat misleadingly) "Three Elizabethan Songs", Vaughan Williams set a lyric by George Herbert (whose poems he would return to for the rest of his long career), entitled *Virtue*. The poem deals with the transitory nature of temporal existence, while ending with a contrasting meditation on the immortality of the soul in the final stanza:

*Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.*

The imagery, though gentle, is explicitly apocalyptic – the whole world turning to coal is an allusion to the end of time in the Book of Revelation (which was the basis of Vaughan Williams' Oratorio, *Sancta Civitas*). Even if we suggest that Vaughan Williams in 1898 held no literal belief in a future apocalypse, as the seventeenth-century cleric who wrote the lyric surely must have, the poem at the very least speaks to the immortality of the soul, which topic Vaughan Williams was drawn to, relentlessly, for the rest of his career. This in and of itself would be a bizarre, inconsistent, and a self-contradictory subject for an atheist of Vaughan Williams' day. It would be contradictory even to the formulation of hardened agnosticism later propagated by Bertrand Russell.

In that same year, Vaughan Williams also set a text by Christina Rossetti entitled *Dream Land*. Rossetti, a devout High Anglican, was often explicit in her Christian imagery, and this lyric is no exception. In the first stanza we encounter a reference to the star over Bethlehem at the nativity, while in the fourth and final stanza, we read:

*Rest, rest for evermore
Upon a mossy shore;
Rest, rest at the heart's core
Till time shall cease:
Sleep that no pain shall wake;
Night that no morn shall break
Till joy shall overtake
Her perfect peace.*

Once again we are given a meditation on the immortality of the soul in the poem, this time in even more explicitly Christian imagery. Vaughan Williams would not have failed to notice the reference to Milton in this final stanza. "Till joy shall overtake" is a quote of Milton's ode "On Time" ("then joy shall overtake us as a flood"), another poem dealing with the loss of the temporal and the gaining of the eternal.

Despite even the most sophisticated arguments of contemporary secularists, it is hard to imagine an atheist having any attraction to poetry such as this, let alone to go on setting exactly this sort of verse for another six decades. The obvious, simplest, and most reasonable conclusion is that if Vaughan Williams ever had an atheistic phase, it was most certainly over by the year 1898. I qualify this only by saying that it is by no means proven that he ever had a true atheistic phase (one which he had thought through, debating the actual claims of Christianity, and rejecting each one in turn). This quick demonstration reveals two things: First, that the works of Vaughan Williams pertain directly to the discussion of his religious beliefs, and second, it highlights the lack of interest scholars have shown regarding the texts themselves. This will become even more obvious as we move on to Vaughan Williams' later masterpieces.

Before leaving the discussion surrounding atheism, however, there are other issues to be mentioned. One is of another quote favored and relied upon heavily by scholars: the oft repeated "There is no reason why an atheist could not write a good Mass."¹² Once again, we have the difficulty of context for the quote. No direct context is offered by Mrs. Vaughan Williams as to when the composer said this, where, to whom, or what the tenor of the surrounding conversation might have been at the time. Did he say this often or only once? Was he provoked into saying it or did it arise spontaneously? We are not given this information. Aside from these important concerns, what does the quote mean? It doesn't mean that the composer was himself an atheist. And perhaps even more importantly, it doesn't even mean that Vaughan Williams felt an atheist had ever actually

written a good Mass: only that there was no reason why one shouldn't. Any number of situations might have prompted the comment, from any number of different points of view. Yet too often scholars have immediately jumped to the conclusion that this quote says something about Vaughan Williams' own faith or lack of faith. Given a lack of context for the quote, and given what the statement actually means, on its own merits, this is an altogether unreasonable assumption. We must take it to mean only what it says, and, as such, not much can realistically be gleaned from it.

Quotations with Context

Moving on to some quotations with actual context, we turn to the much oversimplified and misunderstood quote standing at the beginning of Vaughan Williams' Oratorio *Sancta Civitas*. The quote in question is from Plato's *Phaedo*. Frank Howes, Michael Kennedy and James Day, have offered different translations.¹³

They are as follows:

*No reasonable man ought to be dogmatic about the details of what I have just been through, yet something of the sort is the truth about our souls and their habitation after death, since in any event the soul appears to be immortal. So it seems to me that it is right and proper to take the risk of holding this opinion – for risk is a fine thing – and a man should, as it were, have it as a song in his heart and sing about it.*¹⁴

*Now to assert that these things are exactly as I have described them 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.*¹⁵

*A man of sense will not insist that things are exactly as I have described them. But I think he will believe that something of the kind is true of the soul and her habitations, seeing that she is shown to be immortal, and that it is worth while to stake everything on this belief. The venture is a fair one and he must charm his doubts with spells like these.*¹⁶

Vaughan Williams didn't offer us an English translation of the text – the score I have seen bears only the original Greek. Therefore it is unlikely we shall ever know whose translation he would have preferred, Kennedy's, Day's, Howes' or someone else's. It is dangerous, therefore, to draw exact conclusions from this excerpt. Did Vaughan Williams understand the Plato to read "the soul is *shown* to be immortal" (as in Kennedy and Day) or "the soul *appears* to be immortal" (as in Howes)? The former would suggest a statement of conviction on Vaughan Williams' part; the latter implies a leaning. Is risk a "fine thing", or merely "honorable"? Or is it "worthwhile to stake everything on this belief"? To discover Vaughan Williams' exact belief on this matter, at the time he quoted it, would likely require a Socratic dialogue with him, which we don't possess.

This quotation has been interpreted by all scholars, with seemingly unanimous voice, as Vaughan Williams' deliberate distancing of himself from the text which follows, drawn from the Book of Revelation. But this interpretation raises immediate questions. First, if Vaughan Williams was an atheist at some point prior to composing *Sancta Civitas* (which they likewise insist), wouldn't the quote rather demonstrate his moving closer towards belief? The text itself suggests that "this or something like this" is "true" – not aesthetically pleasing or useful as a symbol of the human spirit. Second, the only way in which this quotation would serve to distance Vaughan Williams from the text would be if he had, prior to the composition of *Sancta Civitas*, been convinced of a literal reading of the Book of Revelation. The quote would then serve to demonstrate a movement on his part towards a more allegorical reading of the text, a method of scriptural interpretation we know he understood, by virtue of

a letter to Mrs. Joyce Hooper from 31 October 1951, wherein he wrote:

As regards my other point, human love has always been taken as a symbol of man's relation to divine things. The Song of Solomon has been treated in all of the Churches as a symbol of the relationship of God to man. And what about Isaiah and his "beloved's Vineyard"? And is not the Church in the Book of Revelations always symbolized as the bride?

Such allegorical reading of scripture is completely orthodox: it is as old as Christianity itself. Therefore, a traditional, orthodox Catholic or Anglican could easily have quoted the same passage from *Phaedo* without implying even the slightest bit of agnosticism. Vaughan Williams' critics seem to have either overlooked this, or to have been ignorant that within Christian theology there are a variety of approaches to scriptural exegesis; that fundamentalist theology is not a majority opinion, but a minority and distinctly non-traditional method. It appears they have been applying a false norm to Christian thought.

Unrelated to the Greek quotation preceding the piece, *Sancta Civitas* exposes another assumption of the majority of scholars, regarding scripture. The standard argument has been that Vaughan Williams was primarily dedicated to the soaring prose of the Authorized Version – that he admired it as literature, but had no use for its theological and mystical substance (insofar as we are discussing specifically Christian mysticism). We have already seen, in a generally overlooked quotation of the composer, that this was hardly the case, as Vaughan Williams had been interested in the philosophy behind scripture from the time he was at Rottingdean. But the text of *Sancta Civitas* also contradicts this assumption, as it was not chosen solely from the King James Bible, but Taverner's Bible as well. It seems, therefore, that Vaughan Williams was looking to accomplish something other than an immortalizing of the Authorized Version in song. He must have had deeper reasons, ones which he had thought through on a level beyond the literary or aesthetic.

Even on a merely literary level, though, Vaughan Williams' writings have been misunderstood. Harold Bloom has complained that the worst offense, and result, of contemporary literary criticism has been an incapacity to comprehend irony. Lamenting this most profoundly when discussing a play such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he implies that a literal interpretation of Hamlet's words results in a chaotic reading of the text, so much of which is dependant upon the irony of the main character.¹⁷ Vaughan Williams' words have been a victim of something like this as well, although perhaps the device missed by scholars has been that of frustrated sarcasm. One quote in particular has been habitually taken out of context by scholars. It comes from a letter to Rutland Boughton, concerning the changing of the name "Christian" to "Pilgrim" in his opera based on Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The most frequently excerpted line is as follows:

*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.*¹⁸

As with the previously favored quotations, this has been frequently cited by scholars without reference to its full context, and the sarcasm contained within it seems to have been missed altogether. Boughton's letter (dated 12 May 1951), to which Vaughan Williams was responding, was later well described by Michael Kennedy as being "a mixture of good sense, musicianship, prejudice, muddle-headed political dogma, and sheer wrong-headedness."¹⁹ Vaughan Williams' response was short, terse, and in some places sarcastic - most pronouncedly so in the quote above, where he mentions a fanciful sect called the "5th Day Adventists." This, to anyone who knows what Vaughan Williams was talking about, is obvious sarcasm. But certain scholars, among them Byron Adams, seem to have taken this to mean something very serious. Adams goes so far as to interpret the quote as a proof of Vaughan Williams' "democratic belief in the validity of all religious traditions [etc]."²⁰

This is a serious misreading of the text at hand, as Adams has missed all of the satire of Vaughan Williams' invented denomination – the "5th Day

Adventists” (emphasis mine). The denomination he was sarcastically alluding to actually call themselves the 7th Day Adventists. That Vaughan Williams had already included “Xtian” was an added jab, inferring that 7th Day Adventism wasn’t Christian, and that one of the denomination’s doctrines (that services should be held, and the Sabbath faithfully observed, on Saturday) was arbitrary. Thus, in the very passage Adams believes he has found a “democratic belief in the validity of all religious traditions,” Vaughan Williams actually lampoons a religious tradition. In other words, to look for a twenty-first-century notion of religious relativism in this passage is futile.²¹

Beyond the sarcasm of the letter, there is the question of Vaughan Williams’ intent. Some scholars would have us believe that it contains a statement of his deepest religious opinions. But it is no such thing: instead, it must be understood as a quick response to an annoying letter. This isn’t to say it is without value altogether: it implies at least an ecumenical side of Vaughan Williams’ thought. But it must be stressed that this is only implied, and that the line in which it is implied is riddled with sarcasm. It is highly improbable that the composer ever expected it to be kept by the recipient, let alone published and used as a definitive statement of his beliefs concerning the complexities of ecumenism and inter-religious relationships. Certainly he would have written something less sarcastic and flippant if that were the case.

Most problematic, however, is that this quote has been used as a context for *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The end result of this approach has been to present the opera as a mere statement of English nationalism; a vaguely spiritual allegory which is really, in some muddled sense, “beyond” religion, and only by accident of birth associated with Christianity rather than with Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism (among many other options). This, more than anything, has contributed to the misunderstanding of the opera, and is probably the single biggest way in which Vaughan Williams scholars have inadvertently discouraged the work’s production. A few years ago, I published an article entitled “*The Pilgrim’s Progress* in Context: a preliminary study” wherein I discussed the dramatic substance of the piece. Central to my argument was that, for *Pilgrim* to be understood as a dramatic work, worthy of stage production, the opening of Act I Scene 2, where Pilgrim comes to the cross, must be understood and accepted in all of its Christian theological symbolism. Without this explicitly and uniquely Christian context, the piece absolutely fails as a music drama – in fact, the plot makes very little sense at all. To interpret *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in a vague, non-religious manner is therefore to interpret it into failure, leaving it nothing but an unsatisfying exercise in cultural anthropology.²²

By contrast, if we are open enough to see the quote in the context of the opera, rather than vice versa, we gain a better understanding of both. In all likelihood, the quote taken in context means that Vaughan Williams believed the Christian message to be applicable to people of all faiths: that the Christian message was universal.

All of this brings us, at last, to some relatively ignored quotations with actual context, found in texts written without irony by Vaughan Williams himself. The first of great interest is to be found in program notes written by the composer for a performance of the Bach Choir in 1923:

The essence of the ‘Passion’ form is the recital of the Gospel story as a Church service, interspersed with reflective solos and choruses and the well-known choral melodies of the Lutheran Church (many of which happily belong to the English Church as well, so that here we are on familiar ground), and it is in this spirit that it must be performed and listened to.

However in transferring a work from the Thomaskirche in 1729 to a London concert room in 1923, certain adaptations and compromises are inevitable. To start with, the only possible language in which the gospel history can be recited to an English audience is that of the Authorized Version of 1611: anything else would be an insult to Bach and the Bible. To do this it is necessary to alter a few notes of Bach’s recitative, and in a few cases to sacrifice some of Bach’s subtlety of phrasing but the compromise cannot be avoided.

Bach’s original chorus for his cantata and Passions consisted of not more than 40 voices. What then are we to do when we have a chorus of 300? It seems ridiculous and outside the bounds of dramatic propriety to give the words of the Apostles or the questions of Peter to more than a few voices; these numbers have then been assigned to the semi-chorus. One exception, however, has been made: the words ‘truly, this was the Son of God’ belong not to the ‘Centurion and they that were with him’, but are the triumphant outcry of the whole world.²³

These reflections on Bach’s Passion settings are extremely important. Unlike all of the previously favored quotations used to portray a Vaughan Williams as distant from Christianity as possible, they were actually prepared by the composer for publication, in the form of program notes. They have context, they are serious, and they were premeditated. None of the more favored quotations can claim anything like this.

An atheist or agnostic of the Bertrand Russell variety (hostile to and distant from Christianity) would never have written anything of the kind. And here it is useful to dispel one of the most frequent false-parallels employed by Vaughan Williams scholars: the supposed spiritual parallel between Vaughan Williams and Johannes Brahms.

It has become an acceptable bad habit of scholars to compare Brahms and Vaughan Williams as though their beliefs were in some way similar. It is particularly ill advised to use Brahms’ *Ein Deutsches Requiem* as an example of this.²⁴ For if Brahms’ Requiem serves as any example at all in this debate, it must serve as a stark contrast to Vaughan Williams’ approach. In writing the Requiem, Brahms deliberately avoided all direct references to Christ. This is supremely at odds with Vaughan Williams, who not only set, explicitly, the Nativity of Christ (in *Hodie*) but also the Second Coming of Christ (in *Sancta Civitas*), while the dramatic action of the *Pilgrim’s Progress* is utterly dependent upon the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. In short, there seems to be very little in the way of direct reference to basic Christian doctrine that Vaughan Williams didn’t explicitly set to music. A choir shouting out “Emmanuel! Emmanuel! God with us!” in response to the name “Jesus”, as in *Hodie*, is certainly not the way to go about emulating Brahms’ selection or setting of texts. But it is not only the music and libretti that contradict this comparison. Brahms was open about his disbelief in the immortality of the soul.²⁵

Vaughan Williams, on the other hand, spent a career setting texts proclaiming belief in it, and nowhere can we, as yet, find unqualified evidence of Vaughan Williams ever having disbelieved in it. Whatever Vaughan Williams might have emulated musically about Brahms (and it seems he emulated much), he most certainly did not resemble the man spiritually.

Vaughan Williams’ understanding of Bach, expressed in the above program notes, likewise contradicts such an analysis. The utilitarian agnostic approach to setting scriptural texts suggests that, like Brahms, a composer might set a biblical text for the humanistic qualities embodied therein, jettisoning the supernatural element. Indeed, an atheist or materialist agnostic *must* make this interpretation: to suggest an orthodox, supernatural interpretation would be to go against their primary beliefs. If Vaughan Williams had believed this sort of thing, he would certainly have stressed the musical qualities of the Bach pieces in question, rather than their theological and evangelical implications. But in the program notes, he is careful to explain that he has done precisely the opposite, sacrificing even some subtleties of Bach’s phrasings to achieve the proper spiritual effect. In other words Vaughan Williams clearly believed the Gospel narrative, with all of its implications, to be even more important to Bach’s pieces than the notes themselves. Moreover, he worked with his choirs to ensure that they went beyond the music, just as the original Lutherans who sang them had.²⁶ This is completely inexplicable if one subscribes to the idea that Vaughan Williams was an atheist or a Russellian agnostic. The only proper conclusion we can draw from this is that Vaughan Williams was neither.

Perhaps even more telling, however, regarding Vaughan Williams’ personal beliefs, is the final line quoted above, wherein he tells us of his

unusual decision to give the words of the Centurion (“Truly, this was the Son of God”) not to a soloist or semi-chorus, but to the entire chorus, because “they are the triumphant cry of the whole world.” In this context, then, we understand the true meaning behind the sarcastic reply to Rutland Boughton, written almost 30 years later. His ecumenical leaning was founded on the belief that the Gospel was valid for people of all cultures, the world over.

In another letter, this one to Michael Kennedy dated January 26, 1957, Vaughan Williams writes something of importance:

*Your question of who is the greatest man in my lifetime is very difficult to answer. I don't think Churchill, somehow, but a few names taken at random would include Brahms, Walt Whitman, and General Booth . . . and of course there is also Sibelius.*²⁷

There is a distinct odd-man-out in Vaughan Williams' list of great men, and that man is General William Booth (1829-1881), the founder of the Salvation Army, a Christian organization that seeks to live out the gospel in the service of the poor, by means of charity, music and the reformation of character. These tenets must have made a deep impression on Vaughan Williams, and though his youthful Fabianism was eventually lost, perhaps he discovered a more profound expression of social action in this evangelical combination. The brass band music associated with the Salvation Army must have also impressed Vaughan Williams. The combination of the gospel message and social activism within music could hardly have failed to resonate with the man who had written “No doubt it requires a certain effort to tune oneself to the moral atmosphere implied by a fine melody.”²⁸ What he meant in this enigmatic sentence is perhaps elucidated by his citation of William Booth as one of the greatest men of his lifetime.

Having earlier dismissed the spiritual parallel between Brahms and Vaughan Williams, it wouldn't be surprising if Brahms was chosen for his as musical qualities. His devotion to Bach, his counterpoint, his lyric yet absolute qualities, especially in the symphonies, and his resistance to the fashion of the day are all obvious fore-runners of Vaughan Williams' music.

Much has been made of the middleman of Vaughan Williams' triumvirate, Walt Whitman. It has been repeatedly suggested that Vaughan Williams sought a non-Christian, or specifically secular expression of spirituality, finding this ultimately in Whitman's verse. But to prematurely end the discussion of Vaughan Williams and Whitman there is to overlook the possibility that Whitman might actually have steered Vaughan Williams more towards Christianity than away from it. Such was the experience of G.K. Chesterton, Vaughan Williams' contemporary. For Chesterton, Whitman's verse provided an important step towards faith, countering the dominant secular pessimism of his day. Whitman's impact upon his own eventual conversion was of enough importance that, in his dedication of *The Man Who was Thursday*, Chesterton included the following reference:

*I find again the book we found, I feel the hour that flings
Far out of fish-shaped Paumanok some cry of cleaner things.*²⁹

It is not unreasonable to think that Whitman's effect upon Vaughan Williams was similar. In fact it seems probable, once we consider that Vaughan Williams tends to use his verse for one of two purposes: the first is to discuss the immortality of the soul, and the vastness of spiritual reality (as in the *Sea Symphony* and *Toward the Unknown Region*). The second is when Vaughan Williams appropriates and reinterprets them in a Eucharistic sense (as we shall see in *Dona Nobis Pacem*). Neither purpose is anything but completely harmonious with Christianity, and in the case of *Dona Nobis Pacem* Whitman is used to strengthen the theology, not replace it. But before moving on to a discussion of that masterpiece, there are other matters concerning Vaughan Williams and specific expressions of Christianity to be addressed, which, combined with a case study of two important pieces, will demonstrate that Vaughan Williams had an understanding of mystical Christianity, going beyond even the non-sacramental social action espoused by General Booth.

Mysticism, dogma, and other sources of confusion

Perhaps the biggest problem with Vaughan Williams criticism over the decades has been its insistence on a shallow and reductive understanding of Christianity. This is a grave error: his scores and carefully arranged texts deal with almost all of the central doctrines of Christian faith, and not on a superficial level. As we shall see, he plumbs the depths of sacramental theology at times. If a scholar has nothing but a superficial, caricatured knowledge of Christianity (such as one might gain by reading Bertrand Russell), they will find themselves ill equipped for analyzing Vaughan Williams.

A case in point is the slow movement from the *Symphony in D Major*. In the manuscript to the score, the movement bore the motto: ‘Upon that place there stood a cross and a little below a sepulchre...Then he said “He hath given me rest by his sorrow and life by his death.”’ This, combined with the title of the movement, *Romanza*, has confused some scholars, including Frank Howes, who said, “There is therefore and indeed nothing romantic in any of the normal connotations of that pliable word about this movement”.³⁰ Having made this statement, he doesn't explain what it might mean in a Christian sense. Likewise, Michael Kennedy delivers a confused understanding when he wrote that the “Oriental exotic ecstasy” of *Flos Campi* “sweeps away the religious mysticism found by disturbed critics as consolatory evidence that this work was really by the composer of the *Tallis Fantasia*.”³¹ And as I pointed out in an earlier article, Byron Adams misinterpreted the eroticism in the *Magnificat*, considering it at odds with Christianity and scriptural intent.³² Three prominent Vaughan Williams scholars from three successive generations, therefore, have not known that erotic love has been used for millennia by Christians and Jews as a symbol of God's love for the Church and Israel. Vaughan Williams knew, however.

It is worth revisiting his letter to Mrs. Hooper of 31 October 1951, in which he wrote “...human love has always been taken as a symbol of man's relation to divine things. The Song of Solomon has been treated in all of the Churches as a symbol of the relationship of God to man.” There is nothing esoteric or bizarre about Vaughan Williams' theology: it is all completely orthodox and traditional. It is to be found in the writings of countless Christian mystics, including St Bernard of Clairvaux, St Teresa of Avila, and St John of the Cross. And if this theology is known, the title “Romanza” makes perfect sense, when dealing with Christ's sacrifice on the cross; the passion in *Flos Campi*, which was after all inspired by the most erotic book in the Bible, also makes perfect, orthodox sense; and Vaughan Williams' interpretation of the *Magnificat* becomes very Catholic, emphasizing Mary as the bride as well as the mother of God. But the scholars have searched, in vain, for latent paganism in Vaughan Williams' symbolism. The only shame is that such confusion has developed, unabated, for three generations now. If we hope to progress in our understanding of Vaughan Williams' pieces, it will be necessary to move beyond this unfruitful confusion.

In light of this information, it is interesting to consider some of the more dogmatic statements that have been made concerning Vaughan Williams' religious beliefs. James Day writes:

*[For Vaughan Williams]...there is no act of faith to inspire the hope of redemption either of man or of the world in which he lives through some kind of divine intervention or divine self-immolation. Prayers, however intense (and there can be no mistaking the intensity of the prayers in a work like Dona Nobis Pacem) are a projection of man's hopes and fears, nothing more.*³³

It is difficult to imagine that the man who wrote these words has ever heard or paid attention to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. There, we see and hear prayers answered, we see a man transformed by virtue of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection (which Day refers to with seeming contempt as “some kind of divine intervention or divine self-immolation”), and we see a man redeemed. However Day came to his own conclusions on prayer and the ultimate destiny of humans, it certainly wasn't from Vaughan Williams. I use this as an example, and do not wish to single out James Day: there are many such dogmatic statements in the scholarship on Vaughan Williams. None of them ever quotes the composer directly

when they write such dogmatic things, and none of them seems to take the entirety of the man's career into consideration.

Michael Kennedy has written

*It is important to realize, and it cannot be over-emphasized, that the religion of Vaughan Williams's life was music...*³⁴

Objectively speaking, and apart from whether Vaughan Williams felt the need for religion or not, music simply is not a religion. Nor would it seem, after thousands of years of human civilization, that it is capable of ever becoming one. Ethical systems are not built upon music theory. Moral codes and societies are not held together by music. Wars are not fought over music and martyrs are not killed for music. To say therefore that "the religion of Vaughan Williams's life was music" is a serious overstatement. What Kennedy is more likely saying is that Vaughan Williams tried to use music as a *substitute* for religion, though he also writes (with something bordering on contempt) of Vaughan Williams' practice of music going beyond religion. But these statements are too large to make. It is highly unlikely that Vaughan Williams' ethics, morals, political opinions, spirituality, marital relations and relations with other people in daily life were informed by music. These things are informed not by music, but by religion, even if one's religion is an absence of belief: atheism exists, after all, only in reference to theism. It is worth considering that even those who do not practice religion or believe in a specific religion are effected daily by religion, and Vaughan Williams was no exception – especially considering that he made much of his life's work a musical monument to Christian scripture and theology. Ultimately, it seems more that the statement was Kennedy's attempt to end the discussion before it could begin – the slamming of a door on the issue of Vaughan Williams and religion. But the culture Vaughan Williams inherited and contributed to, the art he was drawn to and, most of all, the works he produced tell a different story. Moreover, Kennedy has given us no evidence to support his assertion that Vaughan Williams ever considered music to be a 'religion.' No passionate insistence alters this fact.

The dogmatic statements written on this subject are too numerous to mention in a single article, but they occur throughout the literature on Vaughan Williams. The sheer volume is daunting for anyone who would try to refute them, as refutation, though simple as a matter of reasoning, is time-consuming when so much has been written over the course of so many years. Meanwhile, scholars have ignored not only quotes, but people in Vaughan Williams' life, one of whom we turn to now, beginning with a quote from his book entitled *Socialism and Christianity*, published in 1907.

Vaughan Williams, the *English Hymnal*, and Anglo-Catholicism

An old agricultural labourer once admitted to me that Socialism was "all backed by Scripture"; and I need hardly remind anyone who reads his Bible, that if I were to put down every passage that makes for Socialism, I should want a pamphlet several sizes larger than this. But nothing is more futile than the unintelligent slinging of texts; and I shall therefore confine myself strictly to the central features of Christianity, and not pick out chance sayings here and there, since that could be done with the writings of every great moral teacher that has ever lived. Christianity is different. It does not only provide a few noble sayings that Socialists would welcome. It is Socialism, and a good deal more.

The above passage was written by the Rev. Percy Dearmer – a man who worked with Vaughan Williams on three separate occasions over the course of several decades, beginning with their work on the *English Hymnal* from 1904-06.

Vaughan Williams had heard of Dearmer even before taking the job of music editor for the revolutionary new hymnal. As he put it himself, "I just knew his name vaguely as a parson who invited tramps to sleep in his drawing room."³⁵ This must have impressed Vaughan Williams, who was himself a Fabian as a young man.

There has been so little consideration of this relationship, and such little basic research done on Dearmer that Jeffrey Aldridge, in his article "A Christian Atheist", writes "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*..."³⁶ Once we know even a little bit about Dearmer, such a position becomes impossible to maintain.

First of all, the Rev. Percy Dearmer was, in fact, an Anglo-Catholic.³⁷ He was the author of many books, including an Anglo-Catholic book on the liturgy, and he seems to have been a clerical parallel to Vaughan Williams. Nationalistic and progressive, yet returning theologically to the Tudor age to reinvigorate the liturgy and theology of England, he mirrored Vaughan Williams' artistic quest, which also ran back to the Tudors, and was also paradoxically progressive while restoring what was lost. It goes without saying that the *English Hymnal* was, from the outset, an Anglo-Catholic project. Thus, nothing could be less ironic than the fact that Anglo-Catholics picked it up so quickly (it was undoubtedly the plan, even before Vaughan Williams was recruited). But even more importantly, Aldridge's summation of Anglo-Catholicism as "the bells and smells wing" is revealing. In doing so he superficially dismisses the Oxford Movement and Anglo-Catholicism in general.

Without knowing the reason for this flippancy, and perhaps unrelated to it, there is an important contemporary misconception that should be addressed, and that is the false relation between orthodox religious beliefs and political conservatism. In our own day and age (especially in the United States, from where I write), it is generally assumed that to be a devout Christian means one is also politically conservative. It is important to note that this is not necessarily the case even today, and that only a very poor scholar would believe it has always been the case in every age and in every country. It certainly was not the case at the turn of the twentieth century in the England of Vaughan Williams.

Anglo-Catholicism in particular, born of the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century, should not be confused with anything like a conservative political movement. From its very outset it was associated with what we would now call liberal social concerns. As John Henry Newman, the leader of the movement until his conversion to Roman Catholicism, said "the Church was formed for the express purpose of interfering or (as irreligious men would say) meddling with the world." This included the ministering to the poor, especially the urban poor.³⁸ The liturgical renewal which coincided with this practice of the Christian faith (Aldridge's "bells and smells") was hardly the substance of the movement, and hardly the sum total of what Vaughan Williams is likely to have known or thought of concerning Anglo-Catholicism. As we can see, Percy Dearmer resembled Newman and Edward Pusey, his predecessors in Anglo-Catholicism, in his concern for the poor – and not merely as a theoretical or political matter, but in an intensely personal manner, as evidenced by his reputation for letting tramps sleep in his own parlour.

Beyond this, the assertion that Vaughan Williams had seemingly no attraction to Anglo-Catholicism seems suspect. If Aldridge meant that Vaughan Williams didn't attend services regularly, he is of course correct, but this is a general statement rather than a specific comment upon Anglo-Catholicism. In light of many of his pieces, the spiritual substance of Anglo-Catholicism seems to have been something that appealed quite strongly to Vaughan Williams for much of his career.

As we have already seen, his early songs contain the specifically Anglo-Catholic meditations of Christina Rossetti. Even as this early period was ending, he worked with Percy Dearmer for two years. In the next decade he was to write the *Five Mystical Songs*, the third of which, *Love Bade Me Welcome*, makes little sense without a specifically Catholic³⁹ understanding of the Eucharist. If he wasn't attracted to actual worship in Anglo-Catholic churches, he certainly was drawn to and inspired by the spiritual substance of the message, for he incorporated the most mystical aspects of Catholic theology into some of his most significant works.

Scholars also tend to paint a portrait of Vaughan Williams as a man of music alone; one who had little interest in the meaning of the texts he

chose, or anything more than a superficial understanding of them. His work on the *English Hymnal* has been traditionally understood as a musical matter only, the conventional scholarly opinion being that he wanted to give folk music back to the people, and even if that meant dealing with Christianity, he was prepared to do it. But this makes no sense. A true atheist or anti-Christian agnostic would have rejected such time-consuming, and for Vaughan Williams, money-consuming work. Moreover, they certainly wouldn't have praised the verse of the Anglo-Catholic priest who contributed lyrics (which Vaughan Williams did).⁴⁰

Perhaps it was the enduring influence of the Rev. Percy Dearmer, or perhaps Dearmer was merely another catalyst for Vaughan Williams' greater exploration of Eucharistic theology, but by 1911, five years after the publication of the *English Hymnal*, he had completed one of his most enduring vocal pieces: the *Five Mystical Songs*, a cycle of poems by George Herbert (1593-1633), another Anglican cleric with strong Catholic sacramental tendencies. Vaughan Williams actually set only four poems, but by dividing Herbert's *Easter* into two separate songs (*Easter* and *I got me flowers*), he arrived at five. Hubert Foss, in his *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study*⁴¹ attempted to superimpose a pantheistic understanding on the song cycle, but he did so only by misinterpreting the second song from *Easter*. The crux of Foss's argument is the second stanza of what was to become this second mystical song (I give the first two stanzas here):

*I got me flowers to straw [in VW "strew"] thy way;
I got me boughs off many a tree,
But thou wast up by break of day,
And brought thy sweets along with thee.*

*The Sun arising in the East
Though he give light and th' East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.*

Foss insisted that the "they" in stanza 2 refers to the "flowers brought to strew thy way."⁴² But Herbert is actually saying that the light and the perfume of nature's sun cannot compete with the risen Christ. In doing so, he is involving an implied pun (a common technique in seventeenth-century metaphysical verse): Christ the Son's rising is more beautiful than the rising of Nature's Sun itself. It is therefore an explicitly supernatural poem, and cannot be interpreted properly in a pantheistic sense.

But there is an even more specifically theological poem in the cycle, and this is *Love Bade Me Welcome*. In George Herbert's book of verse, *The Temple*, it stands as the final poem, and is simply entitled *Love*. The poem is a dialogue between Herbert and Christ, in the context of the Eucharist (the Sacrament of Holy Communion, where Catholics believe the offered bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ). In it, Herbert finds himself welcomed by Christ ('Love'), but pulls back, seeing himself as too dirty and sinful to accept the offer. Christ then gently informs Herbert that He Himself has answered for that very sinfulness (alluding to the sacrifice on the cross). Herbert then begs Christ to allow him to serve, but Christ instead gently commands 'You must sit down...and taste my meat' (meaning the Blessed Sacrament – Herbert is being told, literally, to eat Christ's body). Herbert's response is the grateful final line, "So I did sit and eat."

That Vaughan Williams understood Herbert's poem and wanted to emphasize this exact reading is shown by his incorporation of the ancient chant attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, *O Sacrum Convivium* in the wordless background chorus. The text of the Aquinas reads thus:

*O sacred banquet
at which Christ is received
the memory of his passion is renewed,
our souls are filled with grace,
and a pledge of future is given to us.*

This represents the very mystical center of Catholic worship. It is therefore clear that Vaughan Williams had no desire to use Herbert's

words separate from their original purpose. In fact he strengthens the poem with this traditional Catholic chant, written by the man who had contributed the theology behind the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation – that the bread and wine become, physically, the Body and Blood of Christ during the Eucharist. The song can only be fully interpreted in the light of this theology. Vaughan Williams left no room for a pantheistic reading, no room even for a Calvinist reading (which would deny the 'real presence' of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament). In light of the music and text, Foss's interpretation falls, and with it, any credible arguments of Pantheism in the piece.

A Case Study of Christian Depth: *Dona Nobis Pacem*

A large number of Vaughan Williams' most important pieces contain religious symbolism that has gone unnoticed by scholars for over half a century. The argument posed here is that to deny this symbolism is also to deny them of their depth, keeping us from recognizing the true greatness of Vaughan Williams' artistic achievement. Importantly, this very symbolism contradicts the notion of Vaughan Williams' using sacred texts in a secular manner. In fact, the opposite is to be found, strikingly in the example of a misunderstood masterpiece such as *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

Dona Nobis Pacem has puzzled critics since its first performances in 1936. Undoubtedly effective in performance, it has often been criticized as being too much of a patchwork quilt on the page a hodgepodge of Whitman's verse, parliamentary speech, quotes from the Bible and the Mass. While it is rightfully acknowledged as a forerunner to Britten's *War Requiem*, it seems to make no coherent sense to the majority of those who have written about it. But the critics have approached the piece with the assumption that it was written by a hardened agnostic, uninterested in Christian theology or mysticism, and because of this disposition they have missed the unity of the libretto, permeated as it is with Eucharistic symbolism. Once a Christian (and specifically Catholic) perspective is allowed, one sees how much of an understatement it is to say that Vaughan Williams "set text." In actuality, his genius was the musical interpretation of texts (a much rarer thing, and perhaps where Vaughan Williams might lay claim to supremacy among composers). In *Dona Nobis Pacem*, he reinterprets the poetry of Whitman by inserting it into the context of the Catholic Mass.

The poetic structure of the libretto is marked by a repetition of the phrase "*dona nobis pacem*" ("grant us peace"). Day has written that this phrase comes from the Requiem Mass⁴³ but this is incomplete: it is in fact recited at every Mass, Requiem or not. It is the final part of the *Agnus Dei*, which in English may be translated:

*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: grant us peace.*⁴⁴

This is a prayer with a specific context: the high point of the Mass, after the breaking of the bread, and as such the spiritual and mystical center of Catholicism. For Catholics, the Eucharist represents the intersection of eternity with temporality, the divine with the human, heaven with earth. Catholic tradition and theology see this as the height of earthly life and experience, as a fulfillment of the Jewish Passover, a memorial of the Last Supper and the Passion of Christ, and a pre-figuration of the Wedding feast of the Lamb, written about in the book of Revelation.⁴⁵ It is so holy that, prior to reception of the Sacrament, communicants receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation (sometimes called "confession" or the Sacrament of Penance).⁴⁶ Each of these elements is written into Vaughan Williams' cantata, and in understanding the complex interrelationships of text to the theology of the Mass, reveals the libretto and piece to be far more coherent and remarkable than critics have noticed. The briefest possible overview will be given here.

In reiterating the words *dona nobis pacem*, Vaughan Williams highlights what the piece is: a meditation on the prayer. Everything else in the piece happens within those words. Like a person reciting a rosary while meditating on the its mysteries, the piece operates on two levels: what we

can call the “verbal prayer” (the *Agnus Dei* itself) and the “meditation” (the Whitman and other texts which relate to the *Agnus Dei*). Another way of putting it is that the *Agnus Dei* serves as a prism for the rest of the text.

In this meditation on the need for peace, Vaughan Williams first shows us nothing like peace: in fact he gives us warfare and turmoil, throwing us into Whitman’s apocalyptic “Beat! Beat! Drums!” Because of the Eucharistic context already provided by the soprano’s “dona nobis pacem,” certain elements of the Whitman text will stand out to those attuned, especially the lines ordering the drums and bugles “Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation/Leave not the bridegroom quiet no happiness must he have now with his bride.” The symbolism being used by Whitman, and strengthened by the Eucharistic context given by Vaughan Williams, is from the Bible. Before his Passion, Christ reminded the disciples of the prophecy of Isaiah: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” (Matthew 26:31). Likewise, Jesus refers to himself as the Bridegroom who will be taken from them (“The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” Matthew 9:15). “Beat! Beat! Drums!” is therefore being used to symbolize the Passion of Christ, and its effects on our world, and conversely, the sharing of the faithful in the Passion.

This segues directly into a section of the piece that shares its very name with a sacrament linked to the Eucharist: Reconciliation. From a Catholic perspective, many things jump out: specifically the title itself and the phrases “Word over all” and “a man divine as myself.” “Word over all” in a Christian context is guaranteed to resonate with the opening of the Gospel according to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Vaughan Williams was to set this text in *Hodie*, but by context he has also implied it here in Whitman’s poem. Later in the poem, he sets the words “a man divine as myself.” This might have meant something completely different to Whitman, but through Vaughan Williams’s prism of the *Agnus Dei*, there is a Catholic implication that a man receives the divinity of Christ into himself, physically, through the Eucharist. This poem about reconciliation, then, fits symbolically in at least three different ways into the context of the *Agnus Dei*. It is difficult to think this might be coincidence.

The Dirge for Two Veterans parallels the offertory, the part of the Mass where bread and wine are brought to the altar. Whitman sees a father and son, both dead. Is this the sacrifice itself, the time of mourning on the first Holy Saturday? *The Agnus Dei* reminds of the Man who said “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9). Theology teaches that we can give nothing to God in response to His Passion and death, except our love, freely, which is what Whitman ends up giving those two symbolic veterans.

The final sections of the piece, which have eluded scholars over the decades, are of tremendous significance. Vaughan Williams uses a quote of John Bright, referring the Passover, which is directly related, by typological significance, to the Eucharist. Likewise he references the “new heaven and new earth” which signifies the end times from the Book of Revelation, implying the wedding feast of the lamb, which is essential to Catholic Eucharistic theology. None of the text is haphazard: all of it serves to demonstrate symbolically some aspect of the Eucharist. This is completely inexplicable if we are to accept the accounts of Vaughan Williams given by the scholars, who suggest that he jettisoned the spiritual elements of Christian thought. Instead, he did the opposite: his works stand as some of the most compelling and profound witnesses to Christianity.

Commentators have wryly noted that the peace Vaughan Williams requests in the cantata was not granted: the second World War happened anyway. But surely this is to miss the point of the piece. The piece itself knows that earthly wars will still be a part of reality even after sincere prayer, and Vaughan Williams highlights this by making “Beat! Beat! Drums!” the first poetic text of the piece. Christianity is not a facile utopian ideology like Marxism; it offers no promises of ending human suffering by mere social theory. Rather, Christians understand that this mortal life will be fraught with wars and rumors of wars: that suffering is

inevitable in a fallen world, but through Christ it can be redemptive. Ultimate peace, for the Christian, is only to be found in Christ, and Christ is followed by picking up one’s cross: ultimate peace is therefore linked to redemptive suffering, by means of holy mystery. Vaughan Williams’ vision of peace, presented in *Dona Nobis Pacem*, is revealed only after suffering, reconciliation, the Passover, and the apocalypse. Only then do the soprano and chorus linger, truly satisfied, on the word *pacem*. This represents an understanding of some very detailed theology. How Vaughan Williams managed to touch all of this symbolism so profoundly is mysterious, and we shall probably not know the full answer in this life. But one thing is clear: he did more than simply “set texts” that could be experienced by devout believers: he meditated on them, and presented profound conclusions that resonate with Christian theology.

The question of Ralph Vaughan Williams and religion now becomes more complex. Instead of being a question about his beliefs alone, whatever they might have been, it becomes a more profound one, concerning religion’s and, ultimately, God’s impact upon him.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the religious beliefs of Ralph Vaughan Williams, usually the same few opinions over and over again. A few quotes have been exaggerated, some misunderstood, many ignored. Lost in all of this has been the relatively clear trajectory of an artist who continuously investigated and deepened his meditations on Christianity. His scope was nothing short of incredible, giving us intimations of immortality in the poems of Christina Rossetti, explorations of the spiritual life in *A Sea Symphony*, his intimate discussion of the Eucharist in the *Five Mystical Songs*, the apocalyptic splendor of *Sancta Civitas*, the patiently endured faithful suffering in *Riders to the Sea*, the Eucharistic mystery of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, the tracing of an entire spiritual journey to the Cross, death and eternal life in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, joyful bursts of angelic song in *Hodie*, the final climbing of the tower of Salisbury Cathedral in the farewell of the 9th Symphony. His works document and share a consistently engaged and intuitive grasp of the mysteries of the Christian faith.

So, like it or not, scholars will eventually have to accept that Vaughan Williams was a Christian composer, at least in that his works are Christian. In other words, his pieces bear witness to the theology, the doctrines, and the mysticism of Christianity. Regarding his own struggles with belief, it is good to remember the age into which he was born. Darwinism, some strands atheistic, others not, competed with Creationism; the Salvation Army was formed, the Anglo-Catholic movement and Christian Socialism were vibrant, and legalized Roman Catholicism in England was not yet half a century old when Vaughan Williams was born. Violent secular atheism was ascendant, in various forms of Marxism and, later, Nazism. Vaughan Williams himself was appalled by these secular perversions of true humanism, writing to Rutland Boughton in defense of his choice of Bunyan for his opera:

...as to what you accuse me of—i.e. ‘re-dressing an old theology’, it seems to me that some of your ideas are a good deal more moribund than Bunyan’s theology:—the old fashioned republicanism and Marxism which led direct to the appalling dictatorships of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini, or your Rationalism, which dates from about 1880 and has entirely failed to solve any problems of the Universe.⁴⁷

Theosophy, astrology, and other aspects of the occult were also ascendant at the time, as demonstrated by poets like William Butler Yeats, and Vaughan Williams’ own close friend, Holst. Yet Vaughan Williams set almost nothing but Christian texts, illuminating them with his own penetrating meditations. His age was rationalistic, still dominated in many ways by the paradigm of Enlightenment philosophy, with its emphasis on the supremacy of the human mind, alienated from the body and creation. Vaughan Williams’ art leaps back in time, retrieving the lost values from before the age of Descartes, bringing them into the future and revealing, along the way, their timelessness. Herbert, Shakespeare, Donne, Crashaw, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Bunyan: these poets

resonated with Vaughan Williams intuitively, presenting him a means to reconnect with a vision of the world before it had become the Waste Land, spiritually. Attempting to define the religious beliefs of an artist, and the effect of those beliefs upon their art, is a precarious exercise. This difficulty is heightened by the fact that Christianity is not a position, but a path. A person's relationship to that path is never static, but dynamic. Whether Vaughan Williams could rationally assent to Christian faith is perhaps of less importance than scholars have thought, for the argument was presented by an age that had rigged the question. His music assents, and that, ultimately, is what he left us.

I will perhaps be accused of doing the very thing I was critical of at the beginning of this article: of presenting my own, biased "Christian-RVW." But that is not exactly what I've done. There is no wishful thinking that will turn Vaughan Williams, retroactively, into a practicing Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Baptist, or Seventh Day Adventist, nor does this article propose such an endeavor. Instead, this article has shown that Vaughan Williams' atheist and agnostic phases were not quite so strong as scholars have asserted; that his works can not be construed as pantheistic; that his agnosticism is neither of the Russellian nor the Brahmsian variety; and that his works are profound meditations, perfectly orthodox, in deep harmony with Christian theology. Though it is impossible to determine the ultimate reason why scholars of the past have written the things they have about Vaughan Williams, it seems that their insistence on an overly reductive understanding of religion and agnosticism was a type of wishful thinking. Perhaps, like academia in general, they fell prey to the Christophobic *zeitgeist* of the last half-century or so. Just as it does no good to quibble about whether Vaughan Williams was really a secret Christian in disguise, so it is useless to claim that his works are not profoundly Christian; that is, that they are derived from a Christian world-view, informed by Christian theology, and resonant with the Christian message. If Vaughan Williams is to assume his rightful place in the history of music, if he is to be given more than the second-tier status he is currently given by the majority of academics, it is the Christian symbolism within his works that will have to be brought to light. For it is in this that he most clearly surpasses his contemporaries. What other composer of his day produced such monumental meditations on the nativity, the apocalypse, the relationship of the soul to God, and the Eucharist? In this respect, his name is worthy of discussion with the company of Palestrina, Byrd, Tallis, J. S. Bach, Bruckner, and, after him, Messiaen. To suppress this dimension of his art, and this achievement, only diminishes his legacy, and denies the listening public a doorway into some of the greatest masterpieces Western Civilization has produced. To bring Vaughan Williams' musical achievement the recognition it deserves, and to firmly establish all of his masterpieces in the repertoire of all orchestras, we must not give short shrift to the eternal values which informed his art, and upon which he staked the work of his career. Scholars must move beyond mere ideologies, beyond narrow definitions, beyond reductive caricatures, and beyond mere wishful thinking, plunging into the depths of the works themselves.

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NOTES

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- 5 UVW pg 11
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- 7 Kennedy, Michael. The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams. OUP 1964, pg 42
- 8 Russell, Bertrand. "Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?" Why I am not a Christian and other essays. Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1957. pg 24
- 9 Russell, Bertrand. "Why I am not a Christian" Why I am not a Christian and other essays. Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1957. pg 22
- 10 Russell. Preface to "Why I am not a Christian and other essays. Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1957. pg i
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- 12 UVW pg 138
- 13 The translation used by James is Day is by F.J. Church
- 14 Howes, Frank. The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams. OUP 1954, p150
- 15 Kennedy pg 194
- 16 Day, James. Vaughan Williams. OUP 1998, p103-104
- 17 Bloom, Harold. How to Read and Why. Scribner (New York). 2000. p25
- 18 Kennedy pg 313
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- 20 Adams, Byron, p99
- 21 I am indebted to Timothy Arena for a conversation a few years ago, where he pointed out the term "5th Day Adventists."
- 22 Seddon, Eric. "The Pilgrim's Progress in Context: a preliminary study." The Journal of the RVW Society (No 26 February 2003)
- 23 UVW pgs 425-26
- 24 cf. Adams, Byron. To be a Pilgrim: A Meditation on Vaughan Williams and Religion. The Journal of the RVW Society No 33 June 05, p 4
- 25 Brahms said to his friend Richard Heuberger, "Apart from Frau Schumann I'm not attached to anybody with my whole soul! And truly that is terrible and one should neither think such a thing nor say it. Is that not a lonely life! Yet we can't believe in immortality on the other side. The only true immortality lies in one's children." Johannes Brahms: A Biography, by Jan Swafford (1997, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.)
- 26 UVW pg 425
- 27 Kennedy pg 388
- 28 Vaughan Williams, Ralph. The English Hymnal pg ix.
- 29 Chesterton, G.K. The Collected Poems. Methuen: London 1950. pg 110
- 30 Howes pg 48
- 31 Kennedy 187
- 32 Seddon, Eric. "Mysticism and Joyful Solemnity: Two moments of D Major in The Pilgrim's Progress". Journal of the RVW Society.
- 33 Day pg 103
- 34 Kennedy pg 42
- 35 UVW pg70
- 36 Aldridge, Jeffrey. "A Christian Atheist." Journal of the RVW Society. No 33. June 2005. p7
- 37 G.K Chesterton paints a delightful portrait of Dearmer in his autobiography, saying "Dr. Dearmer was in the habit of walking about in a cassock and biretta which he had carefully reconstructed as being the right pattern for an Anglican or Anglo-Catholic priest; and he was humorously grieved when its strictly traditional and national character was misunderstood by the little boys in the street."
- 38 Booty, John E. "Christian Spirituality: From Wilberforce to Temple"; William J. Wolf, ed. Anglican Spirituality. Morehouse-Barlow, Co. Inc. 1982 pg 79
- 39 From here on in the text, I will use Catholic, with the capital "C". The ecclesiological disputes are many and intricate between all of the various denominations claiming catholicity, and it is beyond the scope or purpose of the present article to address them. Here the capital C is intended only to give clarity to certain doctrines Anglo-Catholics hold in common with Roman Catholics, especially Eucharistic doctrine. Since the foundations of these doctrines, and my understanding of them expressed in the essay, are most clearly formulated and propagated by the Roman Catholic Church, I will be using them as the basis for my sacramental arguments, directly, rather than sifting through the various disputes in the history of 19th century Anglicanism, which, worthy as they are to discuss, would be too laborious and distracting in an article on Vaughan Williams.
- 40 Vaughan Williams referred to a "fine hymn of Dearmer's": the setting of a Wagner tune for which there was no appropriate text. This signifies that RVW was not only involved with the texts, but that he had an appreciation for them.
- 41 Foss, Hubert. Ralph Vaughan Williams: a study. George G. Harrap and Co, Ltd, 1950
- 42 Foss pg 106
- 43 Day pg 132
- 44 Roman Missal. Scepter Publishers 1993. p.737
- 45 cf. Cantalamessa, Reniero. The Eucharist: Our Sanctification. The Liturgical Press 1993. and Hahn, Scott. The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth. Doubleday 1999.
- 46 Once again, theological differences between those denominations asserting catholicity would reate a lengthy discussion not pertinent to the present article. My exposition is based upon Roman Catholic teaching, which requires that a person is "bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins once a year." The Catechism of the Catholic Church goes on to say that "Anyone who is aware of having committed mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion...without first receiving sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession." (Catechism, no 1457)
- 47 UVW pg 304

SIR JOHN IN LOVE

Michael Kennedy presented the following introduction to the opera at the English National Opera on Saturday 11th March 2006

There is no Shakespeare play called *Falstaff*. The fat knight, page to the Duke of Norfolk in his boyhood so he tells us, is a subsidiary character in the historical plays *King Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2 (1597) where he appears as drinking companion of the heir to the throne Prince Hal, with whom he not only knocks back gallons of sack carousing in the Boar's Head with the disreputable Poin, Pistol and Bardolph and such women as Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Quickly but accompanies him on various probably illegal escapades such as the ambush at Gad's Hill. Falstaff rides to Gloucestershire to join in the repression of a rebellion which is followed by Hal's accession to the throne. Back in London for the coronation, Falstaff expects preferment as one of the new king's cronies but is ruthlessly cast aside. His death, babbling of green fields (or was it *Greensleeves*?), is described by Mistress Quickly in *King Henry V*. There is a legend, which I hope is true although it probably isn't, that Queen Elizabeth I was so taken by Falstaff that she expressed a wish to see a play in which Sir John was in love. So Shakespeare interrupted his work on another play – perhaps *Julius Caesar* – to scribble *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in double quick time in 1597 or 1598. Many Shakespeare commentators regard it as a poor and unworthy play, but it has held the stage for 400 years – most modern playwrights such as Harold Pinter would happily settle for that. And the play has attracted several composers of opera, the most famous and successful example being Verdi's *Falstaff*.

Why, you may ask, would anyone want to write an opera about Falstaff when there already existed a masterpiece by Verdi?

One answer is that composers had been attracted to Falstaff before Verdi wrote his opera in the 1890s. The first known setting occurred in Paris in 1761 with music by one Papavoine. Then in 1794 Peter Ritter wrote a singspiel called *Die lustige Witwe von Windsor*, produced in Mannheim. Dittersdorf also set the same libretto in 1796 and two years later Antonio Salieri – the Mozart Salieri – composed a three-act opera called *Falstaff*, with a libretto which owes very little to the original.

The next Falstaff opera was the Irish composer Michael Balfe's produced at Drury Lane in 1838 and never as popular as his *Bohemian Girl*. After that came Nicolai's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, produced in Berlin in 1847, which is still often performed though not often in this country (apart from the overture). Some of you may have seen last summer's excellent Buxton Festival production. Vaughan Williams told me that he thought this was the best of the Falstaff operas. It is certainly nearer to Shakespeare's plot than Salieri's and follows it more closely than either Verdi or Vaughan Williams.

In 1893 in Milan Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*, was performed and was not all that much of a box-office success though soon acknowledged as a masterpiece. The libretto by Boito took many liberties with Shakespeare but concentrated all the interest on Falstaff himself to give us one of the great baritone roles in all opera.

In 1913 at the Leeds Festival Falstaff made another musical appearance, not in opera nor as the comic Falstaff of the *Merry Wives* but as the Falstaff of the history plays *King Henry IV* parts 1 and 2 in Elgar's symphonic study for orchestra. This was the Falstaff who also attracted Gustav Holst in 1924. He was reading *Henry IV* and noticed that the words fitted a tune in a volume of English country dances. He then tried to discover how many other tunes fitted the rest of the words and the result was his one-act opera *At the Boar's Head*.

It so happened that 1924 was the year in which Holst's great friend Vaughan Williams began work on *Sir John in Love*, which he first called *The Fat Knight*. In 1912 and 1913 he had been music director for Frank Benson's Shakespeare company at Stratford-upon-Avon and had arranged music for *The Merry Wives*, most of it folk songs and folk dances and including *Greensleeves*. At this time he was composing his first opera *Hugh the Drover* although he did not orchestrate it until he returned from the First World War in 1919. It was produced for the first time in 1924 at the Royal College of Music and later by the British National Opera Company, a kind of forerunner of English National Opera which also toured the country. *Hugh the Drover* has never entirely faded from the repertoire and I don't see why it should when it contains such lovely music. I suggest that to those who say that Vaughan Williams was not an opera composer!

That Vaughan Williams had been thinking of a Falstaff opera for some time since returning from the Army in 1918 is evident from Sir Donald Tovey's programme-note for *A Pastoral Symphony* in which he states that Vaughan Williams had told him that the scherzo was originally sketched for "a ballet of oafs and fairies." Not oafs, in truth. Vaughan Williams was referring to Mistress Page's speech in *The Merry Wives* in which she says that she will dress the village boys "like urchins, ouphes and fairies, green and white", an ouphe being an elf. Was this "ballet" an early idea for the finale of the opera in Windsor Forest? At any rate he was undeterred, as he wrote in the preface to the score of the opera, by appearing to be "entering into competition with three great men – Shakespeare, Verdi and Holst." He might have added Elgar, whose great symphonic study has a claim to be the most penetrating musical exploration of Falstaff's character, but he was not an unqualified admirer of this work, deploring "a general consensus of opinion among [Elgar commentators] to praise *Falstaff* at the expense of his other works". By 1924, in any case, there had hardly been a decent performance of *Falstaff*.

Shakespeare, he wrote in the preface to the score of *Sir John*, was "fair game, like the Bible, and may be made use of nowadays even for advertisements of soap and razors." He made his own adaptation of *The Merry Wives* (which he called "this wonderful comedy"), keeping Shakespeare's words but where he needed arias and choruses not supplied in the original text he followed Holst's example and borrowed from other Shakespeare plays, for example *Sigh no more, ladies* from *Much Ado about Nothing*, and from other Elizabethan poets, including *See the chariot at hand* and *Have you seen but a bright lily grow* from Ben Jonson, *Come, O come my life's delight* from Campion and others, not forgetting *Greensleeves* sung by Mistress Ford as she awaits



Sir John in Love
at the ENO

Falstaff's wooing and later the basis of an orchestral interlude, re-modelled in 1934 as the famous *Fantasia*.

Vaughan Williams did not follow Holst in setting the whole opera to folk-song. "When a particular folk-tune appeared to me to be fitting accompaniment to the situation, I have used it", he wrote. "When I could not find a suitable folk-tune, I have made shift to make up something of my own." He quoted ten folk-tunes amounting to a bit more than fifteen minutes of music in an opera lasting 130 minutes. One of these is the old *chanson Vrai dieu d'amours* which he gives to the Frenchman Dr Caius, thus almost making him a credible suitor for Anne Page.

But the competitor he knew would be most strongly held against him is Verdi, whose last opera is now regarded as one of the marvels of the lyric theatre. This was not always the case and would not have been the general view in 1924. "I hope it may be possible", Vaughan Williams wrote, "to consider that even Verdi's masterpiece does not exhaust all the possibilities of Shakespeare's genius." Masterpiece you will note. But he had reservations about it, mainly the libretto, which he expressed in an article in *OPERA* in February 1951: "*Falstaff* is not my favourite opera. I know it is very brilliant and skilful and that the basket scene ensemble is a miracle of stagecraft. After all, the real Verdi carried on his drama in terms of broad tune, but Boito's medicated Shakespeare hardly ever gives him a chance. Again and again the orchestra seems to be preparing us for something like the big tunes of his earlier operas, but they do not materialise. Let us be grateful, however, for the heavenly melody with the oboe which accompanies the love-making of Anne [Nannetta] and Fenton. Here the composer was not hampered by his librettist's sham Shakespeare and was able to rejoice in good Italian slush all about kissing!"

This seems like nonsense to us today, but it was the received opinion fifty years ago that there were "no tunes" in *Falstaff*. Incidentally, Vaughan Williams pays homage to Verdi by giving a "heavenly melody with oboe" to Anne in Act I in *Weep eyes, break heart*. No folk songs here – this is Vaughan Williams' invention. And a gorgeous duet with Fenton follows that.

Comparing the two operas, *Falstaff* and *Sir John in Love*, is a pointless exercise. Boito simplified and concentrated the plot so that Falstaff should be the main figure, dominating almost every scene vocally and physically. Vaughan Williams' *Falstaff* is more genial and expansive and is out of the action for considerable periods. He is no buffoon, nor of course is he Elgar's tragi-comic figure. Here he is plotting to woo both Mrs Ford and Mrs Page and composing a love song. The delicious orchestral writing tells us that we can't help liking this rogue.

In Verdi's opera Ford is given one of the finest arias, the famous "jealousy" aria. In *Sir John in Love* the baritone singing Ford is also given one of the melodic highspots of the work. This comes in the fourth act after Ford has realised he was wrong to suspect his wife of having an affair with Falstaff. "Pardon me wife", he pleads.

This opera contains some of Vaughan Williams' most lyrical music, at times recalling his *Pastoral Symphony* and at others looking ahead to the *Fifth Symphony* and to the *Serenade to Music*, one of the most beautiful of all Shakespeare settings. It is an extraordinary fact that from 1924 to 1928, when Vaughan Williams was composing *Sir John in Love*, he was also working on two other operas, *Riders to the Sea* and *The Poisoned Kiss* – as well as on the suite *Flos Campi*, the oratorio *Sancta Civitas*, the *Violin Concerto*, the first movement of the *Piano Concerto* and smaller works. And he was always at work on a fourth opera, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It was a prolific period, notable for stylistic variety. Where Verdi's opera moves like quicksilver, Vaughan Williams' is more leisurely, until the final scene in Windsor Forest which rivals Verdi's in its operatic skilfulness and stagecraft and has the superb coup of the chorus singing "See the chariot at hand" to a heart-stopping melody. We have had the humiliation of Falstaff and all the muddle about the mock marriages, the result of the attempts by the parents to stop Anne marrying Fenton. But now a group of young men drag in a country cart bedecked with flowers and Anne and Fenton riding in it. It is a wonderful moment and Vaughan Williams finds the perfect tune for Ben Jonson's words.

I have only touched on a few of the reasons why you should see and enjoy this opera. It is not meant to supersede Verdi nor could it. It is an alternative version, you might say a more Shakespearean version. It is certainly an English National Opera and ought to be at home here. But I am glad too that it is being conducted by someone who is not English. Vaughan Williams' music is not just for the English – it is for everyone who loves and admires the art of music in all its guises.

I last saw it in 1958 at Sadler's Wells in company with the composer. On the way back to his home in a taxi he seemed deep in thought. I asked him if he had been pleased with the performance. "Oh yes," he replied "but I was just thinking I don't think I need to revise it."

'A REAL JOY TO SING'

Stephen Connock meets Sir John Falstaff - Andrew Shore - shortly after the last performance of *Sir John in Love*.



Andrew Shore is no stranger to Vaughan Williams. He directed *Hugh the Drover* whilst at Bristol University and more recently sang Sir John Falstaff in the London Opera Centre's performance at St John's Smith Square in London. His love and understanding of the part marked his interpretation of Falstaff in the recent ENO production at the Coliseum. As he put it "There is such a warm-hearted Englishness about the music. People leave the theatre enriched by it."

Andrew Shore was very comfortable with director Ian Judge's setting of the opera in Edwardian times. For him, the music captures the aura of the early twentieth century – a period of rediscovering folk song, of open-air music pageants with music still very much part of the community. Indeed, the music of *Sir John in Love* "rejoices to the English sense of community when everyone had a folk song on their lips be it in the pub or around the fire-side."

"How different this is to Verdi" says Andrew Shore. "Verdi focuses on Falstaff, detached from the world and society around him. This is a more reflective interpretation. In Vaughan Williams' conception, Falstaff is very much part of the community. Vaughan Williams knew *The Merry Wives of Windsor* well from his Benson days at Stratford and has a clear sense of the importance of each character, even down to the timings necessary for the performers to make their mark."

These comments show Andrew Shore as having a shrewd and perceptive grasp of what Vaughan Williams was trying to achieve in *Sir John in Love*. He feels that the opera's construction gets off to a rather slow start for the audience although the more one gets to know the piece, the tighter the construction becomes. The opera is, moreover "a real joy to sing." He continues "Falstaff's part sits well on the voice, especially the lyrical episodes in Act II. There is nothing in Verdi quite like this. The recitative in Act IV ("the Windsor bell has struck twelve") is perhaps a little low – singers' voices normally go up toward the end of the evening – but the folk songs and poetic interludes are marvellous."

Alistair Miles (Ford) and Andrew Shore had much fun with the Falstaff – "Brook" scenes in Act II. In rehearsal Alistair Miles had said "F-Brook" by mistake, but Andrew Shore picked up on the mistake and it stayed in the production. It was a very funny addition to the score which Vaughan Williams would have loved. During rehearsals, some of the dancing moments were played down – everyone decided to let the music speak for itself rather than needing illustration by choreography. The *Episode*, added by Vaughan Williams later, was originally included in the production but omitted in the end as the cast and director felt it did not fit.

Andrew Shore reflects on the production as showing the composer's "love and delight in Shakespeare". Above all, for him "it was a great

ensemble performance. Everyone gets a chance to shine with each character tellingly drawn. Even Peter Simple's role is convincing and touching. Oleg Caetani, the conductor, adored the piece, loving the Englishness of it."

Remembering with a smile downing two pints of best ale (the second shown in the illustrations), getting into "the smallest basket I have ever seen" and his theatrical scene with "Brook", Andrew Shore appreciated the audience's reaction to the music. "They really liked it. If I was in the ENO management, I would want to keep it in repertoire." Absolutely – and Andrew Shore should be the first singer to be contracted for its revival.

(Stephen Connock met Andrew Shore in London on 5 April 2006)

***Sir John in Love* reviewed by Stephen Connock**

It was July 1958 when *Sir John in Love* last opened for a professional performance in London. Then it was a New Opera Company production (Vaughan Williams happened to be their President) conducted by Brian Priestman. He was to become music director of the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford shortly after this production. The producer was Brian Trowell and Eric Shilling sang Falstaff. One of the last concerts Vaughan Williams attended before his death in late August 1958 was the performance of *Sir John* over the August Bank Holiday.

Now, in March 2006, after almost 48 years, the English National Opera gave *Sir John* another hearing with Ian Judge as Director and Oleg Caetani conducting. Andrew Shore was the superb Falstaff with a striking cast of British singers giving excellent support. For each of the performances I attended, the Coliseum was around 90% full – we always said Vaughan Williams could attract large audiences for his operas over an extended run. Hopefully, promoters will be less timid in future.

The staging and costumes in the Coliseum were Edwardian rather than

Elizabethan, although the mock-Tudor gables on the houses suggested earlier times. Despite my initial misgivings, this worked well and in Act IV gave way to a wonderful timeless oak and the best on-stage bonfire I have ever seen.

Crowd scenes were entertaining, with cyclists calmly transversing the stage. The opening forays involving Falstaff's henchmen, Bardolph, Nym and Pistol, were suitably humorous and Anne Page (Sarah Fox) was delightful. She looked good and sang with a lovely purity of tone. Andrew Kennedy was also ardent and youthful as Fenton, albeit singing in a heavy overcoat. The young lovers receive from Vaughan Williams music of exquisite lyricism, as if Hugh and Mary had walked onto the set off the open road. Caetani and the ENO orchestra played throughout with affection and understanding of the rich score.

Highlights of the production were the Act II duets between Falstaff and Mistress Quickly (Sally Burgess) as well as between Falstaff and Ford (Alastair Miles). Miles was very impressive throughout – suitably dark and jealous at the end of Act I, humorous in disguise as Brook in Act II and poignant in forgiveness in his remarkable duet 'Pardon me wife' in Act IV. Marie McLaughlin as Mistress Page had a feisty, teasing stage presence that marked out her duets with Mistress Ford (Jean Rigby). Above all, Andrew Shore was a triumph – 'Go thy ways old Jack' was sung with superb warmth and ardour. His journey from mock conceit to genuine humility was brilliantly conveyed. My only regret was that this wonderful performance seems not to have been captured on DVD.

Musically, amongst many highlights, the opening of Act III stood out, with a warm-hearted Host (Nicholas Folwell) extolling the virtues of Fenton. The return of the 'See the chariot at hand here of love' melody, in Windsor Forest, at the end of the opera was a spine-tingling moment of affirmation, followed by the joyous final chorus. A life-enhancing experience. Let's hope and pray that we do not have to wait another 48 years to hear it again.

Stephen Connock

Jennie McGregor-Smith introduces . . . **English Song at Tardebigge**

Three years ago the lovely Georgian church of Tardebigge, more or less in the centre of England, was chosen for an experimental series of summer concerts of English Song. This was so popular that the series had to carry on, and now we look forward to the third season. There are three concerts, each starting at 3.00 pm, each with a pre-concert talk at 2.00 pm and each featuring a different 'voice'. The aims behind the series are to give opportunity for lovers of song who are unable to visit the mecca of the Wigmore concerts, to give opportunity to musicians who are seldom invited to perform the rich English repertoire, and to hear some of the work of composers of today.

"What a mouth-watering programme!" is how one audience member has described this summer's feast of song. June 25th brings soprano Donna Bateman with Christopher Glynn (piano), who will perform a varied collection including Walton's *A Song for the Lord Mayor's Table*, the intriguingly titled *Three Songs for a contemplative spaceman* by Quentin Thomas, some lovely Delius settings and the premiere of *Love, it is said...* by Lynne Plowman (currently in the news for her new opera *House of the Gods*).

The second concert on July 30th will be given by tenor James Gilchrist, one of this country's best known oratorio singers, with Anna Tilbrook (piano) whose programme starts with Britten's First Canticle, *My beloved is mine* and ends with Quilter's *Love's Philosophy* and Vaughan Williams' *Silent Noon*. At the centre of the afternoon is John Ireland's collection of A.E. Housman settings *The Land of Lost Content* and Britten's *Michelangelo Sonnets*, but there

are also recent works by Ryan Wigglesworth (*Seven Medieval Lyrics*) and Howard Skempton (*Three Songs for Jennie*). These two composers will be in discussion beforehand, talking to the title *Working with Words*.

A young baritone, Ronan Collett with Simon Lepper at the piano, carries on the Housman theme on August 20th, with that favourite group of Butterworth's, *A Shropshire Lad*, and Barber's setting of *With rue my heart is laden*. Three of Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel* and a group of folk song settings by Ireland, Britten and Warlock and then Bridge's tremendous *Love went a-riding* complete the most traditional programme of the series.

A very popular prelude to each concert is the free talk or discussion, when composers and experts add illumination to the songs. We first hear Lynne Plowman and Lyndon Jenkins discussing attitudes to song composition, comparing the way Delius wrote with the songwriter of today, and lastly the respected Birmingham Post critic on *The Art of Reviewing Song*. Also very popular are the tea and luscious cakes provided in the interval by the Community Hall committee!

Tardebigge, Nr. Bromsgrove in north Worcestershire, is easily reached from the motorway system, and a large proportion of the audience drive a considerable distance to join fellow enthusiasts at these friendly events. If you would like a leaflet, please contact, or ring 01527 872422, or write to me, Jennie McGregor-Smith, Coombe Cottage, Finstall, Bromsgrove B60 1EW.

Stephen Connock continues “Footsteps”...

following in the footsteps of RVW to visit Sheringham in North Norfolk

On demobilisation in 1919, Vaughan Williams moved from Valenciennes in France, not to London, or Dorking, but to Sheringham on the East Coast of England. This North Norfolk town sits high above the sea, with the resort of Cromer to the east and the pretty Norfolk villages of Weyborne and Blakeney to the west. A decade or more earlier, Vaughan Williams had visited the area collecting folk songs. Now at the age of 47 he started to rebuild his musical life after about five years in the army.

Adeline had chosen Sheringham as having the right climate to nurse her brother, Hervey. He was one of 12 Fishers, now reduced to 11 by the early death of Arthur as a result of injuries from the Boer War. Hervey had problems with his spine, and Adeline was devoted to supporting him. Adeline herself was at this point suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and she must have felt that the bracing climate of North Norfolk would have helped them both.

The rooms they rented were in Mainsail Hall, 5 The Boulevard, Sheringham – right on the sea front in the western side of the town centre. As the illustration shows, it is a substantial Edwardian house, built in 1906 by one Captain Dolphin. Adeline knew him and so it was that four rooms on the ground floor were rented in 1919. Ralph’s music room was at the front, just 50 yards from the sea.

The current owner is Mrs Bateman, a wonderful 94-year-old lady who is well aware of the Vaughan Williams connection. She placed the blue plaque on the front of the house. When she purchased the property in 1965, there were people who remembered Vaughan Williams in the area in 1919-20. She was often told that Vaughan Williams was seen pushing a basket wheelchair (she was very clear it was a *basket* wheelchair) for Adeline, down to the shops and along the sea front.

There is, too, a man aged 102 still living in the nearby village of North Walsham who remembers Vaughan Williams playing the violin in the house. Incredible isn’t it!

In the ground floor front room, Vaughan Williams went back to his *London Symphony*, reworked *Hugh the Drover* and began his *Pastoral Symphony*.

By November 1920, Vaughan Williams’ address had become Sea Salters, Alexandra Road, Sheringham. This is a more sombre part of town, half a mile back from the sea across the railway line. In May 1921, Hervey Fisher died and the way was free to return to London. Vaughan Williams’ Sheringham interlude was over, and the basket wheelchair would not be seen again on the High Street or Promenade.

Stephen Connock

(Next *Footsteps*: St Barnabas Church, South Lambeth)

Sheringham High Street in RVW’s time



The house and garden today



Mrs. Bateman, the house’s current owner



Letters

We are always pleased to receive contributions for this page

X-CERTIFICATE VAUGHAN WILLIAMS?

I myself when young might perhaps have joined in “giving the bird” to a Proms performance of the RVW 6th, a demonstration so sternly reprehended by Em Marshall in the Society Journal no. 34! Concert audiences include first-timers and new explorers of music; and those hoping to hear more cheery music in the wake of the “*Greensleeves*” *Fantasia*, the *English Folk-Song Suite*, *The Lark Ascending* and the *Fifth Symphony* could well have felt that they’d sought a fish only to be given a serpent.

We now know that the *Sixth Symphony* begins a trilogy; in the wake of the classical Mozart 39/40/41 and the powerful Sibelius 3/4/5 we have the overwhelming RVW 6/7/9, with interconnected themes and changing perspectives (see for example Jeffrey Aldridge’s “p.s.” in issue no. 27.) I imagine that Vaughan Williams needed to share his dark side with his listeners, as Hardy, “never so happy as when he’d written a miserable poem” did with his readers. Thus after the brutal crushing of the great melody in the 6th and after the raucous Scherzo, we have the melting oboe tune near the end of the Epilogue, and the mischief of the programme notes.

All in all, however, I prefer some of the other RVW symphonies as being more settled – nos. 3 and 5 for example, and especially the 2nd. Restore the “1913 Andantino” as I pleaded in issue no. 34 and we have love and compassion throughout the calamitous crisis, and re-emerging before the harps chime the three-quarters. Ought not the Proms programmes to be “certified” like cinema films, with “Parental Guidance” to be sought before buying tickets for works like, say, the Sixth, the Ninth and the Sibelius Fourth?

*Frank McManus,
Lancashire, UK*

RVW AT THE PROMS

I have noted with utter incredulity that RVW does not feature at all in this year’s Proms season, and there is only one serious Elgar piece (the 2nd Symphony), one Walton, one Britten, and no Holst or Delius, let alone any of the countless other twentieth-century British composers. Even Beethoven gets only two symphonies and the Violin Concerto.

The reason seems to be that the decks have been almost completely cleared for the Mozart and Shostakovich anniversaries. I have great admiration and affection for both composers, but this seems way over the top, particularly for Shostakovich, who has no less than eight symphonies featured, together with many other major works.

I look forward with keen anticipation to the 50th anniversary of RVW’s death in 2008, when I expect to see the Proms featuring the greatest ever festival of his music. Or is it not politically correct in today’s BBC to celebrate our national treasures?

I hope that the RVW Society will lobby the BBC ceaselessly to ensure proper recognition for Vaughan Williams in 2008.

*Nigel Blore,
Essex, UK*

RVW IN AUSTRALIA

One of Sydney’s most enterprising choirs, fielding up to 100 voices, is Collegium Musicum, part of the School of Music and Music Education at the University of New South Wales, formerly conducted by Patricia Brown and since her retirement by Sonia Maddock. They give about 3

concerts a year, and at the end of May attracted a large audience to a mighty Vaughan Williams program: *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and *Five Tudor Portraits*, two masterpieces which had their premieres a week apart in 1936.

Though practical considerations prevented use of a full orchestra, a string orchestra and pianist Lara de Wit did their best to bolster fine singing – sometimes slightly marked by caution restraining emotional spontaneity – by the keen choir and soloists Mark Donnelly (baritone for both works), Vivien Conacher (soprano for the cantata) and Jo Burton (mezzo-soprano for the John Skelton Tudor poems). It added up to an outstanding music event honouring Britain’s greatest post-Purcell and pre-Britten composer.

A week earlier, Wendy Dixon, one of Sydney’s most venturesome sopranos, and oboist Diana Doherty, principal oboist of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, performed Vaughan Williams’ rarely heard *10 Blake Songs* (1957).

*Fred Blanks,
New South Wales, Australia*

FINZI FACTS...

I was delighted to read Simona Pakenham’s response to my review of Diana McVeagh’s *Gerald Finzi: His Life and Music* (RVW Soc Journal no.35, p.11), with her memories of Finzi himself. I should like to respond by revealing the source of my note that she had been in line to write Finzi’s biography – Stephen Banfield, who writes on p. 485 of *Gerald Finzi* (Faber 1997) that: ‘Delighted with Simon Pakenham’s study of himself which appeared in 1957, Vaughan Williams suggested Finzi as the subject of her next book’, though to whom is not recorded. Banfield goes on to say that the late Percy Young was also mooted. However, Diana McVeagh had also been fixed as biographer in Joy Finzi’s mind within weeks of Gerald’s death in 1956.

An interesting aside on Joy Finzi: on p.176, Banfield says that Simona Pakenham was ‘terrified of her’!

*Rolf Jordan,
Wirral*

AND FICTION...

I just thought I’d pen a quick note to say that: I know that my articles in the VW journal are of amazingly high quality, and it’s only understandable that the essence of each article is bound to stay in the memory of the reader for weeks. Indeed, in the last journal I found evidence of this in an unexpected way. William Hedley had obviously been so affected by reading my article on Bernard Herrmann that in a haze (presumably drunken) he credited another quality article by another writer (Rolf Jordan) to myself. It’s understandable that he should do this of course. So starting with next month’s journal you’ll probably find that all the articles in the journal are credited to me. Well he has to do something to maintain the very high standard of the journal – doesn’t he?

*Rob Furneaux,
Devon*

Editor’s note: Apologies are due to both contributors for confusing their names in the second line of Simona Pakenham’s article on page 11 of the last Journal.

READER RESPONSE

Today I received the latest *RVW Society Journal*, which I opened with much trepidation. I was expecting, after the last Journal, in which two of my letters were published, for there to be howls of protest at my views or at the very least someone willing to enter into some kind of dialogue. Nothing! What am I to conclude? Do the Society members all agree with my views? Are they all too polite to air theirs?

What does one do to stimulate debate? I feel frustrated, I want to know other people's points of view. I am quite happy for them to disagree with me! Surely this Society exists to express the views of its members, to encourage debate, to educate and to encourage people's thinking! Music is more than academics expressing their views: it is a medium that touches the heart and soul of a person!

I note from the column "From the Editor" that the subject of religion rumbles on! I feel totally frustrated, surely the letters page of the Journal is an opportunity for members to express their views whatever they are? Thank goodness Tony Kitson expressed his! Atheist or believer, we all have a right to express our views. We live in a society that allows individuals to express their points of view, let us do it!

Members not interested in Walt Whitman's poetry? Just to stir the pot, I find it dire! Having said that RVW's setting of his poetry is exquisite! I am listening to the music, the voices, not the words!

Clive Elgar,
Norfolk

THOSE "TOP TENS": FINAL WORDS?

At last the moment you've all been waiting for (well, one or two of you have): the results of the Vaughan Williams top ten poll. First of all, my warmest thanks to those members who emailed me with their top tens, and those who sent me their nominations on a post card (and what a lovely selection of colourful scenes I received – everything from a dramatic landscape of South Georgia Island to a painting showing the destruction of Bordesley Abbey in 1538!) Also my thanks to those who sent their nominations from far away places – nominations were received from members in France, the U.S.A, Canada and Australia.

When I set out on the task to find the members' top ten pieces I thought that perhaps the result would be a foregone conclusion with the most well known pieces of Vaughan Williams' output, namely, *The Lark Ascending* and the *Tallis Variations* surely heading the list. Not a bit of it. The winner as you'll see below was – trumpet fanfare – Symphony No 5 – although that said, *The Lark* and *Tallis*, did come second and third respectively.

In all a total of no less than 46 works received nominations, ranging from the symphonies and concertos to such small scale works as *The Water Mill*, *Silent Noon*, and *Down Ampney*.

One particularly notable feature was the remarkably uneven spread of nominations across RVW's output. Whereas the symphonies invariably appeared in members' top tens, the choral works and operas were comparatively poorly represented. To put things in context, when I received a top ten list I awarded points for each position. A number 1 nomination would receive 10 points; a number 2 nomination 9 points and so forth with a number 10 nomination receiving only 1 point. The overall winner, the Fifth Symphony, received no less than 125 points, and second placed *Tallis* 103 points. The operas by comparison did not fair well: *Pilgrim* scored a creditable 39 points, whereas *Hugh the Drover* scored only 4, *Sir John In Love* just 1 and *The Poisoned Kiss* none at all!

This stunning result more than indicates that the society's members value highly the orchestral works, but consider the choral works to be of less importance. To further emphasise the point, it was very notable that of the major choral works, *Dona Nobis Pacem* received just 17 points, the Mass 15 points, whilst *Sancta Civitas* received no points at all!

What of the pastoral VW versus the gritty VW? Well, as I suppose you'd expect it was the gentle VW that won out over the more aggressive VW. All the gentler pieces received points, the *Serenade*, The Rhapsodies, and the *Oxford Elegy* were well supported, whereas Symphony No.4, received fewer votes than any symphony other than the 8th – which surprisingly received only 5 votes, and was last amongst the symphonies by quite a margin. (A shame, I quite like the 8th.)

Here is the final top list as voted for by the members:

- 1 Symphony 5
- 2 Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis
- 3 The Lark Ascending
- 4 Symphony No. 2
- 5 Symphony No. 3
- 6 Symphony No. 7
- 7 Pilgrim's Progress
- 8 Symphony No. 6
- 9 Job
- 10 Serenade to Music

Order of symphonies as voted for by the members:

- 1 Symphony No 5
- 2 Symphony No. 2
- 3 Symphony No. 3
- 4 Symphony No. 7
- 5 Symphony No. 6
- 6 Symphony No. 9
- 7 Symphony No. 1
- 8 Symphony No. 4
- 9 Symphony No 8

Thanks again to all that voted, and especially to John Eldon for his encouragement to launch the vote.

Rob Furneaux,
Devon

MORE...

A sure way of stirring up arguments is to publish lists of ten greatest of anything, let alone composers, as Linda Hayward bravely did in her letter in the October 2004 edition. It is even more contentious to try to list them in order! Incidentally, although I can put up with the omission of Delius from her list of British composers, why no Walton, Arnold or Rubbra?

But it certainly got me to thinking if I could possibly come up with a list of ten favourites and how it could be done (vain hope!) systematically. I came up with the idea of totting up how many works of each I had on LP, CD or cassette. I have a rather old (started in 1968) card index of all my recordings. Perhaps the number of complete cards for each composer would be a guide? Not really, because I inherited the whole of my late father's huge LP collection, and dad was a confirmed believer in the First Viennese School, and included very few British works in his collection.

But I have acquired over the years a large collection of my favourite British (really mostly English) works. So adopting this exceedingly rough method, the results for home-grown composers appears below. But it does not tell the whole story. For instance the Gurney index is taken up with mostly individual two- and three-minute songs. As a further indication of my obsessions, those marked with an asterisk denote the composers where I have collected very nearly all their works available in any recorded form.

1. Vaughan Williams* (52.5)
2. Gurney* (9.5)
3. Elgar (8.0)
4. Rubbra* (7.0)
5. Dowland (6.5)
6. Holst (6.5)
7. Finzi* (6.0)
8. Stanford (6.0)
9. Walton* (6.0)
10. Britten (5.0)

As far as international composers are concerned, I find it difficult to narrow it down to just ten, as there are so many types of work involved. But my favourites would have to include the following which is in alphabetical order and definitely *not* (except for the first!) in order of preference:

Bach	(for everything)
Beethoven	(for everything)
Borodin	(for everything)
Brahms	(for the 4th Symphony, the Violin Concerto, the German Requiem, the piano works and the smaller chamber works)
Dvorak	(for the symphonies and chamber works)
Haydn	(for the symphonies, string quartets and masses)
Mozart	(for the 'Jupiter', the piano concertos and the operas)
Rachmaninov	(for everything, especially the Second Symphony, Symphonic Dances, and All Night Vigil)
Ravel	(for the chamber works, Mother Goose, and Daphnis and Chloe)
Shostakovich	(for nearly everything, but <i>not</i> the Jazz Suite which has nothing at all to do with real jazz)
Schubert	(for the songs and chamber works)
Sibelius	(for the symphonies and tone poems)

I find it easier to list those I don't like much, or think are grossly overrated, who include: anyone in the Second Viennese School, Bruckner, Weill, Wagner, Hugo Wolf, most Prokofiev, most Stravinsky, most Vivaldi (although the few non-formulaic ones are excellent), most Janacek, most Delius, and (although he figures in my ten British composers) most Britten. I am treading on toes here, I am fully aware!

But, to close, if I were put in the awful position of having to be restricted to listening to only one composer's works for the rest of my life, I would choose Johann Sebastian Bach, the greatest one of the lot. Sorry, Uncle Ralph! (But I'm sure he wouldn't mind.)

*Michael Gainsford,
Leicestershire*

A "TOP TEN" REACTION

The list on page 16 of the last Journal prompted me to investigate the *Six Teaching Pieces* for piano, of which I'd never heard. My music supplier was able to send me a copy.

I'm not a well-known pianist, and I don't expect to record the set – but I'm grateful to Stuart Fairbrother for his prompting!

*Brian Sturtridge,
Bournemouth, UK*

HOW I MISSED THE 2005 AGM

My wife and I have always enjoyed our yearly visit to the AGM, especially when it used to be held at Charterhouse, but perhaps the following horror story will illustrate some of the problems experienced by members living north of Watford in actually arriving at places like Dorking on time.

In 2004 we were stuck in a traffic jam on the M25 for over an hour, only three miles from the Dorking exit, and arrived at the meeting by the skin

of our teeth. But last year we managed to cap that experience, with something to spare. Luckily I managed to see the comical side of our experiences, and after a somewhat longer delay, so did Barbara.

We left home in good time, allowing more than three hours for the journey to give time for a bite to eat at Denbies. Our route was via the M40 and the dreaded M25, but as it was a Sunday we expected the traffic to be reasonable. However, coming into the dip on the M40 at High Wycombe, we noticed our lane slowing down and the outer lane also filling up. Eventually we ground to a halt at the bottom of the dip with all three lanes solid. From that point one can see well over a mile ahead. All three lanes were full and nothing moved. The car radio also spoke of traffic jams on the M25, so sadly Barbara and I decided to abort our trip as there seemed no way we could reach Dorking on time.

But how to escape the M40? After waiting about half an hour we decided to break the law and get off via an access onto the motorway from Wycombe. Several others seemed to be of the same idea, some reversing down the access, presumably so they would not be noticed by any onlooking police. We drove down the hard shoulder for a couple of hundred metres, then down the access road, quite blatantly in forward gear and into High Wycombe.

But having left home for a 'day out' and needing a lunch, we decided to get back onto the M40, and visit Oxford for the rest of the day.

So far, so good. But now the fun really started. On reaching the vicinity of Oxford we saw signs saying 'For Oxford use the park and ride'. So we parked, and got on a bus that looked as if it were about to leave. It was a very luxurious bus, and the fare seemed quite steep, but after all this was Oxford where it costs about £5 to park for an hour.

However, I almost immediately began to have worries, although I said nothing to my wife until after we turned right out of the car park and I realised that we were on the same road from which we had left the M40. I then had to admit that I feared we were perhaps going to London. Barbara wasn't very happy. But we found the bus had toilets so that was one problem solved. The driver then announced that he was departing from the usual route because of a serious jam on the M40!

So we decided to sit back and enjoy the trip. By a devious route we reached the M4 and then the M25, and thence into London Victoria. But we were able to see London landmarks we had never seen, or hadn't seen for a long time, in addition to Windsor Castle; among them being Notting Hill, Hammersmith Palais, Brook Green (of Gustav Holst fame, the benches well stocked with derelicts drinking cider and meths), Brentford Football Ground, the site of Tyburn Tree, and Marble Arch.

On arrival at Victoria we were given confusing directions as to the whereabouts of the departure point for the return bus. All the bus personnel we asked seemed to be foreigners with a poor grasp of English. But at last we located it. Time for quick refreshment. We didn't wish to miss the last bus. In the shopping complex we found a modest eatery and had a passable cup of tea and a truly awful sandwich each.

Then back on the bus to Oxford. We eventually arrived back home at about six-thirty, rather tired. I later calculated that we had travelled almost 350 miles just for a couple of grotty sandwiches. But we had found a rather inexpensive way of getting to London...

We will, therefore, be thinking twice before setting out for a future AGM, unless the venue can be changed to somewhere a bit more accessible to Society members living north of the metropolis.

*Michael Gainsford,
Leicestershire*

Concert Reviews

The *TALLIS FANTASIA* in LONDON

In the presence of HRH The Prince of Wales

The Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank, London, was the setting on 9th March for a memorable concert of English music which included the world premiere of a new piece by Sir Richard Rodney Bennett to commemorate the late Queen Mother. Hence the attendance of HRH Prince Charles as he had commissioned the piece. The presence of royalty at the concert was in no way obtrusive except for some airport-style security at the entrance which was handled cheerfully and calmly by the police.

This was the programme in full:

Introduction and Allegro for strings (Elgar)

Reflections on a Scottish Folk song, for cello and strings (R R Bennett)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (Vaughan Williams)

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (Britten)

The Philharmonia Orchestra was conducted by David Parry and the cello soloist was Paul Watkins.

As the orchestra took their seats there were stringed instruments as far as the eye could see. The common factors between the works chosen for this concert were (a) that they were written by English composers, and (b) they were each derived to some extent from a melody written by somebody else. Of course in Vaughan Williams' case this was Tallis, and for Britten it was Purcell. The other works were based on folk song, the Elgar perhaps more loosely than the Bennett.

The programme was a balanced one as it shifted in mood between the different pieces. It began with Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* – and what a beginning! I had never heard this piece performed live and was astonished at its fury and agitation on the one hand, contrasting with tenderness on the other. The orchestra under David Parry's direction could unleash a whirlwind in the concert hall and then calm it down to a sigh.

There was a shift to a more reflective mood for the Bennett piece which is based on the Scottish folk song *Ca' the yowes to the knowes* ("Call the ewes to the knolls"). I have yet to make up my mind about this piece, after only one hearing, but the highlight for me was the cello soloist Paul Watkins whose playing was astounding. This work is to be recorded by the same soloist and orchestra in May 2006 on the Chandos label and I would recommend that devotees of the cello seriously consider getting hold of a copy.

After the interval the orchestra took their seats for the *Tallis Fantasia* and I was gripped simultaneously by eager anticipation and mild panic as I could not see the second orchestra anywhere. Where were they? Stuck on the Tube? Still at the bar, perhaps? David Parry seemed undaunted and started the piece. I resisted the urge to put my hand up and stop him – wisely as it turned out. The second orchestra were indeed there, but hidden. On cue the main orchestra would stop playing and a ghostly echo came from behind a screen at the back of the stage. This was an ingenious idea and was executed brilliantly. I suspect that this was not the first time in history that this has been done but it caught *me* out.

The percussion, wind and brass players were allowed to come out to play for Britten's piece which effortlessly shifted between all the instruments. It lightened the mood after the dark intensity of the Vaughan Williams and was a fitting end to the concert.

The highlights for me? Probably the Elgar whirlwind and the cello *tour de force* in the Bennett piece. Surprisingly, not the Vaughan Williams this time. It was a competent performance, but for me lacked feeling. This

sounds unfair on the orchestra and conductor but they could not be faulted, so perhaps it was more a case of the concert-hall setting not being right for this deeply spiritual piece.

I wonder if His Royal Highness could be persuaded to join the RVW Society? I didn't get the chance to ask him...

Robert Shave, Sussex, UK

A SEA SYMPHONY in MELBOURNE

Oleg Caetani, Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, hopes that during his tenure all the Vaughan Williams symphonies will be played. We heard the *London Symphony* last year. This year, on March 30 and 31 and April 1, it was the turn of the *Sea Symphony*.

The concerts were conducted by Edo de Waart, who had never even heard the music before he was invited to conduct it. Not surprisingly, although soloists, choir and orchestra were all splendid, the performances as a whole did not come across as entirely idiomatic. It seemed to me that the more conventional parts of the score were emphasized, while Stanford's "impertinences" tended to be overlooked. Nothing, of course, can fail to hide the pre-echoes of the *London Symphony* in the slow movement, and here the baritone Jonathan Summers, well-known to English audiences, was alert to every nuance of Whitman's text. It was a superb and most affecting reading.

The soprano soloist, Deborah Riedel, was not quite so comfortable, and she was not always able to ride the waves of orchestral sound; but when singing together, the two soloists produced some exciting moments. The Melbourne Chorale is one of Australia's finest choirs and over the years Melbourne audiences have learned to anticipate first-rate performances, under their Artistic Director, Jonathan Grieves-Smith. (He was for many years with the Brighton Festival Chorus.) They did not disappoint.

Whatever its shortcomings, the performance was a memorable one, unlikely to be repeated in Melbourne in the foreseeable future.

Hector Walker, Melbourne, Australia

NOTICE OF AGM – 8 OCTOBER 2006

Meet Simona Pakenham

Members will know Simona Pakenham from her evergreen book *Ralph Vaughan Williams – A discovery of his music* (Macmillan, 1957). At our AGM on 8th October 2006, at the Performing Arts Library, Denbies, Dorking, Simona will discuss her collaboration with RVW on *The First Nowell*. This is not a meeting to be missed!

The details are:

- 14.00 Tea and coffee at the Performing Arts Library
- 14.30 AGM
- 15.30 Simona Pakenham on *The First Nowell*
- 16.15 Performance of *The First Nowell* from the Chandos recording
- 17.00 Refreshments

We look forward to seeing us many members as possible at our AGM

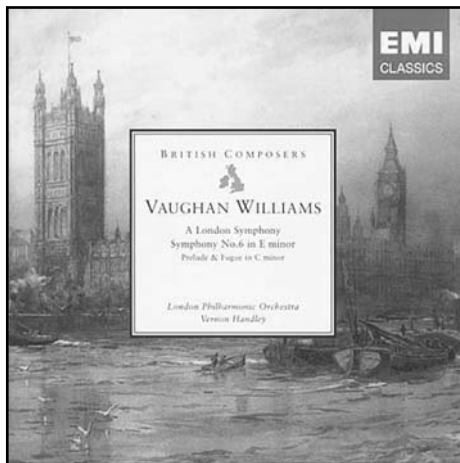
Look out for the RVW Quiz at the AGM!

CD Reviews

HANDLEY'S EARLY VAUGHAN WILLIAMS PERFORMANCES

A London Symphony
Symphony No.6 in E minor
Prelude and Fugue in C minor (David Bell
Organ)

London Philharmonic Orchestra
Vernon Handley EMI British Composers
(2CDs) 7243 5 86592 2 1



These recordings (originally issued on LP in 1978-80) pre-date those Handley made with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic on CFP but, nevertheless, make a very welcome return to the catalogue.

Both symphonies receive strong performances and that of *A London Symphony* is, if anything, finer than the more recent recording. This has something to do with the greater warmth of the earlier analogue recording but also, I think, with the slightly more expansive performance of the opening movement where the climaxes are arrived at with a greater sense of inevitability. Both the opening and closing sections of the symphony convey a greater sense of mystery and tension than in the Liverpool performances, though here the recording certainly plays its part.

Paradoxically, the earlier recording tends to blunt the impact of the *Sixth Symphony*, Vaughan Williams' greatest work in my opinion. This is immediately apparent if you compare the opening moments of the symphony in the two recordings. The Liverpool performance conveys a much greater sense of menace whereas the impact of the LPO recording is undoubtedly diminished through the more restrictive recording. This is a pity as the performance is generally a fine one. There are very few entirely effective recordings of this enigmatic work but I would recommend those by Boult (Decca/Dutton), Haitink (EMI), Davis

(Warner), Abravanel (Vanguard/Silverline Classics) and Bryden Thomson (Chandos) in preference to any others.

I think that EMI have missed an opportunity here as it would, in my view, have been preferable to have issued Paavo Berglund's fine Sibelian recording of the *Sixth Symphony* (also from the 1970s) with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra instead of the earlier Handley recording, especially as Handley's fine Liverpool recording is already available at budget price. Berglund's Bournemouth version was only briefly available on a very early HMV own label CD (coupled with Sir Alexander Gibson's recording of *Symphony No 5*) and it cries out for reissue.

Never mind, this is still a desirable set, especially as it includes an interesting fill-up in the *Prelude and Fugue* in C minor. This is an orchestral transcription (from 1930) of an organ piece (1921) but with the organ part retained in the orchestral version. This is one of those craggy Vaughan Williams works (like the *Fantasia on the Old 104th*) that have a haunting quality to them, the appeal of which (for me at least) is difficult to pin down. It is a dramatic, entirely characteristic and most enjoyable work lasting just over ten minutes and containing echoes of the contemporaneous *Job* and *A Pastoral Symphony*. This recording was last available on a "Best of British" double CFP CD collection (with works by Britten, Tippett and Walton) and it is good to have it back especially as the performance has a marginally greater sense of urgency than the alternative version on Chandos, coupled with Richard Hickox's fine recording of the *Fifth Symphony*.

This enjoyable set also contains informative notes from Piers Burton-Page written especially for this release and focusing on Vernon Handley's sterling work on behalf of British composers as well as on the music of Vaughan Williams.

The cover art features an appropriately atmospheric painting of the Houses of Parliament by Maude Parker.

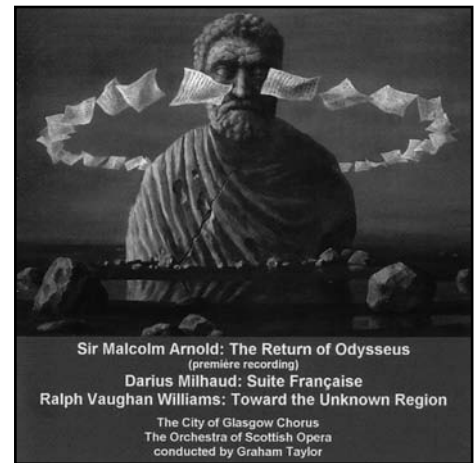
Notwithstanding my reservations about the recording of the *Sixth Symphony*, this remains a very desirable set, an interesting supplement to Vernon Handley's later recordings of these same works and an ideal introduction to the music of this great composer.

Jeffrey Davis

AN UNUSUAL PROGRAMME FROM GLASGOW

Sir Malcolm Arnold: *The Return of Odysseus*, op. 119
Darius Milhaud: *Suite française*
Ralph Vaughan Williams: *Toward the Unknown Region*

City of Glasgow Chorus
Orchestra of Scottish Opera
Conducted by Graham Taylor
Divine Art 23035



The first thing to strike the listener about this performance of *Toward the Unknown Region* is the forward placing of the choir in relation to the orchestra, a quite different perspective from that of the recent performance issued by Naxos coupled with *Willow-wood*. At first I thought that orchestral detail would be obscured, but the recording has been carefully engineered and virtually everything is audible in the rather dry and unforgiving acoustic of Glasgow's Scottish Opera Centre. The performance is a fine one, well sung, well played and conducted with all the care and devotion this early work merits. Other conductors have perhaps moved on a bit more in the final pages, and still others have found a slightly more exultant tone in these same pages – one of my own favourite performances is conducted by Norman Del Mar in a performance dating from 1980 – but this is excellent stuff all the same.

That strange breed, Vaughan Williams completists, will want this disc and the performance will not disappoint them, but how much will they enjoy the rest of the collection? Milhaud's piece, with no choral element, seems a strange choice. It is in five movements, three of them lively, jaunty, even rumbustious and two rather more pensive. Originally written for wind band, it is given here in the composer's own orchestral arrangement. I haven't seen the score, but it's clear that the work was conceived for winds, the added string parts being mainly

of a supporting nature. There is some lovely writing for horns at the beginning of the second piece, some strangely jazzy harmonies supporting the melodies of the fourth and a most engaging fife and drum-style passage in the jaunty finale. This is attractive music based on French traditional melodies. It will not frighten the horses and is extremely well played.

The accompanying notes by Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris, whose biography of Sir Malcolm Arnold was published in 2004, state that *The Return of Odysseus* is the composer's only work for chorus and orchestra. It was commissioned by the Schools' Music Association and first performed in 1977 under Sir David Willcocks' direction, presumably by a chorus of young people. (There is a parallel here with Vaughan Williams' *The Sons of Light* of 1951.) I have not seen the score of this work either, but I suppose that the work's origin as a piece for school children explains the lengthy passages of unison singing, often with the line doubled in the orchestra, as well as the general lack of polyphonic writing for the chorus. One result of this is that the words are beautifully clear, important as the narrative moves on quite swiftly, and since there is only one tiny solo passage the chorus is the narrative vehicle throughout. I'm a great admirer of Arnold, particularly the symphonies, and respond as well as anybody to the composer's wonderful gift for melody so much in evidence here. But I have my doubts, all the same, as to whether this work really demonstrates what the notes refer to as an "instinctive magic touch in the setting of words to music." There are some glorious moments for the orchestra, notably a most vivid, ravishing and all-too short evocation of the sea, but the choral writing often seems prosaic, the natural rhythm of the words suppressed rather than enhanced by the music. Nor will everyone, I feel, be so impressed (and amused) by Patric Dickinson's text as are Messrs. Meredith and Harris. Still, I have read several reviews of this disc, all of them highly positive, so no reader of this one should be discouraged by my slightly muted personal reaction to the Arnold piece. It receives, in any event, another remarkable performance, with a particularly outstanding contribution from the fine amateur choir, and quite clearly convinced all those who took part in it.

William Hedley

HILARY HAHN'S LARK

Elgar: Violin Concerto in B minor, op. 61
Vaughan Williams: The Lark Ascending

Hilary Hahn, violin
London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Colin Davis
Deutsche Grammophon 00289 474 8732

This is not a new disc – it was recorded towards the end of 2003 – but it has not been reviewed in these pages before.

A calculator is handy if you want to know how many photographs of Hilary Hahn feature on the CD box and in the booklet. Sir Colin Davis appears on two of them (he is also allowed one on his own) taken at the recording sessions and looking quite the English gentleman complete with tiepin. The third page of the booklet carries a dedication "...to my parents with much love". This is unsigned, but it seems a fair assumption that it is Miss Hahn's parents who are so honoured, rather than, say, those of Sir Colin, Sir Edward or RVW. There is a short but informative note by Michael Steinberg as well as, alas, what seems to be an original poem about the disc by the violinist.



The presentation of these performances, then, is far from traditional, so what of the performances themselves? Reviewing the disc in the *Gramophone*, Andrew Achenbach wanted more of the "...searing passion, intimacy and heartache behind the notes". Marc Bridle on *musicweb-international.com* was even more disappointed. "What does most injury to this performance is the sheer lack of empathy the soloist has with Elgar's idiom, and that is death in any performance." He also complains about the soloist's "wiry tone". Well, I assume that these critics were reporting what they heard with their own ears and I can only do the same. This is a reading of Elgar's masterpiece to which I expect to return many times with great pleasure. Hilary Hahn plays with spot-on intonation and remarkably accuracy in the many virtuoso passages. Her view of the work is perhaps a little on the cool side, particularly when compared to a player such as Nigel Kennedy, but none the worse for that, in my view. Her treatment of the first movement's second subject is quite affectionate enough for me, as is her way with the opening pages of the development section of that same movement. She is more detached than some in the slow movement but the finale is brilliant, though even she can't convince me that the fires of Elgar's inspiration burn anything other than dimly in certain passages before the cadenza. Others have perhaps cast a stronger spell in the cadenza itself, but that is to look for things to criticise. Better to listen to the performance and decide for yourself. The London Symphony Orchestra plays superbly under Sir Colin, who provides mercifully few of those noises which so terribly disfigure his live recordings of the Elgar symphonies.

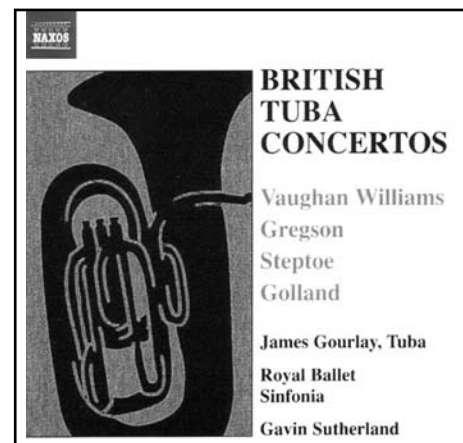
Marc Bridle, in the review quoted above, refers to Vaughan Williams' lark as "vapid", but I think most members will prefer to agree with Christopher Palmer's observation that "Vaughan Williams applied the term romance to some of his profoundest and most poetic music." No-one could accuse Hilary Hahn of lack of emotional involvement here. She takes a minute and a half more than Hugh Bean over the piece and the performance does indeed seem very slow at times, though strangely her tempo for lilting main theme is if anything less slow than that of Bean and Sir Adrian Boult. It is in the unaccompanied passages that she really takes her time, and when she is not playing at all, well, for once I have to agree with Andrew Aschenbach who writes that Davis "...makes a meal of VW's ineffably simple opening bars". The same treatment is meted out to the various linking passages, the one prefacing the orchestral return of the main theme being pulled out almost to breaking point. This may be a demonstration of virtuoso conducting, but I do feel it goes against the spirit of the music. The soloist, on the other hand, plays beautifully, with ravishing tone – "wiry" seems a strange way to describe it. She is recorded a little too close for my taste, and Bean is much better placed within the orchestral texture, especially noticeable in the twitterings of the central section featuring the triangle. Hilary Hahn's closing cadenza, "...ever winging up and up", is marvellously affecting and it was hearing this, just catching the last three minutes or so of this performance on the car radio, that intrigued me enough to want to purchase the disc. I hope members will feel the same: Hilary Hahn's performance will not be to everybody's taste but it is a most individual and touching view. Best not to bother with her poetry, though, I think.

William Hedley

FOUR ENGLISH TUBA CONCERTOS

Ralph VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Tuba Concerto in F minor
Edward GREGSON: Tuba Concerto
Roger STEPTOE: Tuba Concerto
John GOLLAND: Tuba Concerto, op. 46

James Gourlay, tuba, Royal Ballet Sinfonia,
conducted by Gavin Sutherland Naxos
8.557754



At a fraction under fourteen minutes the Vaughan Williams is the shortest piece on this new Naxos disc. It is also the earliest, composed in 1954. Most members will know it well enough not to need a detailed introduction, but it is a work which is often overlooked, even by enthusiasts of the composer, and I do urge those who have yet to make its acquaintance to do so. The slow movement in particular, which Vaughan Williams significantly designated a Romanza, is most touching, but there is not a note out of place in the whole work, nor an uncharacteristic moment.

Edward Gregson's concerto of 1978 is superbly well written such as one would expect from the now Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music. First composed for tuba with brass band accompaniment but given here in its orchestral guise, the work is in four movements. The first opens with fanfares which bring echoes both of film music and the symphonic writing of Malcolm Arnold. The music is tonal, strongly melodic and readily appreciated without being in the slightest pale or bland. The rather mournful slow movement requires a bit more effort on the part of the listener, even as it exploits brilliantly well the tuba's rather surprising ability to sing. The finale boasts the same rhythmic drive as Mozart's horn concerto finales and there are many touches throughout this movement which make the listener smile. The work ends strongly, with an exceptionally convincing reference to the motif of the first movement just before the end.

We read in the booklet notes that Roger Steptoe employs the twelve-note technique in his concerto of 1983, but whilst the work is certainly a tougher nut to crack than the others even those allergic to Schoenberg have nothing to fear. The composer has his own characteristic voice, and it is a particularly English one. (A thesis would be required to be able to say exactly why, but the writing for the string orchestra which accompanies the tuba has a pronounced English flavour.) The central scherzo features some fearsome virtuoso writing for the soloist, but in the two slow, outer movements the singing quality of the instrument, already so well exploited by Gregson, is brought out even more powerfully. Compared to the other works on the disc this is a rather weightier, more ambitious affair, and taken on its own terms it is most satisfying. It would be wonderful to hear it in a concert, where I'm sure it would work extremely well, particular the most affecting ending.

The strings assume a very subordinate role in the final concerto on the disc, that by John Golland. The composer was born in 1942 (*pace* the booklet) and was quite prolific, producing a large number of works for brass ensembles, an opera for children and even writing the music for television series featuring those dear ladies, Hinge and Bracket. His concerto falls somewhere between the immediate appeal of Gregson and the seriousness of intent of Steptoe, without quite achieving either. The outer movements are lively, highly rhythmic with much virtuoso writing for the soloist, rapid

tonguing in particular in the finale, and colourful writing for the orchestra, particularly the brass and percussion sections. The slow movement is genuinely peaceful and beautiful, though to this listener at least the succession of beautiful chords masks a lack of true melodic distinction, a comment I would apply to the whole work, attractive though it is.

The performances are consistently fine, with James Gourlay outstandingly sensitive to the needs of each of these pieces. Glancing at the other discs on my shelves seems to suggest that Graham Sutherland might be making something of speciality out of these lesser-known English composers, and the Royal Ballet Sinfonia plays superbly throughout. The informative notes are by Philip Lane, presumably the same who has done such valuable work to bring the music of Lord Berners out of the shadows, and the recording is excellent. All in all, a thoroughly recommendable disc, and one which could quite easily feature in one of our *Music You Might Like* columns.

William Hedley

ALL THE WASPS

Ralph Vaughan Williams: *The Wasps*, complete

Henry Goodman, narrator
Hallé Orchestra and Chorus
Conducted by Mark Elder
HALLE CD HLD 7510



This two-CD set is the first recording of the full score of the music Vaughan Williams composed for performances of Aristophanes' comedy *The Wasps* at Cambridge University in 1908. Until now what survived of this hour and three quarter score was the famous *Overture* and the five-movement *Aristophanic Suite* which Vaughan Williams made in 1912, lasting twenty-five minutes or so. The translation of the comedy used for the original performance is not employed as it was thought to be not modern or relevant enough for audiences in the 21st century. Instead, a new version by David Pountney, which certainly employs a "modern" vernacular and is littered with expletives and sexual innuendos.

This performance presents *The Wasps* as a true *melodrama*, and for me it doesn't work.

The frustrating paradox of this CD is that the music is superb, beautifully played by the Hallé and conducted with great affection and insight by Mark Elder. By contrast the banal, vulgar dialogue with its frequent degeneration into bad language I found irritating and boring. Yes, of course Aristophanes was attempting slapstick and satire, and Vaughan Williams may well have relished the bawdy at times, but I don't think this is what either intended.

The Wasps were a bunch of fourth-century B.C. disaffected Athenian war veterans who sought to eke out their army pensions by being paid jurors in the city's so-called *democracy* of people's courts. This they did for the money and to get their own back on the Athenian society they despised, relishing in returning guilty verdicts. There are only two characters of any importance in the action, Procleon, the irascible leader of the Wasps and his haughty son who attempts to reform him. The action is narrated by Henry Goodman and he acts and speaks with great panache. He portrays Procleon in a voice that varies between Alf Garnett (*Till Death Us Do Part*) in full right wing diatribe and Del Boy Trotter (*Only Fools and Horses*) scheming for a good night out. The voices of the other characters are not so stereotyped and more easy on the ear. The narration is complemented by a male-voice chorus. Much of the drama comes across as an episode from *East Enders*. Perhaps I have not fully appreciated the satire and political commentary of Aristophanes but I think it has little relevance today, and after the trial of a dog for eating some cheese, it disintegrates into the fantasies of a miserable old man.

So back to the music which for me is the most fascinating thing about this recording. Firstly a superb *Overture*, very well played and full of detail, that made me think just how clever its construction is as it incorporates all the main tunes in the piece. The *March past of the kitchen utensils* employs different orchestration to the *Suite*, but otherwise the familiar tunes are all there with particularly beautiful, luminous woodwind playing. This score seems well ahead of its time, often reminiscent of some great Hollywood epic. There is an extraordinary passage at the beginning of Act 2 where Procleon is audibly urinating on stage, followed by powerful, strange modal chords that would not have been out of place in the scores of *Ben Hur* or *Spartacus*. However, it is the twenty minutes of music composed for the *Parabasis* in Act 2, that will be new to most, a visionary passage for chorus and orchestra whose quality alone justifies purchasing this CD. (*Parabasis* in ancient Greek plays was a distraction, often for the chorus to communicate the author's thoughts. Procleon, thankfully, has a rest!) Michael Kennedy here sees a foretaste of *A Pilgrim's Progress* though I can sense *Antarctica* – remember, this is 1908. The big tune in the overture is revealed in a choral version and, curiously, Vaughan Williams briefly quotes from the opening of Debussy's

Prélude a l'après-midi d'un faune, but the rest is unique and the music blazes to a majestic conclusion.

In Act 3, when the action deteriorates into Procleon's drunken fantasies and sexual antics, the music doesn't. There are brief quotes from Offenbach and the *Merry Widow* to satisfy the

drunkard's desire for dance, then Vaughan Williams' music dominates, rising with great energy after impressionistic pauses where the flute is prominent to a great climax reminiscent of the finale of *Sir John in Love*.

This was an occasional piece, where not for the first time Vaughan Williams' music was far superior than the commission demanded. The

composer extracted the best bits as the *Overture* and *Suite* and I think performances of the *Wasps* should be left at that.

So should you buy it? Definitely, yes! But you have been warned!

Robin Barber

RVW, Email and the Internet

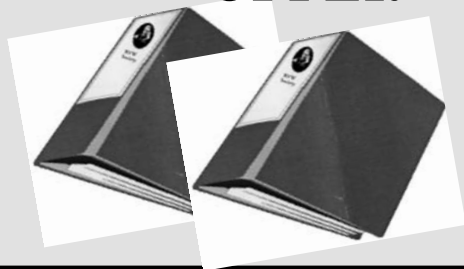
Thanks are due to those members who have responded positively to the request to provide email addresses. Email is a cheap and convenient way of communicating and the Society invites members to pass their email addresses on to the Secretary, David Betts, whose contact details are to be found on the front page. All information pertaining to members is of course held in strict confidence and is used only by the Society.

Please don't forget the Society's website which received a positive write-up in The Times recently. Type "Vaughan Williams" into the best known internet search engine and our site is the first result to come up. It is a high quality site with far too many features to mention here. Members are urged to visit and see for themselves.

www.rvwsociety.com



RVW SOCIETY JOURNAL BINDER OFFER



Due to circumstances beyond the Society's control the RVW Society Journal Binder is temporarily unavailable. As soon as they become available again the usual announcement will appear in the Journal. We apologise to those members who have ordered binders and are awaiting delivery and ask for your patience as we try to rectify the situation.

Binder Offer, The RVW Society,
c/o 24 Birdcroft Road, Welwyn Garden City,
Hertfordshire AL8 6EQ

Michael Gainsford has spotted this:

Three-day residential course on Vaughan Williams

Society members, particularly those in the north of England, may be interested to hear of a three-day residential course entitled 'Vaughan Williams- that Extraordinary Ordinary Man', to be held at Alston Hall, Longridge, near Preston, from October 11th to 13th.

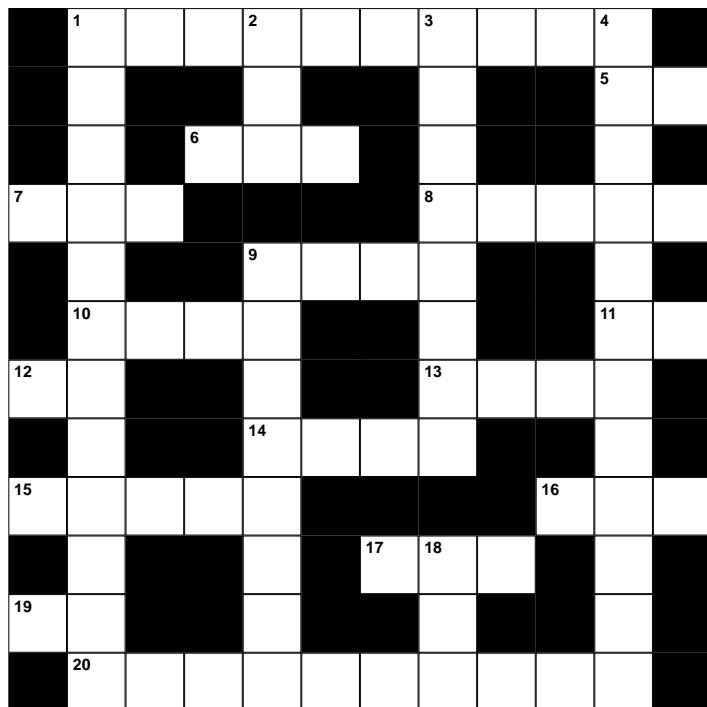
Alston Hall is set by the River Ribble in beautiful countryside. I can vouch for the warm and friendly atmosphere and comfortable surroundings, having attended the astronomical courses that have been held there for many years.

The course is being run by Joan Burns MBE. The cost is £130 (*I should add that it is very easy to overeat on these Alston Hall events!*)

Further details are available from:

Alston Hall
Longridge
Preston PR3 3BP
Tel: 01772 784661
Email: alston@ed.lancscc.gov.uk

RVW Crossword No. 22 by Michael Gainsford



Across

1. Place by the Stour in a Dorset Folk Song (1902) (10)
5. Owners of Leith Hill Place (1,1)
6. When the military unit should arrive at its destination (1,1,1)
7. It's above the roof in the RVW song (3)
8. Valentine, the 'Man in Black', speaker at the first performance of *Thanksgiving for Victory* (5)
9. This of words is bright in *Songs of Travel* (4)
10. Work for three players (4)
11. Homeland of RVW's friend Douglas Lilburn (1,1)
12. This repeated seems to be the limit of Santa's vocabulary! (2)
13. Look after (eg sheep in the folk song) (4)
14. Over hill and this in *Three Shakespeare Songs* (4)
15. These of love were sown in the folk song(s)
16. This plus a sceptre figure in Walton's Coronation offering (3)
17. Manuel de Falla wrote about a three-cornered one (3)
19. Silver (2)
20. Tune to *For all the Saints* (4,6)

Down

1. Folk tune incorporated in *Norfolk Rhapsody* No 1(6,2,4)
2. Foxy was a favourite one (3)
3. Leslie, conductor of BBCSO in first performance of *Six Choral Songs* in 1940 (8)
4. Words to RVW's hymn tune *Guildford* (7,5)
9. Site of the fire in *Songs of Travel* (8)
18. God's was here in Song of Thanksgiving (3)

ANSWERS PAGE 11

Next Edition: October 2006

The shorter choral works

Deadline for contributions

10 August 2006

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Deadline for contributions

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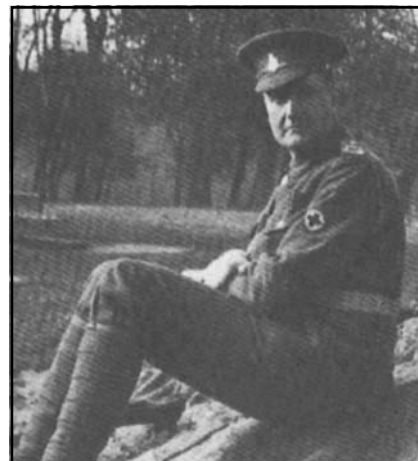
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