

Journal of the RVW Society

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and more . . .

RVW - "an Atheist who had suspended disbelief"

The weekend Symposium on religion in the life and music of Vaughan Williams and Elgar, held in late November 2006, provided much food for thought and alternative viewpoints from the world class speakers at the event.

Eric Seddon elaborated on his controversial views on Vaughan Williams and religion in his thoughtful analysis of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Describing *Pilgrim* as a triumph of "theology over ideology", he identified the sacramental and ecclesiastical elements written into the Morality. Using many musical examples, Seddon referred to Act 1, Scene 2, when the Interpreter lays hands on Pilgrim and seals his forehead, as one of the most overtly sacramental moments in the opera. In addition the "cross" icon occurs over 25 times in the opera. Eric Seddon concluded that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is "profoundly and uniformly Christian".

Michael Kennedy, with the authority and wisdom of a lifetime's reflection, was wary of over-interpreting Vaughan Williams' works. Music was Vaughan Williams' focus, not theology or philosophy. "Our little life is rounded in a sleep" meant much to the composer. Vaughan Williams was, to be sure, moved by the words – be it the Psalms, Bunyan, Shakespeare or Whitman – but the identification with the text was less philosophical and more musical. Music was in his heart, and he composed heartfelt music.

James Day, with his customary freshness and enthusiasm, saw the *Mass in G Minor* and *Sancta Civitas* as deriving from the composer's experiences in the First World War. In Vimy Ridge Vaughan Williams may have re-kindled a view that materialistic atheism was not a complete answer to the human predicament. In these two fine works, James Day described Vaughan Williams as "an atheist who had suspended disbelief".

The leaves of the Tree are for thy healing

Well-argued and opposing interpretations of Vaughan Williams' views on religion will do no harm to the composer. We can make up our own minds by, first and foremost, listening to the music with an open attitude. Eric Seddon's article on *Pilgrim* is reproduced in full in this edition of the Journal. It repays close study.

We hope to publish Michael Kennedy's and James Day's papers in a future issue.

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From the Editor . . .



No sooner was the ink dry on the issue of the Journal which announced Vaughan Williams and Bunyan as a forthcoming theme than I decided it was time to read *The Pilgrim's Progress* from cover to cover. In common with most members I had dipped into the book many times over the years, with certain favourite passages revisited again and again, but I had never read it in one go. Well, I don't think Bunyan's allegory is the best choice for the beach, but it is an immensely satisfying read. The tale itself is mesmerising, and the language in which it is told is both simple and very beautiful. I felt at the end that I understood more easily why the book might have occupied so important a place in Vaughan Williams' thoughts for so long. I hope members will enjoy the contributions on Bunyan in this issue. The subject of religion is inevitably in evidence again – how could it not be so? – but other aspects are explored too. I was hoping that someone would send me a piece which dealt more with Bunyan and his allegory than with Vaughan Williams and his morality, but this was not to be. I am going to have to do more commissioning. Beware, therefore, when your telephone rings. It might be me.

One of the more rewarding aspects of Vaughan Williams' vocal music is the richness and range of literature he chose to set to music. He famously dismissed the idea that his music had any meaning, yet he did, on one memorable occasion, invite a listener to consider one of Prospero's great speeches from *The Tempest* as a key to understanding the finale of the Sixth Symphony. In the next issue of the Journal we are to look in detail at one of the more neglected of his works, and this unaccountably, as it is surely one his greatest, the Ninth Symphony. When I listen to this masterpiece I feel an almost uncanny similarity in atmosphere with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Do I imagine this, as a result of knowing a little about the history of the work? I do hope someone will decide to take up

the Hardy connection. There is scope, too, for a study of music composed in advanced old age. The work is questing and visionary. Enormous questions are asked. Yet the composer's own presence in the music is one of almost Olympian detachment and serenity. Can I launch an appeal for a piece which looks at this aspect, perhaps with reference to the late works of say, Verdi or Monteverdi? And ought the last works of Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven be taken into account too? As I write this, Adam Stern's performance in Seattle, announced in the last Journal, has already taken place. I am sure we will hear how it went, though with the Seattle Philharmonic, not, as I erroneously said, with the Seattle Symphony. My apologies to both orchestras, and to their conductors, Adam Stern and Gerard Schwarz.

Eric Seddon makes the point elsewhere in this issue that Vaughan Williams' operas are all very different from each other. He might also have said that they are very different from other composers' operas too, for this is surely the case. *Riders to the Sea* will be our theme for the October 2007 issue. Many, perhaps most, of our members will know nothing about J. M. Synge beyond this work, so there is much scope for enlightenment.

A combination of factors have contributed to the fact that this issue of the Journal arrives particularly late in your letter boxes. A number of changes are being put in place from the next issue onwards. These changes need not concern members directly, except that I sincerely hope one result will be the arrival of the Journal at the beginning rather than the end of the month.

William Hedley

The best of me . . . ?

A summary of the Symposium

The second Symposium organised by the Elgar and Vaughan Williams Societies focused on religion in the life and music of both composers. With members from both Societies filling all available places, the weekend on 23/24 November 2006 was a great success. Here Stephen Connock summarises the main points arising during the weekend in respect of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

John Calvert - *RVW and the English Hymnal*

It was good to have the current Vicar of All Saints Church, Down Ampney, to provide the context for VW's hymn-tune work. John Calvert had everyone on their feet immediately with a fine rendition of the *Old Hundredth*. John reminded us all that hymns were a 'Praise to God', they unified the congregation and supplemented liturgy. Recounting Percy Dearmer's objectives for the *English Hymnal* as a new version of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, John Calvert brought out Dearmer's 'arts and craft' background, his Christian socialism, links to the Oxford Movement and the influence of Ruskin. By the time Dearmer approached VW in 1904 he was Vicar of St Mary the Virgin in West London.

Dearmer and Vaughan Williams aimed at a 'hymn book for everyone' with 'fine melody' as the criterion for inclusion in the new hymn book. VW introduced a variety of interesting accompaniments to the hymns, many of which were folk based. John Calvert concluded his talk with examples of how Vaughan Williams responded to the new found artistic expressiveness of the time, through his tasteful and lyrical choice of hymns. VW's own personal experiences – the early death of his father, illness and bereavement within Adeline's family – had added to his responsiveness to the hymns. The *English Hymnal* was a 'snap shot of Vaughan Williams' life at that point in his journey'.

James Day - *Mass in G minor and Sancta Civitas*

James Day reminded the delegation that the *Mass in G Minor* was written for Holst and his Whitsuntide singers – Holst had been very proud of this dedication. It had been intended for performance at Whitsun in Thaxted Church where Conrad Noel was vicar. Here the 'social message' of Christianity was preached with links established to William Morris's Christian socialism. The driving force was 'beauty in every detail of human life and work'.

RVW viewed his *Mass* as a work to be used liturgically. It is a 'spiritual' work, with use made of the plainsong style along with a more contemporary impressionistic element. RVW took the setting of the Latin text very seriously – he shows great respect, and tenderness, for the text in his musical responses. It was, suggested James Day, the work of an "atheist who had suspended disbelief".

Moving on to *Sancta Civitas*, James Day pointed to VW's First World War experiences as relevant to his choice of text from the Book of Revelation. The vision of a 'new heaven and a new earth' showed VW as a shrewd and watchful commentator on world events at this time of the League of Nations and talk of a new international world order. This powerful work contained both prophecies and warnings and demonstrated Vaughan Williams as a true visionary.

Michael Kennedy – keynote address

In his keynote address, Michael Kennedy described Vaughan Williams as

first and foremost a musician. Everything else – including religion and God – were subordinate to his intense love of music. Whitman and Bunyan were important to Vaughan Williams – they shaped his concept of life and of a 'journey' to death and beyond. A 'cheerful agnostic', Vaughan Williams had a strong social conscience, but music was his inspiration. Music was in his heart, always.

Eric Seddon - *The Pilgrim's Progress*

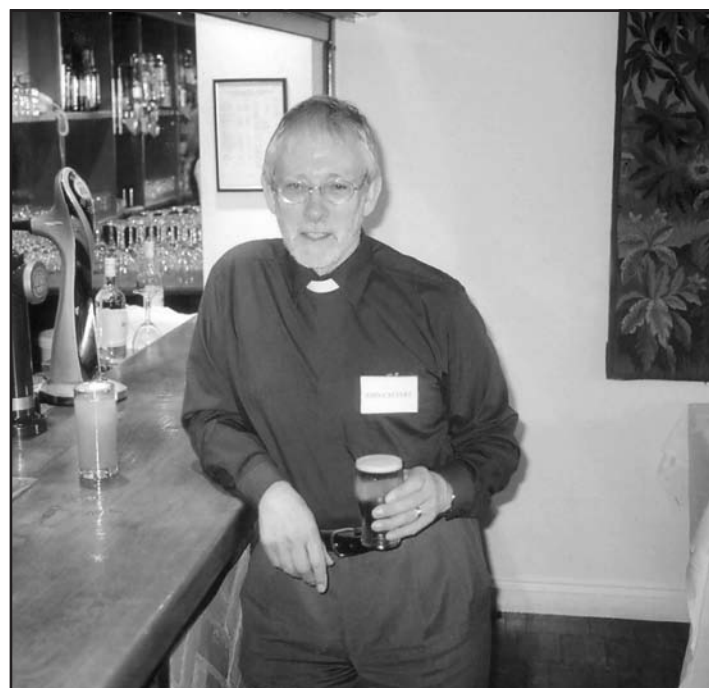
Eric Seddon's exploration of *Pilgrim's Progress* proved a high point for the weekend. Exploring the theological and mystical symbolism of the 'Morality', Eric Seddon examined the sacramental symbolism added by the composer to Bunyan's vision. The Celestial City was the Church Triumphant and the House Beautiful was the Church at Peace. The motto of the cross was a constant theme. Vaughan Williams' concept was a 'triumph of theology over ideology'. VW's understanding of sacramental theology was deep. Vaughan Williams consistently sees human love as a symbol of the relationship between God and Man and in this context the quotations from *Flos Campi* were of enormous significance.

Pilgrim's Progress, said Eric Seddon, derived from a profound and uniform Christian theology. It was a deeply Christian work.

Conclusion

A panel of experts, under Terry Barfoot's masterly guidance, took questions and answers to bring the Symposium to an end. Each speaker had brought unique insights on the subject of Vaughan Williams and religion. The specialists on Elgar, including Diana McVeagh and Geoffrey Hodgkins, had brought similar depth to their chosen subjects. The genius of both composers shone brightly – they were the bright and the morning stars.

Stephen Connock



Rev. John Calvert keeping everyone on their feet

TURN UP MY METAPHORS AND DO NOT FAIL:

Religious meaning and musical iconography in Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress*

by Eric Seddon

On the 2nd of May, 1951, shortly after the premiere of Vaughan Williams' operatic *Morality, The Pilgrim's Progress*, E. J. Dent wrote to the composer, offering his congratulations and support of the piece. The general substance of the ensuing correspondence is that of Dent's solidarity with Vaughan Williams against the early criticisms that *Pilgrim* was not really appropriate for the operatic stage – that it was an oratorio in disguise. Dent was unequivocal in his rejection of such a criticism, writing instead:

I am more and more...certain that it must be an Opera on stage and not an oratorio. I have read several criticisms and think them mostly stupid and unintelligent. I think I know more about Opera than all the lot of critics put together, and have a more analytical mind than any of them; I am a complete unbeliever and generally a scoffer but I have no difficulty or reluctance to surrender wholeheartedly to Bunyan and to your music.¹

It is of interest that in the process of defending the *Morality* as stage-worthy, Dent articulated his own religious position. This rhetorically buttresses his argument, at least, but there is more to it than that, for during this correspondence Dent was to venture into religious concerns more than once. In a letter of the day before, he wrote that [*"The Pilgrim's Progress"*] does not want a cathedral environment, because Bunyan stands for 'pure' religion without the external decorations of a church." This is of particular importance in this correspondence, for it is the beginning of what becomes Dent's one real negative criticism of the *Morality* – that it wasn't faithful enough to Bunyan. On May 6th he writes specifically what he sees to be a problem:

The House Beautiful actions are too ecclesiastical, and some costumes too; the atmosphere required is surely not Priestly Authority, Penance, formal Worship and Reverence, but Kindness and Friendliness, Love and Sympathy, Helpfulness on the part of all the heavenly beings (including Evangelist and Interpreter).

Dent's primary objection in this scene is Vaughan Williams' decision to conduct the laying on of hands and anointing of the Pilgrim in a manner that indicates the Rite of Confirmation, which would have been directly opposed by an Ana-Baptist such as Bunyan. He is also bothered by the costumes of the inhabitants of the House Beautiful, which, according to the original staging, implied a monastic community; likewise incompatible with Bunyan's Puritanism. Later in the same letter he added a similar objection:

...did Bunyan imagine [Pilgrim] wearing the traditional "pilgrim" dress with cockle-shell hat and staff? In any case I think a hat and staff would often help to suggest pilgrimage; he sometimes looks too "ecclesiastical" without them.

Vaughan Williams' reply makes his position clear concerning the sacramental and "ecclesiastical" elements which Dent found alarming. In his response of May 17th he writes:

As regards the Religious aspect of the H[ouse] B[eautiful], I like the landscape back-cloths on the whole. In "House Beautiful" what we want is a scene of initiation, which I have made by expanding two sentences of Bunyan.

Towards the close of the letter, Vaughan Williams adds this telling statement:

You refer a good deal to Bunyan, but remember that this is not Bunyan

but only adapted from Bunyan. He would certainly have had a fit at some of the things I do!

Vaughan Williams was therefore well aware of the sacramental and ecclesiastical elements written into the *Morality*; it is clear by this response that they were intentional. It is interesting to note, too, that Dent was not the only one to pick up on the "ecclesiastical issue" embedded in the *Morality*. In Nathaniel Lew's survey of the early criticism of the *Pilgrim*, he writes that "many were troubled by the obvious similarity of much of the opera to High Church ritual, finding it... a violation of the spirit of Bunyan", going on to cite, among others, the following criticisms:

I don't think Bunyan, sturdy independent as he was, would have approved of what Vaughan Williams has done with his book. (Daily Mail, 1951). The extraordinary clarity and vividness of [Bunyan's] original is obscured in heavy-handed ritual that destroys simplicity without adding anything illuminating, and which, with its suggestion of Puseyite fal-lals, would certainly have outraged Bunyan. (Glasgow Herald, 1951)²

These criticisms cannot be dismissed as mere tirades. They point to several substantial elements, such as those mentioned by Dent to Vaughan Williams in private, and more. What the critics lacked, however, was the knowledge that Vaughan Williams had done these things deliberately and that his treatment of Bunyan's book is emblematic for his career. To find sacramentalism in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for instance, would not have shocked anyone who had deeply considered the musical and textual symbolism that permeated many of his earlier works. Over the course of his career, a relatively clear trajectory can be traced through many of Vaughan Williams' most important pieces, detailing a continued fascination with and investigation of Christian mysticism and even sacramentalism – the two sometimes intertwining in profound unity.

The immediate question to be asked is why. Vaughan Williams, after all, is a composer whom the majority of scholars have identified as a youthful atheist turned something of a cheerful agnostic – a man who supposedly accepted the ethical and social structure generated by the waning remnants of a dominantly Christian society while permanently rejecting Christianity's supernatural claims. His settings of Christian texts have therefore been interpreted in much the same way that Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* has been: just as Stravinsky was able to set a play that had its roots in pagan Greece without being a pagan himself, the argument goes, so Vaughan Williams was able to interact with the texts of Christianity.³ The supposition is that Vaughan Williams saw Christian texts as mere symbols among many others: that a Jungian type of syncretism was at work.

This supposition creates many problems, however; perhaps the greatest being that its application yields only a superficial understanding of the symbolism within the pieces themselves. For example, the fourth of Vaughan Williams's *Five Mystical Songs (Love Bade Me Welcome)* derives its spiritual power from the deepest aspect of Catholic Eucharistic theology – it contains symbolism without parallel in other religions or cultures, and cannot be understood without a specifically Christian, even Catholic, context.⁴ Thus, for adequate analysis, theology is needed. It is one thing to use a symbol out of context, distancing it deliberately that it might be appropriated for another purpose (as classical thought has long been appropriated by Christian poets) – but it is another thing to do what Vaughan Williams did, writing pieces which can only be fully investigated by using the very mystical theology that scholars have assumed he rejected.

A further problem is that Vaughan Williams' music has been analyzed, following the musicological *zeitgeist* of the 20th century, in an exclusively secular, materialist manner.

The debate as to how to interpret the meaning of his scores has been dominated by the *a priori* assumption that they might only be said to express that which scholars can prove he definitively believed. This proposition can only be maintained by yet another assumption: that reality is only definable by individual perception (thus making radical subjectivism the only possible criteria for determining reality), coupled with the reductive assertion that a work of art might only contain what an artist could consciously define and verbally articulate. Yet Vaughan Williams himself held no such assumptions about life and art. Throughout his career, he repeatedly clarified his understanding of music, the most expansive and eloquent utterance of his philosophy coming in 1948, when he wrote that "music is not only an 'entertainment', nor a mere luxury, but a necessity of the spiritual if not the physical life, an opening of those magic casements through which we can catch a glimpse of that country where ultimate reality will be found."⁵ He reiterated this concisely in 1954, stating "Music is a reaching out to the ultimate realities by means of ordered sound."⁶ Such statements assume not radical subjectivism, but are informed by a conviction that truth is both external to the individual and absolute. Likewise his reiteration of Mendelssohn's idea that "the meaning of music is too precise for words" attests to, at the very least, his own inability to delve verbally into the depths of meaning his art contained. To then impose a radical subjectivist method of analysis upon his works is at the very least to interpret them in a manner inconsistent with the way in which they were written.

All of this has been exacerbated by an incomplete understanding of Vaughan Williams' historical context. While scholars have occasionally looked into the political climate of his compositions, the more important contexts of religious and spiritual history have been consistently and perhaps conveniently dismissed as unimportant – the unspoken first principle of radical subjectivism forming an intellectual roadblock to any such inquiry.

This exclusion of theological analysis has resulted in a shallow reading of Vaughan Williams' music, ultimately creating, in theory, an abundance of "problem" pieces: *Dona Nobis Pacem*, *Hodie*, the *Magnificat* and *Sancta Civitas* come immediately to mind. Perhaps the piece which has suffered most from this criticism, however, is Vaughan Williams' magnum opus, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The objective of this essay is to clarify Vaughan Williams' religious context and, by means of identifying the theological symbolism embedded in the very structure of the opera, reveal *The Pilgrim's Progress* for the masterpiece it truly is.

THE BACKGROUND

In his fascinating study of meaning within the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Wilfrid Mellers suggests that the inception of *The Pilgrim's Progress* dates from 1904, when Vaughan Williams set Bunyan's "He who would valiant be" to a folk tune collected by the composer in Sussex on May 24th of the same year.⁷ The setting was made for inclusion in *The English Hymnal*, the musical editing of which was arguably the most important turning point – musically speaking – of the composer's career. More than providing the impetus for his first text setting of Bunyan, however, Vaughan Williams' work on the *Hymnal* was to prove decisive for the musical content and structure of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for two of the building blocks for the future *Morality* were first presented there: the hymn tune *York* and Tallis's *Third Mode Melody*.

The appearance of the Rev. Percy Dearmer, general editor of the *Hymnal*, in the life of Ralph Vaughan Williams was one of those unexpected meetings which have implications beyond their immediate occasion. England at that time was already fully engaged in the first great flourish of her musical renaissance – Elgar, Stanford and Parry were all at work, while a younger generation of talent was beginning to come of age. Vaughan Williams, though the composer of at least one rousing commercial success in the form of *Linden Lea*, was hardly a household name, and it is doubtful that his record as an organist at St Barnabas',

South Lambeth (a post which he loathed and left on strained terms)⁸ resulted in a glowing reputation as a Church musician. Besides this, if Vaughan Williams scholars of the past are correct in assuming atheism for the composer's early years, that he and Dearmer would end up working together at all, let alone for two years and at great expense to the composer, seems decidedly unlikely. Yet there were striking similarities between the two men and enough common ground, even regarding their own backgrounds, to suggest at least a possibility as to why Dearmer would approach Vaughan Williams and why they would work so well together. More pertinently to the present article, I believe looking into this relationship to Dearmer sheds light upon why there was strong sacramental symbolism in Vaughan Williams' works, reaching all the way to *The Pilgrim's Progress* of 1951.

Percy Dearmer was an Anglo-Catholic priest, educated at Christ Church Oxford from 1886-1889, in the years after the decline of the Oxford Movement. Prior to his education there, in 1882, one of the founding members and most dominant figures of the movement, Edward Pusey, had died. Pusey had been the Professor of Hebrew at Christ Church from 1829 and, with John Keble and John Henry Newman, had formed the triumvirate that defined the movement, which sought to counteract growing theological liberalism in the Church of England while exploring reunion with the Roman Catholic Church. Yet the implications of their work were not limited to theology – the Oxford Movement had a significant impact upon Church music and served as a catalyst for the revival of interest in medieval carols and native folk-song. This unique concern for cultural retrieval therefore had a direct impact upon the musical life and work of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Of particular interest to musical history is that, in Pusey's own opinion, the Movement's source was neither a sermon nor a Tract for the Times, but Keble's publication of *The Christian Year*, which firmly established the literary hymn in Anglican circles.⁹

By the time of Dearmer's studies at Oxford, however, the movement's direct influence had long been in decline. The leaders had each been silenced or thwarted at one point or another and Newman, the movement's guiding theologian, had converted to Roman Catholicism. Pusey, however, had remained in the Church of England, and it is largely his influence that shaped the future of Anglo-Catholicism. Retreating from the threatening theological positions of the earlier movement, Pusey continued to strive for a revival of the liturgy, and to focus ever more in the direction of social justice. Detractors of this continued movement associated it so deeply with Pusey, in fact, that it was sometimes referred to as "Puseyism"¹⁰ – a term which would last in the popular imagination long after the turn of the century. Vaughan Williams' *Pilgrim*, as we have seen, was derided by a Glasgow critic as containing "Puseyite fal-lals". It is unlikely, however, that the reviewer was aware of just how firmly he had struck Vaughan Williams' own family tree – and one of the potential reasons why Dearmer and Vaughan Williams might have met and got along so well.

When discussing family history, Vaughan Williams scholars have understandably tended to focus on the Darwin and Wedgwood branches, the Rev. Arthur Vaughan Williams having died at Down Ampney only two years after the birth of his famous son. But there are reasons for looking more closely at the composer's father when considering the roots of his son's musical expression and symbolism. The first is that, like Dearmer, Arthur Vaughan Williams was educated at Christ Church, Oxford, taking his B.A. in 1857 and his M.A. in 1860,¹¹ beginning his time there just six years after Newman had converted and the remnant of the movement was under the gathering impetus of "Puseyism". Moreover, Arthur Vaughan Williams, once ordained, was dedicated to the movement. Percy M. Young, in his invaluable study of the composer, has shown us that the church at Down Ampney was renovated during the working lifetime of the Rev. Arthur Vaughan Williams, in accordance with Anglo-Catholic sympathies.¹² Young goes on to discuss the necessity of showing "the connection between the folk-song revival and other local antiquarian research during the second part of the nineteenth century, and to recognize the partial aegis of the Church, in order to fully realize the process which took Ralph Vaughan Williams from a country vicarage and transformed him into the particular kind of composer he became."¹³ This is very perceptive – the folk-song retrieval of Vaughan Williams' early

adulthood having been spurred on, at least in part, by the Oxford Movement a generation earlier.

Another reason for interest in Arthur Vaughan Williams is that his first appointment as a priest was to Bemerton, the former parish of George Herbert, whose poetry Vaughan Williams was to set repeatedly over the course of his long career. One need not be a thoroughgoing Freudian to appreciate the symbolism this poet must have held, at least in part, for the cleric's son. And perhaps most significantly, his father's close friend, Herbert Fisher, also a Christ Church man, was the father of Vaughan Williams' first wife, Adeline. Thus it seems that the shape of Vaughan Williams' early adulthood, from the time of his marriage to Adeline Fisher to his involvement with the *English Hymnal*, bears a particularly strong influence of Arthur Vaughan Williams. Whether this was the result of a conscious effort on Ralph's part to learn more about his father, or whether it was just natural tendencies that the two had in common is difficult to tell, but the influence seems certain either way.

Significantly, this era leading up to Vaughan Williams' involvement with the *Hymnal* is often referred to as his 'Pre-Raphaelite Phase', owing to the dominance of Pre-Raphaelite texts he set during this time (specifically those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister, Christina).¹⁴ This is important for a number of reasons. First, the Pre-Raphaelites were very much influenced and shaped by the Oxford Movement. Spurred on by the invigorating theology, as well as the call to revitalize 19th century art by means of medieval revival, their art ran parallel to the religious work of Keble, Newman and Pusey. In time, critics even associated them with "Puseyism". Vaughan Williams was deeply impressed by the Pre-Raphaelites, to the extent that his musical philosophy seems to be heavily influenced by theirs. Their tenets could almost have been written by the composer himself, W.M. Rossetti summing up their goals as being "1. To have genuine ideas to express. 2. To study nature attentively... 3. To sympathize with what is direct and heartfelt...to the exclusion of what is self-parading and learned by rote."¹⁵ If we combine these goals with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's penchant for the exploration of medieval subjects, initially pervaded by Christian subjects and a specifically Catholic sensibility, and John Ruskin's theories on the high moral role art must play in society¹⁶, we see a foundation upon which Vaughan Williams might have built his career. Indeed, in this context, we can understand the full meaning of his words from the preface of the *Hymnal*, wherein he described good music as being a "moral matter."¹⁷

This 'Pre-Raphaelite' phase is generally assumed to have ended around the time of the publication of the *English Hymnal*, as he stopped setting the texts of the Rossettis which had maintained such prominence in his early compositions. But I believe he never really got over the Pre-Raphaelites. He might have left their texts behind, but their principles remained. In abandoning their texts, he would often opt for actual Tudor or medieval texts – replacing their attempts at imitation with the real thing. Furthermore, his work on the *Hymnal*, coupled with his folk-song collecting had enabled him to apply their retrieval principles to music. Soon after this, his Victorian era chromaticism would be entirely transformed. All of this plays into Vaughan Williams' treatment of Bunyan, which should be understood with this background of the Oxford Movement, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the *English Hymnal* firmly in place – for all of this was effecting the composer as he first began to collect and set music for the project.

The allegory was to occupy Vaughan Williams for several decades, beginning with the *English Hymnal*, and moving through many successive stages, including an important first setting of incidental music in 1909 at Reigate¹⁸, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* of 1922, the incidental music for a wartime production of the Allegory for the BBC twenty years later, and the D major symphony of 1943. Other pieces, too, figure symbolically in the opera, notably *Flos Campi*, which provides thematic material, the understanding of which is essential for penetrating the depth of the piece. The following serves as a brief overview of the major symbolism and overarching structure of this masterpiece.

NOTES

1. All excerpts from the Dent correspondence are taken from pgs 596-606 of the first edition of Michael Kennedy's *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. OUP 1964.
2. These and other references to Nathaniel Lew's essay are to be found in " 'Words and Music that are forever England': *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the pitfalls of nostalgia", Lew's contribution to *Vaughan Williams Essays*, edited by Byron Adams and Robin Wells, Ashgate 2003.
3. Jeffrey Aldridge "A Christian Atheist" *Journal of the RVW Society* No 33 (June 2005) p. 6
4. For a more detailed exposition of this premise, see my article "Beyond Wishful Thinking" *Journal of the RVW Society* No 36 (June 2006) p. 21
5. 'A Minim's Rest', 1948
6. 'The Making of Music' *National Music* p. 206
7. Mellers, Wilfrid. *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*. Barrie & Jenkins 1989. Pgs 123-124 Kennedy, Michael. *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. OUP 1964. Pg. 653
8. UVW pg. 58
9. Gillman, Frederick John. *The Evolution of the English Hymn*. Macmillan 1927. Pg. 241 Gillman summarized the contribution of the Oxford Movement on Church music thus: "With the Oxford Movement not only did Anglican prejudices against hymn-singing almost entirely disappear, but the leadership in the production of congregational hymns passed from Nonconformist to Anglican circles. The pioneer English writers...were in practice Dissenters: but the leading hymnists of the mid-nineteenth century, when the art 'burst into almost tropical luxuriance,' were for the most part Churchmen, who produced a succession of hymnals chiefly for parochial use."
10. Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity Volume II: Reformation to the Present*. Revised edition. Harper & Row 1975. pg1169
11. UVW pg. 2
12. Young, Percy M. *Vaughan Williams*. Dennis Dobson, Ltd. mcmlmiii, pgs 15-16
13. In light of this it seems beautifully symbolic that Hymn No 152 in the *English Hymnal* bears the name "Down Ampney." Here we see the meeting point between Vaughan Williams, his father, and the musical project which would change the course of his career.
14. It is intriguing to consider that Adeline's mother, nee Mary Jackson, was the model for the Pre-Raphaelite painter George Frederic Watts's *Una and the Red Cross Knight*.¹⁵ Perhaps it was through this connection with the Fisher family that RVW's interest in the Pre-Raphaelites was first kindled, an influence which was to be of the utmost significance in his development as a composer. With this strong family background in the Oxford Movement and it's overlapping cultural principles such as the work of the Pre Raphaelites, we see a foundation upon which the friendship of Dearmer and VW becomes likely.
16. des Cars, Laurence. *The Pre-Raphaelites: Romance and Realism*. Henry N. Abrams, Inc. pg. 23
17. Ibid. pg. 20
18. "Now the expression 'musically correct' has no meaning; the only 'correct' music is that which is beautiful and noble...It is indeed a moral rather than a musical issue. No doubt it requires a certain effort to tune oneself to the moral atmosphere implied by a fine melody; and it is far easier to dwell in the miasma of a languishing and sentimental hymn tunes which so often disfigure our services." [from RVW's preface to the *English Hymnal* pg. ix]
19. For a discussion of the debt RVW's outline owed to the Reigate production see Nathaniel Lew's article in Byron Adams' and Robin Wells' *Vaughan Williams Essays*. Ashgate 2003

THE PIECE

Vaughan Williams' operas are an enigmatic group, each one seeming to owe a debt to a different branch of operatic history. *Hugh the Drover* is Vaughan Williams' reinterpretation of the English ballad opera; *Sir John in Love* a setting of Shakespeare; *Riders to the Sea* is the sung play of Debussy, translated musically to the Irish coast; and *The Poisoned Kiss* is an operetta. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by contrast, is generally discussed in Wagnerian terms by those who support its inclusion in the repertoire. Yet it must be stressed that the *Pilgrim* does not comfortably fit into a Wagnerian mold: if it is indebted to Wagner, it is also a profound critique of his work and philosophy. This paradoxical relationship can be seen even in the title of the piece, which designates it as a *Morality, Founded on Bunyan's Allegory of the Same Name*.

The word "Morality" has been pounced on by hostile critics for a half century, as proof that the work belongs in a cathedral rather than an opera house. Yet the term "opera" is not so specific as such critics would like to think. Wagner preferred the term Music Drama, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* has been described as a sung play, and contemporaneous with Vaughan Williams' *Pilgrim*, Stravinsky produced *The Rake's Progress*, which is subtitled "A Moral Fable." Likewise, Vaughan Williams' designation is neither enigmatic nor apologetic, but explanatory – something which negative critics have either missed or deliberately ignored.

First and foremost, a “Morality” is a dramatic form: Vaughan Williams was referring to the medieval Morality play, which had been effectively banned by Henry VIII in 1543.¹ Like Wagner, then, Vaughan Williams was recalling an artistic model pre-dating the Reformation. Yet in contrast to Wagner, whose philosophy and art sought a return to pre-Christian paganism (as with the *Ring*), *The Pilgrim's Progress* represents a continuity with the Christian past. It is worth noting that Vaughan Williams, passionate admirer though he was of *Tristan und Isolde*, apparently loathed *Parsifal*. At the very least this demonstrates the limits of his Wagnerianism, but I think it also contrasts the two composers' attitudes toward religion.² While Wagner desired to replace religion with art, Vaughan Williams seems to investigate religion, and even point to it as an answer, even to the extent of emphasizing a sacramental world-view in the *Pilgrim*.

Thus, upon deeper reflection, the opera's lengthy title is important in an interpretive sense: that it includes the term “morality” and the phrase “founded upon Bunyan's allegory” [emphasis mine] indicates that Vaughan Williams was not seeking complete unity of theological mind with the great Puritan. Instead, he used the allegory as a basis for something remarkably similar to the medievalism so common to the Pre-Raphaelites and to Anglo-Catholicism, both of which were such formative influences on his art at around the time he began writing music for the opera in 1906.

The choice of Bunyan for this medievalist purpose is not so strange as one might initially think, for his art is essentially informed by the Medieval rather than the Renaissance. Though in many ways a figure of his own day and age, theologically, Bunyan's writing is devoid of the classical imagery so prevalent at the time. As a self-educated man, he would not have studied the texts of Sophocles, Homer, and Virgil: rather his inspiration would take shape from the indigenous folk tradition, replete with giants, dragons and hobgoblins. Though a Puritan contemporary of Milton, his art is uninformed by the vast continental tradition which fed the structure and allusions of *Paradise Lost*. Instead, it has more in common with an English allegorical and mystical tradition vibrant in Pre-Reformation England. Significantly, Neville Coghill defended his choice of staging decisions for the first performance of the opera in very much these terms, saying:

[Bunyan] approaches the Unknown through the Familiar[,] and his Dream, in this respect, is in line with the great English mystical tradition that stretches from The Dream of the Rood of Anglo-Saxon times through Piers Plowman in the fourteenth to The Pilgrim's Progress in the seventeenth century and beyond.³

Coghill's analysis is perceptive, especially relating to the art of Vaughan Williams, which can be said to be descended from this mystical tradition. This has significant implications for the opera as a whole, specifically in terms of analysis: it is the theological and even mystical elements at play throughout the piece that form its meaning and shape the power of its symbolism – a symbolism which has tempted scholars to consider *Pilgrim* in a loosely Wagnerian, leitmotivic fashion.⁴ Yet this parallel with Wagner also strains if too closely scrutinized. Scholars seem to have known this intuitively: other than an interesting doctoral dissertation written by Michael Doonan in the late 1970s, there have been no serious proponents of a strict leitmotivic reading. The problem is that no real framework for understanding the symbolism has been suggested as an alternative, with the possible exception of what I believe to be a rather insightful, if brief, observation of James Day, who has written that “Music formerly used in one context takes on a new significance when quoted in another.”⁵ This seems a simple enough observation, but I think there is a great deal more to it than might generally be assumed. Those familiar with the piece know that it contains an extraordinary amount of self-reference and quotation, more perhaps than any of the composer's other pieces. All of this was quite deliberate – Vaughan Williams held onto the piece for decades, and certainly knew what he had been doing. I believe that he was using these moments symbolically, that in the *Pilgrim* he uses a unique system of musical iconography: the quotations function as windows out of the opera, adding symbolic depth,⁶ his own musical journey represented in pilgrimage. By illuminating this symbolic and

theological content of the opera, interpreting the iconography along the way, the piece's dramatic unity and importance in Vaughan Williams' career is revealed.

The Prologue of *The Pilgrim's Progress* begins with the hymn tune *York*, interrupted by an insistently recurrent phrase from Tallis's *Third Mode Melody*. From the outset there seems a conflict between the two themes: the stately, confident G major of *York*, interrupted by the sweeping phrygian motive – restless, insistent, and yearning. Both tunes were first set by the composer during his pivotal work on the *English Hymnal* of 1906, and both were to reappear before the *Pilgrim* in his career: Tallis's melody as the foundation of a magnificent *Fantasia*, and *York* in his first opera, *Hugh the Drover*, at the beginning of Act 2, when Hugh is in the stocks, suffering for love (a context important for its associations with the *Pilgrim*). Among English churchgoers, the hymns were well known by the time of the opera's premiere, as part of the living tradition of their hymnody. As such, they might have brought to mind the words set in the hymnal, which seems precisely what Vaughan Williams intended, as the texts frame the opera's opening conflict vividly. *York*'s text is a recasting of Psalm 122, a prayer of peace for the Church⁷ – the community of the faithful – symbolized as “Jerusalem.” As the opera progresses, the symbolism of the Church will become increasingly important; first in terms of Pilgrim's arrival at the House Beautiful, symbolic of the Church Militant, and ultimately in the Celestial City, symbolic of the Church Triumphant. These levels of reality are essential for proper understanding of the of the opera, highlighting the inadequacy of secular analysis, which has yielded such confused and often negative results over the past half century. If we accept, for example, Wilfrid Mellers's implication that the “New Jerusalem” of the heavenly city is somehow indicative of an earthly societal construct, hoped for in political terms,⁸ we will have radically truncated the symbolic reflection involved between the House Beautiful and the Celestial City. To suggest that both can be political creations of man is to ruin the drama: there is no longer a gradient, no longer an ascent, and no longer the subtle interplay of earthly symbols reflecting heavenly glory. It also contradicts Vaughan Williams' intent, as revealed by a letter to Rutland Boughton concerning the opera's libretto, wherein he wrote:

...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.⁹

Here Vaughan Williams opts for theology over ideology, anticipating Hans Kung's insightful comment that “Ideologies...reproduce the reality of the world in a distorted form, cover up the real abuses and replace rational arguments with an appeal to the emotions.”¹⁰ Vaughan Williams' pieces and writings consistently demonstrate a man dedicated to pursuing reality, rather than engaging in political distortion. Perhaps this is why he was drawn to such theological material as Bunyan – sturdy and enduring rather than subject to the whims of intellectual fashion. In any event, the application of ideological thought to the libretto results in a confusion of the real dramatic elements. Specifically, it destroys the symbolic relationship between the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.



Figure 1: ‘York’ Hymn Tune

As a corrective, *York's* text from the *Hymnal* should be read as both a prayer for the Church Militant and as a bridge, by combination with the Tallis motive, to the Church Triumphant: it speaks therefore of the prayers of the saints. It has been suggested that the Tallis fragment is "almost a leitmotif for the Celestial City,"¹¹ but even this qualified statement is a little misleading, as to suggest that either *York* or the Tallis could serve independently in this capacity is to miss a full understanding of the iconography, for the Celestial City is never truly presented without both themes intertwined. The Tallis fragment on its own can be better understood when referencing its original context from the *English Hymnal*, where it was set to Addison's "When rising from the bed of death." The lyric outlines the soul's struggle with sin and death; with the individual's fear of damnation, working to peace through Christ's sacrifice and atonement. That it interrupts *York* at the beginning is therefore symbolic: the grace, surety, and prayer for the community expressed in *York* must be reconciled to the guilt, fear, and pardon expressed in the Tallis. Throughout the opera, the Tallis motive is identified most strongly with the Pilgrim's yearning, his desire to gain the Celestial City, and even with his suffering. As such it stands not for the goal of the journey, but the journey itself: the musical icon of "Pilgrimage." The two icons presented at the beginning – the prayers of the saints (*York*) and the pilgrimage of the individual soul (Tallis) – can be understood as the fundamental framework of the opera, expressed musically.



Figure 2: Tallis Fragment—Icon of 'Pilgrimage'

Later in the Prologue, we are given the most recurrent icon of the piece: a four note fanfare (followed by various music throughout the opera), first appearing in the accompaniment as Bunyan sings the title, and found earlier in the composer's works in the finale to the D major symphony. There are many fascinating things about this icon. First, it is a perfect aural representation of the Cross: usually appearing Do-Re-Sol-Do in triplet figure. Then there is context. The first time it is sung to words is the most overtly sacramental moment of the opera: Act 1 Scene 2, after Interpreter lays hands on Pilgrim, and seals his forehead (with what should be the Sign of the Cross): the sacrament of Confirmation. Here Interpreter sings "Thus art thou sealed with the Holy Spirit."

NOTES

- 1 Asquith, Clare. *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*. Public Affairs (2005) pgs 23-24 In 1543, Henry VIII forbade actors to interpret scripture or dramatize matters of doctrine.
- 2 He even said to his wife Ursula that he had "no intention of subjecting himself to [Parsifal] again." UVW pg 362
- 3 Quoted in Lew.
- 4 Both Kennedy and Doonan mention leitmotif in one way or another; Kennedy as an analogy, though Doonan suggests a thorough leitmotivic reading of the opera.
- 5 Day pg171
- 6 That this system of outside references was conscious seems justified by RVW's preface to *Sir John in Love*, wherein he takes pains to dismiss any notion that the folk tunes used in the opera have any symbolic meaning. He does not do likewise with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which utilizes so much external material from his own works.
- 7 No. 472 *The English Hymnal*
- 8 Mellers, Wilfrid. *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*. Pg131
- 9 UVW pg 304
- 10 Kung, Hans. *On Being a Christian*. Pocket Books, New York. 1976 (pg 37)
- 11 Kennedy pg. 353



Figure 3: 'Cross' Icon

The icon occurs over 25 times in the opera, and it is often symbolically used with matching cross symbolism. Most ingeniously, however, is that the first three notes of the Cross are written in retrograde, repeatedly, during Watchful's Nocturne, to the words of Christ from the Cross ("Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit"). This in and of itself is extraordinary, but even more telling is Vaughan Williams' indication that Watchful should turn his back to the audience and bless the house – thus the retrograde Cross icon matches the Sign of the Cross seen from behind by the audience.¹



Figure 4: Retrograde Cross Icon with Blessing

Critics of the opera have often cynically suggested that the *Pilgrim* is a throwback to a kind of self-righteous, Victorian hypocrisy; that it turns Bunyan's book into the story of a lone priggish saint surrounded by sinners.² Having smeared the plot in this manner, they then suggest that the music was passé by 1951; that it smacked of an earlier era, out of touch with its contemporaries. In short, they brand Vaughan Williams with the fatal tags of 'Victorian' and 'Romantic,' in an attempt to discredit the piece. Both of these accusations are false, though it will take some explaining to unravel the problem.

First, though Vaughan Williams is often described as a Romantic, this is simply because he fails to resemble the type of modernist that was so popular in the early 20th century: the artist who favored a technical severing with the past, what might best be described as the artist of radical discontinuity. Out of intellectual laziness, then, unsympathetic critics assert that Vaughan Williams was anachronistic. Yet Vaughan Williams' art has little in common with 19th century egotism. He lacked natural sympathy with Beethoven's art, and therefore much of what followed, preferring instead the musical world of Bach, which he suggested was not so much of the Baroque, but of the medieval: he compared Bach to Gothic architecture³. One of the primary differences between Vaughan Williams' art and most of the music which immediately preceded him is a type of detachment on his part, and either an avoidance or a refusal to indulge in the self-gratifying exercise of perpetual self-expression. Discussing the symphonies Frank Howes wrote:

Unlike the Romantics from Beethoven on through the nineteenth century, Vaughan Williams does not turn his gaze inward and write of heart-searching. His knowledge of human nature is not conspicuously less than that of the romantic introverts, but his gaze is extroverted.⁴

Yet even Howes admitted that the labeling of Vaughan Williams as an extrovert falls short, as his D major Symphony provides both extroverted

and introverted moments. The truth is that he was not easily categorized in these terms: he was neither fully introverted nor completely extroverted, musically. Thus, the *Pilgrim* in particular is a source of confusion for much contemporary criticism, which is hampered by psychological models tending to interpret all drama as a search for Freudian “self-awareness”. Once again, such analysis will stifle the breadth of the opera, which represents not a narcissistic type of quest, but a reaching outward to a reality beyond the self. All of this is to be expected from a composer who defined music in external terms: as the reaching out to ultimate reality by means of ordered sound, yet the implications of such an external philosophy have been continuously ignored or missed by the scholars of the last century, hence the easy and erroneous label of “Romantic.”⁵

In stark contrast to ego-centric romanticism and modernism, Vaughan Williams’ *Pilgrim* must lose himself. Leaving behind his city and possessions, he relies upon the help of others throughout the opera, drawing him beyond his fears, and directing him first toward Christ and the House Beautiful, and from thence to eternal life. Here the initial criticism of the opera by Martin Cooper, that *Pilgrim* is a “solitary saint in a world of sinners”⁶ is betrayed as ridiculously false. It is contradicted immediately in Act I Scene 1, when *Pilgrim* meets *Evangelist*: the first of many who will help *Pilgrim* to lose himself on the quest for eternal life.

When *Evangelist* answers *Pilgrim*’s full orchestral cry of angst, (“What shall I do to be saved?”), he is represented musically by a motto theme: two stark minor chords, E-flat minor and D minor in descending succession, devoid of any comforts save clarity and surety, ascetically orchestrated by strings alone. (It is worth pointing out that here is contradicted the notion that the falling minor second in the *Pilgrim* is indicative of evil: *Evangelist* is hardly evil). Usually the evil thematic material in the opera is represented as a twisting or mockery of an earlier icon. This, in turn, seems a rather profound musical reflection of basic Christian theology: evil is not creative, but only imitative – it cannot produce, but only twist that which was originally good.

NOTES

- 1 Vocal Score, pg45
- 2 cf. Nathaniel Lew’s article on the opera in *Vaughan Williams Essays* wherein Lew quotes, at length, some of the critics who held this theory, and even seems to agree with them.
- 3 Vaughan Williams wrote: “My natural love is more with the Gothic-Teutonic idiom of JS Bach and his predecessors—not ‘Baroque’, by the way... Bach has nothing to do with the mechanical ornament of Baroque architecture, which is much more akin to Beethoven, but should be compared to the natural exfoliation of a Gothic cathedral.” “Some Thoughts On Beethoven’s Choral Symphony” *National Music*. Pg83
- 4 Howes pg. 3
- 5 There are many different meanings and interpretations of the word “Romantic”—space unfortunately prevents me from a full discussion here. This present refutation is simply meant to clarify that, philosophically speaking, RVW’s art has little in common with the egocentric Romanticism so commonly found as a foundation of 19th century music.
- 6 cited in Lew (ed. Adams) pg191

Figure 5: Evangelist’s Motto Theme

As the two dialogue, *Pilgrim* expressing his fears, and *Evangelist* offering guidance, the contrast between them is highlighted through the orchestration. *Pilgrim*’s fears and doubts are tumultuous upheavals of full orchestral anxiety, reaching *forte* in *Pilgrim*’s realization that he is condemned to die, contrasted by *Evangelist*’s firm, *pianissimo* accompaniment. *Pilgrim*’s orchestration remains full, though it never reaches *f* again, as he is gradually calmed by *Evangelist*. Finally, the full orchestration drops out, and *Pilgrim* is left with *p* winds alone accompanying his admission that he *thinks* he can see a light shining in the distance.

Pilgrim’s music is therefore from the very start in transition, progressing and changing. *Evangelist*, by contrast, is passionless in the Christian sense of the term: he is constant, steady, consistent. His music is not particularly comforting. *Pilgrim*’s first experience of the Gospel is therefore one of ascetic qualities – a challenge to give up the passions and possessions which beguile him, symbolized by the sins bundled on his back, which in turn represent death and damnation. There seems no positive aspect to the Gospel at first; it seems a mere denial of comfort, until *Evangelist* tells him where he must go, which is to the Wicket Gate. Here, as he tells *Pilgrim* to knock at the Gate, *Evangelist*’s music blossoms into what Michael Doonan, in his leitmotivic analysis of the opera, has called the Radiant Theme. In actuality, as Doonan also points out, it is more than a theme. Instead, it is a combination of icons first expressed together here in E major, then spread throughout the piece like tributaries.¹ Doonan goes on to explain the significance of the material: not only is it derived from the thematic material of the 5th symphony, some of its sources can be traced in part all the way back to the *Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*. All of this is of particular interest, as it permeates Vaughan Williams’ allusions to and setting of the House Beautiful,² thereby linking Act 1 Scene 2 with Act IV Scene 2: The Delectable Mountains, both of which are also unified allegorically as expressions of different aspects of the Church Militant. Most significantly, however, is the melodic material in which *Pilgrim* sings “for I seek an inheritance, incorruptible that fadeth not away.” This material will actually develop (or settle) into one of the most important icons of the piece: a quotation from *Flos Campi*, which has significant theological implications for the entire opera.

After a brief setback with his neighbors, who try to convince him to return to the City of Destruction, *Pilgrim* is chastised by *Evangelist*, this time more forcefully represented by the low brass and bassoons.³ What follows is some of the most remarkable scene change music of the opera, a brief tone poem describing *Pilgrim*’s struggle up the Hill of Difficulty, subsiding as *Pilgrim* reaches the Cross, at the beginning of the most the crucial scene (in every sense) of the opera: Act I Scene 2.

This scene opens with a string of major chords, interrupted poignantly by one minor chord in a palindrome of measures, all the chords floating in inversion. The musical palindrome, being non-retrogradable, was also being investigated at the time, more systematically, by Olivier Messiaen, in his efforts to express the eternal aspect of God. The opening of Act 1 Scene 2 has this effect: after the tumultuous Hill of Difficulty, these chords seem to float beyond time.

This moment serves as one of the two “mountaintop” climaxes of the piece. The other will be Act IV’s Delectable Mountains. To understand that the climaxes in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* are moments of comparative stillness and peace is to penetrate some of the dramatic mystery of the work. Ordinary climaxes of action and passion do not apply.

Having said this, after the palindrome is complete, on the second beat of measure 7, the cor anglais begins its grateful plainsong melody, also central to the 5th symphony, as it forms the basis of the *Romanza* of that work.

Figure 6: Cor Anglais Solo from Act I Scene 2

The Pilgrim has arrived at the Cross, and his struggle will be completely transformed by this encounter. Here he bursts out once more of his need to be saved, and clings to the Cross – the symbolism of the moment could not be realized other than physically, and the weight of the drama turns on this event.⁴ The burden of sin is removed from his back only after he sings, to the very tune of the cor anglais “He has given me rest by his sorrow and life by his death”: a direct reference to the Passion and Death of Christ, the atonement, the redemption. The orchestration in this scene is not arbitrary. Here the music takes on an added symbolism: the solo of the cor anglais is perhaps the most powerful representation of the critique of Wagner in the piece. To explain this will necessitate a digression.

When Vaughan Williams was a young man, he heard Gustav Mahler conduct *Tristan und Isolde*, and was deeply shaken by the experience. For the duration of his life he remained affected by the opera, and certainly understood the importance of the work musically and symbolically. The “Liebestod”, arguably the most important moment of the opera, features a highly chromatic solo by the cor anglais. Vaughan Williams, too, uses a prominent solo cor anglais, twice, in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, both times also signifying love and death, though in a radically different sense than Wagner’s. In *Pilgrim*, Vaughan Williams presents the Cross, symbolic of the ultimate love-death: God’s self-sacrifice for humanity, individually and corporately. In contrast to Wagner, who uses chromaticism to portray passion in a positive sense, Vaughan Williams tends to use chromaticism in *Pilgrim* to portray evil. Modal melody, plainsong and pentatonic statements are used to represent purity and love. Thus the use of the cor anglais in a modal plainsong, describing the pure love-death of Christ for everyone, cleanses and appropriates the Wagnerian symbolism from *Tristan*. Significantly, the only other prominent use of the solo cor anglais in the opera is chromatic, at the end of Act III Scene 1 (Vanity Fair) as the Pilgrim is being lead to death for his love of Christ. Here we also see a dramatic palindrome: as Christ died for Pilgrim, so Pilgrim must be willing to die for Christ. This reciprocal flow of self-giving is the Christian understanding of true love. And as this true love always bears a cross, so the Pilgrim reaches this transformation in Act 1 Scene 2: from henceforth he will be unconcerned with himself, seeking only to be true to that salvific and sacrificial love experienced when he encountered Christ’s Sacrifice. That these measures seem among the most mystical is not unimportant, for at this moment Vaughan Williams begins in earnest to investigate the mystical relationship between love, suffering, and redemption. He had done this earlier in his career as well, yet in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* he gives his ideas dramatic form, using Bunyan as a scaffold to unfold a type of musical theology; one which resembles the theology of Catholic mystics such as St John of the Cross, whose writings can be used to illuminate some of Vaughan Williams’ symbolism.

It is no coincidence that in this scene the most controversial of the stage directions is given: Interpreter lays hands on Pilgrim, sealing his forehead with a mark. What is enacted here is the Rite of Confirmation: the seal of one’s baptism. Vaughan Williams even described the scene in these terms in his synopsis: “The Pilgrim kneels in adoration while the Interpreter seals him on his forehead.”[Emphasis mine]. That ‘adoration’ is the term used by Vaughan Williams is significant, for it implies Adoration of the Holy Cross, further scandalizing the already nervous critics.⁵ As he begins to delve into mysticism, therefore, he simultaneously asserts a sacramental theology. And when he was criticized for this moment in the opera, even by his supporter E J Dent, he responded crisply and clearly that it was what he intended: that “initiation” was what was called for.⁶ The Sacrament of Confirmation is precisely such a Rite of Initiation. The emphasis here is that Christianity is not an ideology, nor a philosophy, but a community: one which Pilgrim seeks and joins. He has become a member of the Church Militant, on a journey to the Church Triumphant. Significantly, the moment is punctuated by the first sung Cross icon: just as the Sign of the Cross is being marked on Pilgrim’s forehead. The sacramentalism is therefore built into the very music, and cannot be removed from the opera.⁷

After this initiation, the Pilgrim sleeps, the House Beautiful serenaded by Watchful’s Nocturne, based upon Psalm 121. I have already mentioned the iconography of the Cross, repeated in retrograde throughout this intermezzo, but there are other aspects worthy of note. After the introduction, as the Psalm proper is sung, the music shifts to E major, the

first time the key has been sustained since Evangelist first mentions the Gate. The Intermezzo itself, added by the composer for the 1952 production, functions as an allegory within an allegory. While Pilgrim sleeps (itself a metaphor for death in St Paul’s writing), Watchful quotes Christ’s final word from the Cross: “Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.”⁸ Once again, we have the sacrifice referenced, the love-death of Jesus. This statement is reiterated several times before and after the singing of Psalm 121, which forms the central part of the nocturne. The imagery begins with the lifting up of one’s eyes to the hills – very much an encapsulated version of the opera to this point. The psalm continues, outlining in brief, the substance of the opera. That it fits so seamlessly into the piece is a testimony to its perfection of symbolism within the allegory.

To focus on Act II, Scene 1 is to focus on one of the great choral moments in a career of great choral works. When writing of Beethoven’s 9th symphony, Vaughan Williams referred to the difficult task of writing music which is both joyful and serious, citing Beethoven and Bach as the only two who had accomplished this, in the 9th and the “cum sancto” of the B minor mass respectively. He also pointed out that these were both in D major.⁹ During the Arming of the Pilgrim, he does the same, composing music which is both joyful and serious. The occasion is that of preparation: Pilgrim will meet many threats on his journey, and his arming is a matter of life or death: eternal life or damnation. Yet it is supremely joyful, for Pilgrim has come to know that it is within his power to endure to the end, provided he relies on the armor he is being symbolically given. Here it is fascinating to compare Vaughan Williams’ insistent reiteration of the Cross Icon in this scene with St John Chrysostom’s discussion of the Sign of the Cross:

*Never leave your house without making the sign of the cross. It will be your staff, a weapon, an impregnable fortress. Neither man nor demon will dare attack you, seeing you covered with such powerful armor. Let this sign teach you that you are a soldier, ready to combat against demons, and ready to fight for the crown of justice. Are you ignorant of what the cross has done? It has vanquished sin, destroyed death, emptied hell, dethroned Satan, and restored the universe. Would you then doubt its power?*¹⁰

St John Chrysostom’s theology could not have been better represented musically and allegorically than by Vaughan Williams’ setting in this scene. And significantly, when the chorus bursts out into “Hobgoblin nor foul fiend” the key is D major, and the orchestration almost identical to the climax of Beethoven’s 9th.

Also embedded in this scene is the first clear occurrence of what will become one of the most important icons in the opera. As he is being armed, Pilgrim sings “Blest be the Lord my strength, that teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight.” The theme is familiar, as it was first written by Vaughan Williams in the final section, marked “Set me as a seal upon thine heart” of *Flos Campi*. It’s next reiteration will illuminate it’s mystical symbolism.

Act II Scene 2 features a diabolical attempt to mimic this musical Sign of the Cross, in the fanfare accompanying Apollyon’s threats. Unlike the clear, upward thrust of the Cross, however, Apollyon’s fanfare can only swing down, menacing rather than uplifting.



Figure 7: Apollyon’s ‘Mock Cross’

The battle with Apollyon is, in musical terms, the clashing of this mock cross with the Cross of Christ, a conflict Pilgrim emerges from

triumphantly as the Cross blasts in full orchestration, after which the Pilgrim sings “I am more than conqueror through Him that loved me.” The scene represents the world that Pilgrim left behind attempting to pull him back – the temptations getting progressively more difficult. What once was just three neighbors inciting fear becomes a battle with a demon claiming sovereignty.

After this, Vaughan Williams provides us with a brief, but ravishing, moment of idyllic beauty. Pilgrim is anointed by the Cup Bearer and Branch Bearer, and encouraged for a third time by Evangelist. Nathaniel Lew has suggested that this imagery echoes the Eucharist,¹¹ yet there is no way of turning a branch and water into the Eucharistic matter of Bread and Wine. Still, the symbolism is Catholic, in that the water of life is applied like Holy Water. Once again, Evangelist is clothed in the ascetic music of strings, as he warns Pilgrim of the trial to come in Vanity Fair, which opens with a snarling minor second, perhaps as a vicious parody of Evangelist’s own. This is appropriate, as there is no real iconography in Vanity Fair, only the twisted parodies of icons.

If everything in the preceding analysis is either missed or ignored (and most of it has been for over half a century) Vanity Fair can seem, albeit misguidedly, to offer commentators a chance to impose a secular reading on the opera, by pretending the climax of the opera is this scene, and as though the point of it is one extended rant against the evils of capitalism. Yet in its swarming cast of characters, the faces of Lenin, Mao and Marx could easily be added, for the message of Vanity Fair is that money is the only reality: that humanity can be reduced to an economic theory, and that everything, including our sexuality, can be reduced to wealth. Pilgrim refuses this vision of reality: his understanding has been informed by the supernatural experience of Christ’s love. His subsequent proclamation of Truth in the marketplace leads to his mock ecclesiastical trial (reminiscent both musically and dramatically of Hugh the Drover’s), presented here with lines in sinister parody of liturgical chant. Pilgrim is condemned to die, marched off bound, the music dying away in the second, chromatic cor anglais solo, emblematic this time of the Pilgrim’s own love-death. Vanity Fair’s parody of the House Beautiful is complete: it is turned entirely backward. The cor anglais which began Act I Scene 2, emblematic of Christ’s death, ends Act III Scene 1, emblematic of Pilgrim’s death. The House Beautiful has Interpreter, Vanity Fair has Lord Lechery: both want to show Pilgrim “wonderful things.” And after each scene, night falls, the Pilgrim in the Intermezzo asleep, but in Act III Scene 2 facing a deeper type of sleep: that of death.

The following Act III Scene 2 is dedicated to a single aria sung by the Pilgrim in Prison, sometimes referred to as the “Moonlit Psalm.” In actuality it is a compendium of psalms, which Vaughan Williams uses in whirlwind fashion. Beginning with “My God, my God look upon me. Why hast thou forsaken me?” Vaughan Williams once again places the Pilgrim squarely in the context of Christ’s Passion: these words from the beginning of Psalm 22 were cried out from the cross on Golgotha.¹² The Pilgrim has gone from clinging to the Cross of Christ to picking up his own: he has traded the death sentence of his own sins for death at the hands of those who hate Christ. He is participating in the mystery of redemptive suffering. It is not easy: Pilgrim thrashes about in torment over the situation, referencing psalm after psalm, as if rifling through scripture in search of an answer, when at last he remembers the Key of Promise. At this moment of deepest darkness, he remains faithful. The Cross icon sounds in the orchestra, and the Way is shown before him once again, as he is freed from his prison of doubting, departing into the night. The allegorical parallel with St John of the Cross is striking, as St John wrote:

*The soul...affirms that it departed “in darkness, and secure.” For anyone fortunate enough to possess the ability to journey in the obscurity of faith, and depart from all natural phantasms and intellectual reasonings, walks securely.*¹³

The Spanish monk and the English composer use the same mystical imagery, quote the same scriptures, and draw the same conclusions, as though touching minds across centuries and cultures. Vaughan Williams indicates that he wishes this peaceful nocturnal escape of the Pilgrim to be revealed in, writing in the score “Pilgrim goes slowly through the gate,

and is seen for a long time walking up the Pilgrim Way.”¹⁴ It parallels St John’s poem, which has been called the greatest in Spanish:

*On a dark secret night,
Starving for love and deep in flame,
Oh happy lucky flight!
Unseen I slipped away,
My house at last was calm and safe.*¹⁵

The parallels between St John’s mysticism and Vaughan Williams’s opera become more pronounced when we recognize the theological symbolism to be found in the music of Act IV Scene 1, when the Woodcutter’s Boy points out the first glimpse of the Delectable Mountains. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8: Icon of Mystical Union from Flos Campi

Of this moment, Michael Kennedy writes “No words can convey the beauty of the boy’s indication of the Delectable Mountains...Critical analysis cannot penetrate the cause of such magic.”¹⁶ But critical analysis is in fact the very thing needed to reveal what Vaughan Williams has done here, and there *are* words to convey the beauty expressed in this theme. They are to be found in the Song of Songs: one of Vaughan Williams’s favorite books of the Bible, and foundational for the mystical theology of St John of the Cross. For here, Vaughan Williams directly references a theme he wrote almost 30 years prior to the *Pilgrim’s* premiere. The piece is *Flos Campi*, and the subject is a musical illustration of the love story that comprises the Song of Songs. In the final section of the piece, Vaughan Williams writes a theme in D major, the same key as the reiteration of it by the Woodcutter’s Boy, under the words “Set me as a seal upon thine heart”: a moment describing mystical union with God.



Figure 9: Flos Campi Section 6 ‘Pone me ut signaculum super cor tuum’ (Set me as a seal upon thine heart)

The Song of Songs (also known as the Song of Solomon) is ultimately about this mystical union. Vaughan Williams knew this, even writing in a letter to Mrs. Joyce Hooper in 1951: “[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.”

This imagery is crucial to the works of Vaughan Williams: like the poetry of St John of the Cross, it is central to understanding his symbolism. The Delectable Mountains, therefore, represent the fruits of traveling the Way of the Cross, from enduring the Dark Night of the Soul. They represent mystical union with Christ, even here in this earthly existence. The musical and literary imagery is sexual, which seems to have scandalized some secular scholars who have not realized that such imagery is both Christian and scriptural.

NOTES

- 1 Indiana University 1980. Doonan’s cataloguing of the thematic materials is invaluable, though he missed some very significant sources and repetitions (especially regarding the Cross icon). His own theory seems to have been that the *Pilgrim* worked in leitmotivic fashion, and therefore named them as leitmotifs. My own analysis yields different conclusions as to the work’s structure, yet his naming of the thematic material is often very perceptive, and worthy of consultation.
- 2 Discussed in Doonan pgs 140-147
- 3 pg. 48 full score
- 4 see my article “*The Pilgrim’s Progress* in context: a preliminary study” (Journal of the RVW Society No. 26: February 2003) for a more detailed discussion of the dramatic centrality of this scene to the opera
- 5 Thanks to Gregory Martin who pointed out to me that this moment of adoration is directed towards the Cross: it should be staged in this way when produced, so as to make sense of the complex symbolism of the piece.
- 6 Kennedy, First Edition, pg 604
- 7 This emphasis on Confirmation is interesting for other reasons as well. It has long been asserted that Vaughan Williams was never a “professing” Christian (UVW pg. 29). Yet this is not precisely true: he was confirmed at Charterhouse as an adolescent. This, among other things, was a public profession of faith. Whether one considers this a moment of meaningless ritual or a moment when something real happened, regardless of how faint VW’s faith might have been, is entirely dependant upon one’s theological outlook.
- 8 Luke 23:46
- 9 *National Music*. pg 88
- 10 Ghezzi, Bert. *The Sign of the Cross*. Loyola Press. Chicago. 2004. Pg 6. Here, as with my later quotations of St John of the Cross, I would make clear that I am not suggesting Vaughan Williams was directly influenced by the writings of these Saints. I would be very surprised to find he’d read them, in fact. Instead, I am suggesting that certain aspects of his music is best explained in comparison with them—that his experience in some way paralleled theirs, to the extent that what he expressed musically bears a striking resemblance to their theology.
- 11 Lew. pg197
- 12 Matthew 27:46
- 13 St John of the Cross. *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*. Book I. ICS Publications 1979 pg. 108
- 14 pg 167, Vocal Score
- 15 Barnstone, Willis, translator. *The Poems of St John of the Cross*. New Directions, 1972 pg. 39
- 16 Kennedy, Works, p356

In the final scene a unity is expressed, overwhelming in its impact. The Pilgrim crosses the River of Death, completing his way of the Cross (a trumpeted Sign of the Cross sounds on the other side), the *York* and Tallis themes are at last unified in full splendor, and Pilgrim enters the Church Triumphant in the Celestial City, to live united to Christ forever. Here is the fulfillment of all the struggles of his journey, and indeed the suffering inherent in the Tallis fragment is now resurrected in glory, to the heavenly cries of Alleluia. Here, too, is a final medievalist touch by Vaughan Williams: in the stage directions he writes “All round are heavenly beings grouped in circles like a medieval Italian picture.” His vision of heaven, then, was not inspired by Blake or 19th-century Romanticism – not even English, in fact – but medieval Italian. This, in turn, makes sense if we allow for the possibility of a continuing influence of the Pre-Raphaelites upon the works of Vaughan Williams, farther than previously supposed.

When the vision fades, there is Bunyan, book outstretched, reminding us that “in dreams begin responsibilities,” and offering it to each of us, that we might follow the way, live the truth, and gain eternal life, just as the Pilgrim has. The music fades, and we hear the final wisps of *York*, as though evaporating in the morning dew.

From this analysis, it will be noticed that the work is intensely unified. Criticisms that it took too long to compose, and is formed of only loosely pieced together tableaux without real dramatic impetus are sheer nonsense, made by those either ignorant or incapable of understanding the symbolism in the work, which is profoundly and uniformly Christian. It could not have been composed any more quickly, as the iconography that is so essential to the richness of its accomplishment would not have been completed had Vaughan Williams not composed the D major symphony and every other important work which contributed to it. Those who can understand this remarkable system, which draws light from his other pieces and sheds light back upon them, can honestly stand in awe of this unique operatic achievement.



Eric Seddon delivers his paper at the Midhurst symposium

Too long *The Pilgrim’s Progress* has languished, buried under secular scholarship which claimed the composer had no sincere attraction to the supernatural or mystical element of Christianity; no fascination for the deeper aspects of theology. Michael Kennedy has written that “John Bunyan’s book was a lifetime’s obsession for Vaughan Williams, not because he shared its religious outlook but because he saw it as a universal myth of man’s struggle towards a spiritual goal of some kind. In adapting it for the stage, significantly he altered the hero’s name from Christian to Pilgrim, not wishing to tie it to any one religion.”¹ In our own time, when religion is so much a topic of political unrest, this analysis seems outdated: Vaughan Williams’ opera is so completely Christian that every aspect of symbolism in it, and the dramatic impetus itself relies upon Christian theology. A late 20th-century agnostic syncretism forced onto the piece by scholars is therefore anachronistic, and has resulted only in confusion and the denigration of a masterpiece. For anyone doubting how Christian it is, and how little it resembles any other religion, it is useful to imagine an attempt to stage it in an Islamic republic, or a nation under Marxist rule.

Dubious quotes, taken out of context, have become barriers, keeping us from appreciating its theological depth, the most outlandish being a sarcastic quip sent by the composer to Rutland Boughton, in response to an annoying letter, which certain scholars hostile to Christian interpretations of Vaughan Williams have mistakenly thought strengthened their reductive outlooks.² In reality, these scholars have failed: the purpose of scholarship is to expose the layers and depths of a masterpiece, not to obscure and denigrate such an achievement. Moreover, secular scholars have no means of analysis to yield any satisfactory and unified understanding of the piece. Their theories either fall flat or claim that *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is a failure.

But it is not. Instead, it is arguably the most important piece written by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It stands almost unique in the history of opera – the sacred invading a secular art form and living to tell the tale.³ The hostile critics who panned it half a century ago would be dismayed to

hear of the devotion it has aroused – that it has been performed not only in the United Kingdom, but in Australia and North America as well. They would be further shocked to find that it has received two masterful recordings, and that it may well be produced again in 2008.

Michael Kennedy, disappointed in the reception the opera initially received, summed up his analysis of the *Pilgrim* by writing “Truly, this is like no other opera. Its day will come.”⁴ That day is now, if only we will allow the full Christian symbolism of this piece to be presented at last.

[Section III of this article (entitled “The Opera”) is an almost verbatim account of what I delivered in Midhurst on 26 November 2006. In joining it to the background material prepared before the symposium, I have omitted redundant material and added only one other substantial comment. E.S.]

Eric Seddon lives in Cleveland, Ohio, in the USA. He is currently writing a book on the Operas of Vaughan Williams.

NOTES

- 1 From New Grove Dictionary of Opera
- 2 For a detailed discussion of this issue, see my article “Beyond Wishful Thinking” Journal of the RVW Society, June 2006
- 3 Other notable exceptions include Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmelites* and Messiaen’s *St Francois D’Assise*
- 4 Kennedy, *Works*, 357



Inia Te Wiata as John Bunyan in the original Covent Garden production

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

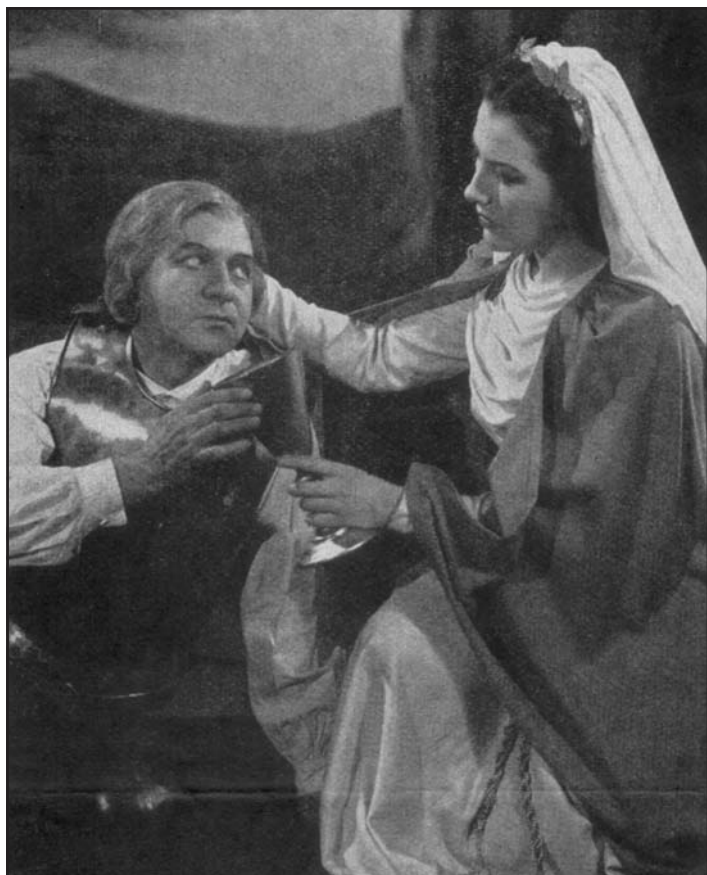


A passionate interest in the music of Vaughan Williams is to be expected from members of the Society, but most also share an appreciation of British music in general. There are many reasons to be grateful for the formation of a new composer society, devoted to Charles Villiers Stanford. the new society will be officially launched in Cambridge, U.K., on March 10 and 11 2007, which is short notice indeed, so members will be happy to know they can obtain further details of the society and its aims from John Covell, the Society chairman at , or by post at 1301 North Sutton Place, Chicago IL 60610, USA.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

by Richard Brunson

Arnold Matters as Pilgrim in the original Covent Garden production, with a Heavenly Being



I first became acquainted with the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams when I was 19 years old. The Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields came to Salt Lake City and performed Vaughan Williams' Fifth Symphony. I was entranced. When the final note of the first movement dissipated I dared not breathe. Since then Vaughan Williams' music has become an integral part of my musical life. *The Pilgrim's Progress* entered my musical consciousness a little over ten years ago. The message of the libretto and the beauty of the music have instilled in me a desire to bring this work to life on the stage with myself in the conductor's chair.

Based upon my own experience, study and knowledge of *Pilgrim* I believe that this work can be successfully staged. By addressing the problems and issues raised by the first performance, this paper will act as a guide to facilitate future performances. Finally I will examine structural similarities between *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other operas that may have provided models for Vaughan Williams' musical and staging decisions.

The Pilgrim's Progress was not a success after its premier. Two years after its premier, Vaughan Williams told Michael Kennedy that "the Pilgrim is dead" A handful of attempts have been made to revive the work in the last few years and a second recording of the opera by Richard Hickox has revived interest in the work. Despite this progress three big problematic areas (outlined by contemporary critics and Vaughan Williams) continue to stand in the way of staging this work. These three areas are the Apollyon and Vanity Fair scenes, and the tempi within the opera affecting the pacing of the production. To this end I have prepared this essay as a guide outlining past difficulties and possible solutions. I will draw primarily from the correspondence of Vaughan Williams and Edward J. Dent¹ after the 1951 premier of *Pilgrim*, conversations

between Vaughan Williams and friends, and will consult the 1971 recording conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, and the 2001 recording conducted by Richard Hickox and documentation of recent performances of the work in the United States and the United Kingdom. I will also draw from cited reviews of the 1951 production and analyses of problematic sections of the work in Nathaniel G. Lew's article "'Words and music that are forever England': *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the pitfalls of nostalgia."² Finally I will examine structural similarities between *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other operas that may have provided models for Vaughan Williams' musical and staging decisions.

Ralph Vaughan Williams worked on his adaptation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* for forty years. The culmination of this life-long labor was its premier at Covent Garden on April 26, 1951. Initial reactions to the first production were not favorable because the work did not fit comfortably into the standard type of an opera. After the first performance, Vaughan Williams told his wife Ursula "a) they won't like it, they don't want an opera with no heroine and no love duets, b) and I don't care. It's what I meant and there it is."³

I strongly believe that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not only the crowning work of Vaughan Williams' oeuvre, but is a profound work that deserves more frequent performance and should enter the public consciousness just as John Bunyan's book did nearly 400 years ago.

In his article Lew outlines in detail many issues which led to the failure of the premier. The inference that the work is inherently or fatally flawed is one that I contest.

The first performance did not live up to the composer's vision. According to Roy Douglas, who prepared the score and parts:

*Alas, the production was a lamentable failure. Musically the standard of performance was reasonably good and VW had nothing but praise for the young conductor, Leonard Hancock, and for many of the singers. But the scenery and costumes, the staging, lighting, and production generally all fell far short of the composer's conception. It is, I am sure, true to say that this shabby miscreation of his beloved Pilgrim's Progress was the bitterest disappointment of his musical life, and those of us who were close to him at the time felt very sad to see him so despondent.*⁴

But Vaughan Williams' despondency was unnecessary according to the composer's friend Edward Dent. In a letter dated April 27, 1951, Dent wrote him:

*I hope you were pleased with the performance of the Pilgrim last night, and with the way in which the audience were completely absorbed by it and gave it the tribute of a definite silence at the end. I felt very conscious all the time of the audience's tense concentration on the work.*⁵

Dent and Vaughan Williams discussed the Apollyon scene extensively. In their correspondence they agreed that the scene contained several problems. First, Dent said that Apollyon's physical appearance in the scene was unconvincing. He suggested that this was due to the staging not following Vaughan Williams' directions. Second, the stage designers and producer, who were non-musicians did not, or could not grasp the musical concerns well enough to stage this scene adequately. Third, Dent did not understand Vaughan Williams' rationale for Apollyon's long speeches on one pitch, and thought the device ineffective. Dent

speculated that it was probably unclear to the rest of the audience as well. Last, Pilgrim's fight with Apollyon seemed visually unconvincing and unbelievable.

Dent agreed with Vaughan Williams that the proper place for performance was not in a cathedral. But he was not impressed with Covent Garden in the production, either:

Of course the architectural environment of Covent Garden auditorium is definitely hostile to it, but it is a technical matter of lighting and stage-management to get over that...All the difficulties of the Pilgrim are purely technical and can be solved by skill, intelligence and ingenuity.⁶

Another testament to the fact that staging and directorial mistakes were made in the premier comes from Igor Kennaway, who directed the production of *The Pilgrim's Progress* at the Royal Northern College of Music in 1991. He wrote the following:

Having spent the majority of my professional life conducting opera, I have never made a distinction between the visual and the musical elements which contribute towards, what ideally, should be a dramatic entity. I have worked with many directors, some of whom wished to impose their own unrelated and often perverse ideas on a work as written, often ignoring the music and the issues which face those who perform it. The rare practitioners of the art of direction concern themselves with revealing the material at hand and are not only aware of the plot and the text, but also of the music which gives life to the drama. Such directors go beyond a purely visual staging.⁷

When Kennaway met with the director, Joseph Ward and Ursula Vaughan Williams, they all agreed that the overall conception of the work should be to "explore the visionary nature of the music drama."⁸

Dent and Vaughan Williams also discussed the *Vanity Fair* scene and agreed it was too short and needed more material to make it aesthetically satisfying. Dent suggested enlarging the scene prior to Pilgrim's entrance and making more use of the characters at Vanity Fair, exploring their wares in greater detail. He also suggested enlarging the role of Judas Iscariot, pointing out that such a crucial, pivotal and malignant figure in Christianity should receive prominent treatment in the music. Finally, Dent suggested to Vaughan Williams that the homogeneous tempi throughout the work grew tiresome. Dent suggested small adjustments in certain places to aid in the flow of the opera.

One week after the premier, the *Daily Telegraph* critic (unnamed in the article, the byline reads: From Our Music Critic) returned to his own criticisms of *Pilgrim*. He argued, cogently, that the work was an

aftermath, and that in the symphonies, the previous three in particular, the emotions that should have been expressed and realised by the Pilgrim had already been worked through; perhaps if Vaughan Williams had stirred himself to complete it earlier, its reception would have been better and its reputation more secure. However, by the time it was unveiled, his own art had already moved past it.⁹

There are conflicting accounts over the reception of *Pilgrim*. According to Douglas, Vaughan Williams was despondent, and the audience did not know what to make of the piece.¹⁰ On the other hand is Dent's account that the audience was in rapt silence because of their awe over the work. Dent's optimism was based on his own personal reaction to the work, and his deference to his friendship with Vaughan Williams. Given that the work was only performed three times before Covent Garden pulled it from its future schedule, it is reasonable to assume that accounts of the premier's failure are closer to the truth. The premier's failure are attributable to structural issues in the following scenes: Act II, scene 2, Pilgrim Meets Apollyon, and Act III, scene 1, Vanity Fair.

In response to the premier some critics claimed that *Pilgrim* was really an elaborate oratorio and as such it belonged in the cathedral, not in the concert hall. Martin Cooper wrote in the *Spectator*, "it must conform to

the demands of the theatre or be judged a failure. It might be given at a Three Choirs Festival in cathedral precincts and succeed."¹¹ Vehemently responding to any suggestion that Pilgrim did not belong on the stage Vaughan Williams wrote "It is what I meant." Dent agreed wholeheartedly writing:

Newman [one of the reviewers] said it wanted the environment of a cathedral, but I am sure he is wrong; that is just what a conventional-minded critic would say. I am sure it would be dreadfully boring as an oratorio, and hard pews would make it unbearable! It does not want a cathedral environment, because Bunyan stands for "pure" religion without the external decorations of a church.¹²

Since the work premiered when Vaughan Williams was in his seventies he was fully aware of the differences between opera and oratorio. In his book *Vaughan Williams* Simon Heffer wrote:

The composer was angered by suggestions that it should be staged in a cathedral rather than in an opera house, but to an extent he had already contradicted himself by denying it the name of "opera" in favour of "morality".¹³

Publicly Vaughan Williams preferred to call *Pilgrim* a "morality", though he did call it an opera in private and in some correspondence. What is a "morality"?

Morality plays were an offshoot of the miracle plays of the Middle Ages. They aimed to teach Christian doctrine, morals and ideals. A morality has been defined by William George Ward as "a play enforcing a moral truth or lesson by means of the speech and action of characters which are personified abstractions – figures representing vices and virtues, qualities of the human mind, or abstract conceptions in general."¹⁴ Bunyan's Christian, and Vaughan Williams' Pilgrim represent Everyman. There are no individual characters; each represents a vice, a virtue or human characteristic. Both book and opera teach moral lessons. Under such a definition, *Pilgrim* is a morality. But this fact was used by critics' attack. The thinking being "a morality isn't an opera and therefore shouldn't be staged like one."

Heffer noted that:

The Daily Telegraph critic said that the production was "so wanting in the dramatic element – so anti-theatrical". It certainly would have benefited from not having to meet the conventional expectations of opera, and instead to have taken its place as a latter-day Gerontius. This, however, the composer was beyond seeing.¹⁵

One staging device that caused discussion from critics and even Vaughan Williams' friends, was the frequent use of *tableaux* or *tableaux vivantes*. Tableaux were used to recreate a painting or picture on stage, and its performers do not speak or move. The most striking use of tableaux in *Pilgrim* is in the Apollyon scene, in which Vaughan Williams wrote his music specifically to be used with blackout and tableau techniques. Pilgrim strikes a pose opposite Apollyon's shadow, after which a blackout occurs and the characters are seen in a new position showing the next stage of the conflict between the them.

Another issue was between Nevill Coghill, the producer/stage director. Coghill did not like Vaughan Williams' stage directions for an ominous shadow of Apollyon and opted instead for a corporeal figure rather than an ominous shadow. This decision resulted in a papier-mâché headdress. After the premier Vaughan Williams told Ursula he didn't like the "large and ridiculous Apollyon which looked like a cross between an Assyrian figure and the Michelin tyre advertisement." He could not prevail on the authorities to scrap this costume even after quoting them the Old Vic staging of the Boyg in *Peer Gynt* and Covent Garden's production of the Countess in *The Queen of Spades*. In both cases the image was a large shadowy figure cast on stage.¹⁶

Vaughan Williams' insistence on this staging device can only be speculated on. However, there are a few possibilities. First of all,

Vaughan Williams believed that the entire work should maintain a reverent, ritualistic feel. Staging in the rest of the opera bears this out. A corporeal Apollyon does not necessarily square with that vision. As we look back to historical depictions of demons and devils in mystery plays and moralities of the late Middle Ages through the Reformation we see the preferred depictions of devils on stage:

“The devill in his fethers” (presumably black feathers) appears in costuming lists from Chester...which reputedly changed very little from 1499 to the 1670s. At Coventry a charge is recorded “for making ye demones head” in 1543 and “for a yard of canvas for ye devylles mall [maul]” in 1544...The St. John’s College Cambridge Register if Inventories lists “ij blak develles cootes with hornes” in 1548-49.¹⁷

By the seventeenth century frequency, satirical and comical depictions of devils had led to the decline of their effectiveness as fear-inspiring entities. Essentially no one took them seriously anymore. The continued theatrical depictions had ruined the credibility of the supernatural.¹⁸ We cannot know how many of these factors played in to Vaughan Williams’ decision to depict Apollyon as a looming shadow. But it seems that there was no available costuming decision that could adequately (to Vaughan Williams) convey the terror of the character. And by using an illusory shadow, the mind can fill in the gaps with a much more terrifying image than could ever be created on stage. The use of tableaux and blackout with music keyed to such worried Coghill. In December of 1950 he wrote to Hal Burton (the set and costume designer): “This is the first scene in which violence is possible, and I think it is *necessary* because up to this the whole opera has been so ceremonial and liturgical.”¹⁹ 1919 Lew, 189. From a dramatic point of view Coghill has a valid point. Lew points out that while the use of tableaux and blackout worked quite well in the amateur Reigate production of 1906, it was unsuited to the more sophisticated audience of Covent Garden.

Now, over fifty years later, technology has improved to the point where a truly frightening combat between Pilgrim and a corporeal Apollyon could be staged. If that be the case then the only remaining issue is coordinating the music to a live combat rather than to shadowy tableaux in between blackouts. A clever and innovative music director and stage director can re-cue the music for a live combat. Another possibility could include use of CGI. All of this would resolve the fact that the scene in the original premier was too short, and not aesthetically powerful enough to accomplish the point of the scene.²⁰

The precedent of demons not singing melodically goes back through history. Music, as a divine art, was denied to beings from hell. A prime example of this is the demon Samiel in *Der Freischütz* by Carl Maria von Weber. Samiel never sings, only speaks. Vaughan Williams takes this tradition one step further by giving Apollyon an actual pitch, but not allowing him to leave that pitch.

Through the course of the combat between Pilgrim and Apollyon Vaughan Williams takes power away from Apollyon by shifting the key in each tableau. In the final tableau Pilgrim is the tonic and Apollyon is the dominant. Thus not only does the combat turn to Pilgrim’s favor dramatically, but the tonal center does as well.

The tonal structure of the conflict is as follows:

Event	Key
Introduction	G minor
Transition	B-flat minor
Apollyon	D minor
Pilgrim	F minor
Fanfare	D
Transition	B minor
Apollyon	B minor
Pilgrim	G minor
Apollyon	G minor

A graphic portrayal of the tonal structure looks like this:

gm	b-flat	dm	fm D	bm	bm	gm gm
	Apollyon on tonic	Height of dramatic conflict		Apollyon on third		Apollyon on fifth, Pilgrim now controls the key center and has mastery of the conflict
Tonal centers move up by thirds to the height of the conflict, and then as Apollyon loses the conflict the tonal centers move back down by thirds.						

Musically this tonal structure is very effective. It is faintly reminiscent of the tonal structure of *Erlkönig* by Franz Schubert. As the Erlking gains control of the child the tonal centers move upward to heighten the sense of terror in the child and the intensity of the conflict. Vaughan Williams uses the same idea to heighten the intensity of Pilgrim’s battle. To aid the tonal shifts, Vaughan Williams also moves the overall tessitura of the chorus, and constantly adds to the instrumentation throughout the combat. All of these factors combine to increase of intensity and drama of the combat scene.

Only two years after the premier, Vaughan Williams appeared to abandon *Pilgrim*: when Michael Kennedy mentioned his admiration of the work the composer replied, “The Pilgrim is dead, and that’s that.” This remark is significant because it shows that Vaughan Williams had given up hope of seeing *Pilgrim* become a staple of British opera. He had moved on. By this time he was deeply involved in writing the music for film, namely his future Seventh Symphony, the *Sinfonia Antarctica*. The passing of his wife, Adeline, had also turned his mind away from *Pilgrim*.

Abandoning the work was a mistake, however. Nevill Coghill had been hired as the stage director only five months before the premier and had never staged a production of this magnitude nor anything at the Royal Opera House. His experience was in regional, amateur and student theatre.

Compounding matters was the noticeable lack of enthusiasm from the administration of Covent Garden. In the end, because the preparation of the score and the details of the production were left unfinished for so long, the rehearsal period was rushed and by some accounts unsatisfactory, with predictably deleterious results for the performances.²¹

And in spite of Vaughan Williams’ objection to so much of the ceremonial staging, Lew rightly observes that:

Thus, although undoubtedly many of Coghill and Burton’s design and directorial decisions, especially the concretizing of so much ritual action in specific historical terms, were poor, some of the responsibility for the (ultimately unsuccessful) visual element of the production must be ascribed to Vaughan Williams’s own lack of imagination in this regard.²²

The assumption (which I would agree with in light of my own research) is that Vaughan Williams’ 1951 version was greatly influenced by the Reigate production of 1906. Some of these influences, though effective in the amateur Reigate production, proved fatal to the Covent Garden premier. This does not mean that the work itself is inherently flawed.

In 1954 Boris Ord (as his apparent swan song with the Cambridge University Musical Society) chose to stage *The Pilgrim’s Progress* with Dennis Arundell handling staging. This production was much more successful than the Covent Garden one. The (unnamed) music critic from *The Times* wrote:

Arundell...used great ingenuity with lighting and simple stage sets and properties to make each tableau visually effective – the fight with Apollyon was indeed more satisfactory in its medieval grotesquerie than in the Covent Garden production...The work has a moving beauty that slowly envelops the hearer; it is not really drama, but it purges the mind not by pity and terror, but by serenity and peace.²³

Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote that the "Cambridge performances were radiant." Vaughan Williams declared that "*This is what I meant.*" Ursula went on to say that "Ralph's conception of Bunyan's dream was vindicated." Members of the cast reported that *Pilgrim* was a success with the audiences, the university community and the cast and crew.²⁴

I cite these examples to show that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not fatally flawed. And though, according to *The New York Times* the opera had not been staged in the United States by 1972,²⁵ several successful productions have been staged in the States in the recent past. Specifically, a Brigham Young University (Provo, UT) production in 1972, the 2004 production by the Trinity Lyric Opera in San Jose, CA, and the Cape Cod Opera in 2005. In the last 20 years *Pilgrim* has also enjoyed a revival in Britain.

In 1992 the Royal Northern College of Music staged a very successful production, a 1997 London production with Richard Hickox conducting which led to a new recording, and Stephen Connock is currently pursuing a 2008 production in London.

My hope is that *The Pilgrim's Progress* will continue to be staged and enjoyed for its visionary, spiritual and universal message.

Richard Brunson holds a B.M. in music education and a M.M. in orchestral conducting from Brigham Young University. After many years of work in education he is now working on a doctoral degree in orchestral conducting at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

NOTES

1. Edward J. Dent was a friend from school, music critic, musicologist, and expert in opera. He was responsible for staging *Die Zauberflöte* in Britain where previously the work had been virtually unknown. After WWI Dent spent a deal of time reforging musical ties between former enemy countries.
2. Nathaniel G. Lew, "'Words and music that are forever England': The Pilgrim's Progress and the pitfalls of nostalgia" in *Vaughan Williams Essays* ed. Byron Adams and Robin Wells. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2003) 175-205.
3. Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 124.
4. Roy Douglas, *Working With R.V.W.* (London, Oxford University Press, 1972), 20.
5. Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. Rev. ed (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), 208.
6. *Ibid*, 213.
7. Igor Kennaway, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. *RVW Journal*, June 1996, 10.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Douglas, 20.
11. Martin Cooper, "Contemporary arts – music," *Spectator*, 585, May 4, 1951. Cited in Lew, 191.
12. Kennedy, 209.
13. Heffer, 125.
14. Catholic Encyclopedia Online, s.v. AMoralities,@ (by K.M. Warren, transcribed by Kenneth M. Caldwell), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10557b.htm> (accessed October 27, 2006).
15. Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams*. (Boston: Northeast University Press, 2000), 125.
16. Ursula Vaughan Williams, R.V.W. *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 316. 316.
17. John D.Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5-6.
18. *Ibid*, 150.
19. Lew, 189.
20. A similar problem of dramatic fear exists in trying to stage Seigfried's combat with Fafnir. How does one make a stage dragon scary enough? But it occurred to me that, for instance, the Balrog in Peter Jackson's film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was very effective on a dramatic scale. Surely stage and screen technology can be married in such a way as to provide a convincing depiction of Apollyon and Fafnir.
21. Ursula Vaughan Williams, 306 quoted in Lew, 187.
22. Lew, 190.
23. *The Times*, February 24, 1954.
24. All anecdotes cited in Ursula Vaughan Williams, 344.
25. *The New York Times*, Raymond Ericson "Celebrating Vaughan Williams' Centenary – 'The Pilgrim's Progress'" August 13, 1972.

BUNYAN MATTERS:

*Liz. J. Luder reports from
"SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND"*



Readers unable to attend our recent RVW/Elgar symposium will have missed one of its highlights – my efforts on behalf of the tourist trade of Bedford (England).

Bedford, as a lot of you will know, was Bunyan's home and also where he was imprisoned. Many of the geographical associations of *Pilgrim's Progress* are still visible, for example Stevington Medieval Cross, Houghton House and "House Beautiful" though now a ruin.

Bunyan was born just to the south of Bedford in the village of Elstow, and although his cottage no longer exists the ancient Moot Hall can still be visited.

The stone jail on Bedford Bridge also no longer exists, nor does its second, County Jail, although its site is marked on a flagstone in Silver Street.

The Bunyan Meeting Church in Mill Street (not in Elstow) is an easy walk from the town centre and is a very thriving concern indeed. All the school rooms have recently been renovated to a high standard and are in continuous use by various public services and local organisations. The church itself is open most days and has the most beautiful stained glass windows depicting scenes from *Pilgrim's Progress*. A postcard of one of these windows was, famously, the only correspondence to reach Terry Waite in captivity in Beirut.

People come from all over the world to visit Bunyan's Church and Museum, especially from the former U.S.S.R. where Bunyan is a hero.

During the War, when the BBC Music Service was posted in Bedford ("Somewhere in England") Bunyan Meeting was Studio 3. Indeed the War years are remembered as a golden time by Bedford's older music lovers.

As a former Mayor of Bedford I was saddened that the 60th Anniversary Memorial Concert given by the BBC last year was before a specially invited audience only, in the small venue of Bedford School and just one short piece of British music (Britten) was played - Christopher Cope take note! Surely this was an occasion for "a bit of a do." There could not possibly have been a better reason for a performance of *Valiant for Truth*.

You see, here in Bedford, John Bunyan is not just part of the past but of our present also.

*Liz J. Luder,
Bromham, Bedford, UK.*



ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

COVENT GARDEN

THURSDAY, 26th APRIL, 1951

THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, COVENT GARDEN LTD.

General Administrator: DAVID L. WEBSTER

presents

The first performance of

"THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS"

A Morality in a Prologue, Four Acts and an Epilogue
founded on BUNYAN'S ALLEGORY of the same name

Music by

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS, O.M.

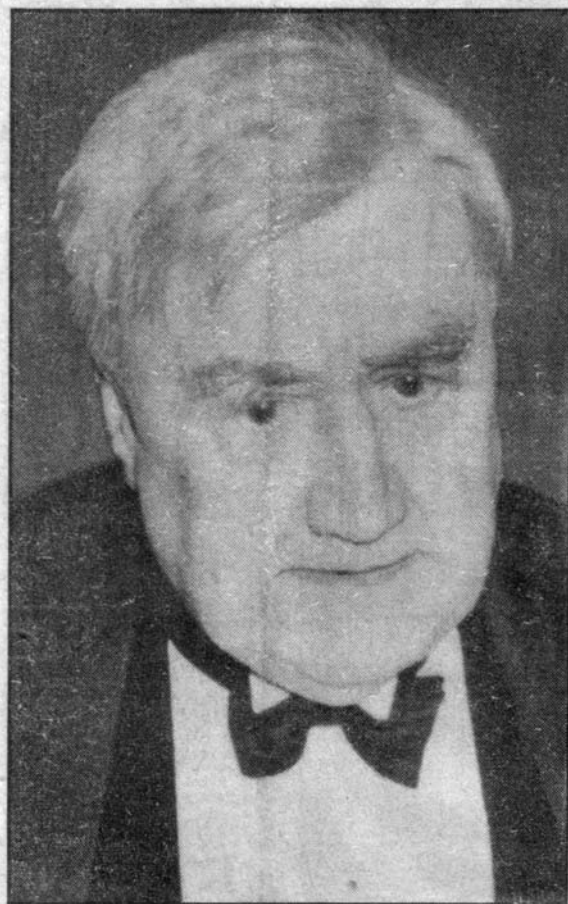
(by arrangement with the Oxford University Press)

Scenery and Costumes by Hal Burton

CONDUCTOR : LEONARD HANCOCK

PRODUCER : NEVILL COGHILL

Off to His Own Opera



Dr. Ralph Vaughan Williams, Britain's Grand Old Man of Music, arrives at Covent Garden. There, last night, he saw the first performance of his opera "The Pilgrim's Progress," a work which he began just 30 years ago. Dr.

Vaughan Williams is 79. By his own request the opera was conducted by Mr. Leonard Hancock, 29-year-old member of Covent Garden's musical staff.

Stanley Bayliss reviews the opera in Page FIVE.

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

SIR JOHN IN BULAWAYO . . . AND THE TALE OF A TROWEL

Sir John Barbirolli spent a month in Bulawayo almost exactly 53 years ago in June and July 1953. He came with the Hallé Orchestra as part of perhaps the most ambitious festival ever mounted in southern Africa, if not in number of events then certainly in the numbers of performers from Britain, more than three hundred of them. Not only was the Hallé Orchestra here but also soloists, chorus and orchestra from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, the Sadler's Wells Theatre (now Royal Ballet) and a theatrical troupe led by Sir John Gielgud who directed and starred in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. It was all in honour of the imminent proclamation of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland and, more especially, the centenary of the birth of Cecil John Rhodes on 5 July 1853. As such, it is as potent an example as any of the change in perceptions and values that has taken place in the last half century.

There were nearly a hundred players in the Hallé and their departure was seen on television. One interested viewer was the Queen Mother who was to follow with Princess Margaret a couple of weeks later, and she apparently commented on how happy everyone looked. Once arrived there was plenty of hard work since in just two weeks from Monday 22 June to Saturday 4 July there were no fewer than fourteen orchestral concerts with five completely different programmes, all culminating in a gala concert on the eve of Rhodes' centenary. Sunday was still a day of rest then but there were matinées on the Wednesdays to make up. In addition a substantial part of the orchestra then became the Hallé Theatre Orchestra for the ballet performances, some of them conducted by Sir John himself including a memorable presentation of Act II of *Swan Lake* when water from the Matsheumhlope seeped into the pit so that most of the orchestra played barefoot with their trousers rolled to the knees. When the orchestra had left, he stayed on to conduct both *Aïda* and *La Bohème* with the Covent Garden forces.

The orchestral programmes embraced many of Sir John's favourite works, the symphonies including Haydn No.88, Beethoven No.7, Berlioz *Fantastique*, Brahms No.2 and Sibelius No.2 and concertos Beethoven No.4 (Denis Matthews), and two by Mozart, Violin No.5 (Beryl Kimber) and Oboe (Evelyn Rothwell – Lady Barbirolli). Other works included the *Enigma* Variations, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *La Mer*, the Second Suite from *Daphnis and Chloé* and a variety of overtures – *The Mastersingers*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *Le Carnaval Romain*, *Don Pasquale* and *Der Freischütz*. There was a novelty too, some of the earliest performances of Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antartica*, premiered only a few months earlier and heard no fewer than three times: Barbirolli and Vaughan Williams had become close friends by this time and the 80 year-old composer was to dedicate his next symphony to 'Glorious John'.

All these concerts (and the opera and ballet) took place in The Theatre Royal, in fact a camouflaged aircraft hangar made largely of corrugated iron and situated on the site of the current Centenary Park Amphitheatre. (It was subsequently removed to Harare and still stands at the airport there.) It seated three thousand and the acoustic was generally held to be good – though (like Bulawayo's subsequent concert halls) it was not proof against intrusive noise: a railway line with an ungated level crossing ran close by in those days and at seven minutes past nine each evening a train halted and sounded its whistle for a minute, as required by the regulations. At one concert it was heard all too clearly in the *Enigma* Variations at the point where the clarinet has a pianissimo quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* Overture. An orchestra humorist afterwards suggested to Barbirolli, 'It must have been the boat train, sir'.

It was a glorious June by day, one of the coldest on record by night and the Theatre Royal was unheated. As the season progressed, many of the

audience came with rugs and hot water bottles whilst the players wore pyjamas under their dress suits and for at least one concert Sir John wore his greatcoat to conduct. Peter Rollason was very involved backstage and on more than one occasion Sir John implored him to rub his frozen hands during the interval! (By contrast, imperturbable as ever, the Queen Mother sat through the Gala in an off-the-shoulder evening dress.) When the festival was over, Barbirolli claimed that on average every member of the white population of Bulawayo had attended one concert and that others had travelled thousands of miles to hear 'my great orchestra'. Even so, the organisers had over-anticipated demand (some programmes were given three hearings, the rest two) and figures suggest that the concerts as a whole played to around two-thirds capacity.

Not so the Gala. It was crammed and room found for an extra two hundred seats: 'An enormous audience', Sir John exulted, 'not another soul could have got a toe into the theatre. And everybody, please note, in evening dress'. In his account for HALLÉ (the orchestra's magazine), he wrote that the royal box blazed with 'orders' and flowers and altogether the scene suggested 'not a relatively new-born city but an occasion of State in some great and ancient capital'. There was a further pleasing touch in that he conducted the concert with the baton which he had used for the very first concert of the reconstituted orchestra ten years earlier to the exact day. He had not known the baton was still around but the devoted librarian, 'Tommy' Cheetham, had put it by for a suitable anniversary occasion and thought there could be none better than this. Sir John mentioned the anniversary when, during the interval, he was presented to the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret, both of whom he found 'extremely sensitive, knowledgeable and enthusiastic listeners', and the Queen Mother wished him another happy ten years with his orchestra.

Despite his heavy schedule, Sir John revelled in everything that happened to him: he umpired a cricket match and stayed on for the braai that followed – 'succulent meats cooked in deep embers, probably the most primitive form of cooking – and still the best, I would say'; he was driven to the Matopos and Rhodes' Grave in a convoy of private cars by members of the Bulawayo Municipal Orchestra (it only changed its name when Derek Hudson arrived); he played first cello in an impromptu performance of Schubert's Quintet at a Bulawayo home at one in the morning; he laid the foundation stone of the Rhodesian Academy of Music; after concerts he cooked for his guests in his hotel suite where he had a small fridge and cooker installed since, he claimed, it was almost impossible to get a meal served in Bulawayo after eight. And he was delighted by the list of howlers committed (or invented) by those who could not get his name right: Sir John Bradman, Sir John Broccoli, Sir John Bismarck, Sir John Barrymore and, he thought, best of all, Sir Barber Olly.

Sir John laid the foundation stone of the Academy of Music on Tuesday 30 June when the first phase of the building, the present south wing, was already complete. The foundation stone is a very substantial piece of granite with a beautifully polished face and it was positioned to the left of what was then the main entrance. As plans progressed, a second wing was added, then the two wings were joined by the central block and so front became back with the result that for more than thirty years the stone has languished on what is now a rear wall, seen by very few, mainly those who park their cars behind the Academy. It has now been moved to a site just to the left of the main entrance and will be re-dedicated immediately before the opening concert of the festival by Ania Safonova, associate leader of the Hallé, when she will use the selfsame trowel that Sir John was given 53 years ago.

The first part of the story of how the trowel came to return to Bulawayo can best be told by The Chiel, writing in *The Chronicle* on 8 January 1976:

There's a souvenir of Bulawayo history for sale in England – and I wonder if there's a chance of it returning home? The souvenir is a solid silver, hallmarked trowel which was presented to Sir John Barbirolli after he laid the foundation stone of the Rhodesian Academy of Music in Bulawayo in 1953...A collector has approached the Barbirolli Society, offering the trowel for sale, and he claims the value of the silver and craftsmanship must be over £100. The trowel, which has a bone or ivory handle, is still in its black presentation case. It seems that Sir John gave the trowel to a charity auction some years ago [not so – as was subsequently made clear, it was only after his death in 1970 that it was auctioned], and it is now in the possession of Mr. Peter Rowland of Cheshire. Mr. Rowland is asking for bids in writing before January 31, and says he will offer the trowel for sale at Sotheby's, or a similar saleroom, if no suitable bid is received. A spokesman for the Academy in Bulawayo told me yesterday that the Academy does not have money to buy the souvenir and will not be making any bids. I wonder if there is some public-spirited Bulawayan with money to spare (preferably in England) who might like to buy back the trowel for the Academy? It would look rather nice in a display case in the entrance hall.

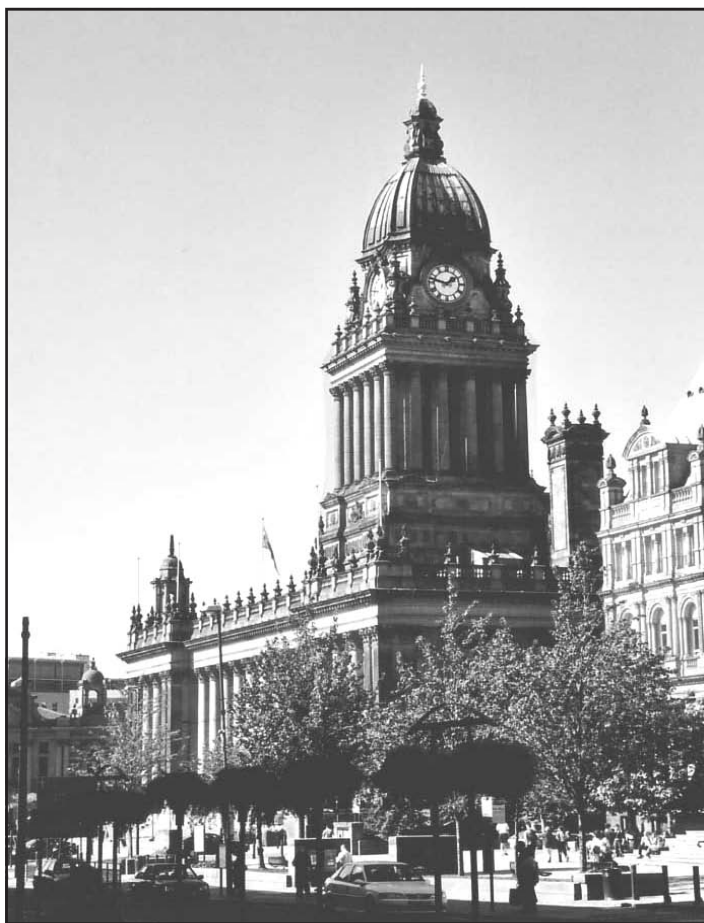
The rest is simply told. A considerable number of 'public-spirited Bulawayans' came forward, and there were several from around the country too, 108 in all, so that not only was the trowel purchased but there was a substantial donation to the Academy Students' Bursary Fund. The trowel was officially received back by Robert Sibson at a ceremony on 25 November 1976 when the Academy Orchestra played Sir John's *Elizabethan Suite*, a work which had featured in that Royal Gala 23 years earlier. Since then the trowel has been on display in the Academy foyer and it is now joined by a photograph of Sir John, a permanent reminder of the building's proud link with one of the very greatest of all conductors.

Michael Bullivant,
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Solutions:
Across:
1. Madam Bubbie, 6. Riders to, 8. Rag, 9. Ian, 10. Mute, 12. Così, 14. Ida, 15. The, 17. Ostinato, 18. People's Land.
Down:
1. Maria Marten, 2. Adelle, 3. Busoni, 4. Blow, 5. Hugo Rignold, 7. Ark, 11. Little, 12. Carnal, 13. Sea, 16. Corp.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS and the LEEDS TRIENNIAL MUSIC FESTIVAL

by Cecil Bloom



Leeds Town Hall

Festivals of music came into existence in Britain early in the 18th century, the most famous being the Three Choirs Festival founded about 1715 that centred on the choirs of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester Cathedrals. This festival, thankfully, continues to flourish. Others then

sprang up at Birmingham, Norwich and Chester and later at Bristol, Cardiff, Sheffield and Leeds. The opening of the Leeds Town Hall in 1858 motivated the idea of a music festival of substance in the city. The Victoria Hall, the main part of the Town Hall, was an ideal location and the first such festival was held that same year – 1858. Problems prevented a second festival until 1874 but, from that date, it became the custom to hold such musical celebrations on a three-yearly basis. This time period was only interrupted by two world wars.

The Leeds Triennial Festival is, alas, no longer with us but in the “good old days” it was recognised as being one of the major and most prestigious ones in the country. Composers and performers alike looked on Leeds as the place where reputations could be established or enhanced and many important musical works received their first performances at these Festivals. Between 1858 and 1983, some 53 works were commissioned and while a few of these were from foreign composers, the large majority were British, testimony to the support given by the City fathers to our own composers. As well as eminent composers of the calibre of Dvorak, Glazunov, Humperdinck, Massenet, Copland and Rachmaninov and British composers such as Elgar and Walton, conductors such as Arthur Sullivan, Nikisch, Barbirolli and Beecham and performers of the stature of Sarasate, Joachim, Kreisler, Arthur Rubinstein, Percy Grainger, Myra Hess, Yehudi Menuhin, Clara Butt and Kathleen Ferrier were attracted to Leeds. Elgar's *Caractacus* and *Falstaff*, Dvorak's *St Ludmilla*, Butterworth's *A Shropshire Lad* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* are among the important works that were written for the Leeds Festivals, as are, of course, Vaughan Williams' *Toward the Unknown Region* and the *Sea Symphony*, the former in 1907 and the latter three years later.

The West Yorkshire Archives that are housed in Leeds contain much information on many aspects relating to the organisation of the Festivals from 1910 onwards and the Reference Library in the City centre contains programme details and much literature on newspaper reports. I have had access to all that appears to be available and it is possible to provide what I believe is interesting material on both Vaughan Williams works that were commissioned for the Festivals.

Vaughan Williams had appeared in Leeds in January 1905 when he conducted the local orchestra in his unpublished work *Heroic Elegy and Triumphant Epilogue*. This was well received and may have motivated the Leeds planners to invite the promising composer to compose a work for their next Triennial Festival but, regrettably, no records are extant. However, *Toward the Unknown Region* was performed on Thursday evening 10 Oct 1907 in a programme that included works by Wagner – the overture to *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg* as well as *Walkurenritt* and the finale of *Siegfried*. Vaughan Williams conducted his own work. The orchestra consisted of 115 players including 76 strings with Frank Bridge and W.H. Reed among the first violins. The chorus was an enormous one, difficult to comprehend today, consisting of 102 soprano voices, 85 contraltos, 6 altos, 81 tenors and 85 basses. The programme for the concert opens with the words: “Mr Vaughan Williams who is one of our most promising young composers has sought inspiration in the pages of Walt Whitman and this ‘Song for Chorus and Orchestra’ is the happy outcome”. 1910 Committee minutes indicate that Vaughan Williams received ten guineas for *Toward the Unknown Region*. It is interesting to note that all concerts took place in the morning or evening – there were none in the afternoon. Ticket prices were one guinea and half a guinea for morning concerts and fifteen and eight shillings for evening ones. Prices and performance times and days had not changed in 1910.

There were very many press reports of the 1907 Festival although not all referred to Vaughan Williams’ piece. These consisted of criticisms from the national press and specialist journals with many local Yorkshire newspapers that must have had small circulations carrying detailed reviews of the Festival. *The Times* reported that Vaughan Williams was called back three or four times and it considered the work to be easily ahead of anything its young composer had yet produced. It saw the perfect maturity of Vaughan Williams’ art and, perceptively, marked him out as the foremost of the younger generation. The Leeds-based *Yorkshire Post* gave a detailed account of the work prior to the concert and, in a lengthy report after the performance, its music critic wrote that the composition was a sympathetic and thoughtful setting of Whitman’s words and that it was a most effective piece of music. Vaughan Williams was said to have handled his material with power and that there were suggestions that he had been influenced by Brahms and Wagner. There was, however, a “touch of pomposity” in the finale but Vaughan Williams was seen as a composer with much promise. The *Daily Telegraph* declined to judge how far Vaughan Williams’ work was original or what masters, if any, had influenced him. The critic found the earliest part of the work dull and needlessly gloomy although the writing showed a complete knowledge of choral effect. The *Daily News* referred to a remarkable choral work and was impressed that the music grew steadily in intensity, working up to a climax of strength and distinction. *The Globe* was also impressed with the climax commenting that Vaughan Williams had aimed high and had partially succeeded. The *Morning Post* reported that the audience greeted the work with enthusiasm and Vaughan Williams was called back twice. The *Daily Express* found it to be an exceedingly virile and original setting of Walt Whitman’s lines. The *Star* considered it to be thoughtful but too indefinite a piece. The end, however, was powerful and impressive. The *Observer* wrote well of it hoping that it would lead to a longer work in the near future. The *Westminster Gazette* conceded that Whitman’s words were powerful but wrote that the music, while correct and skilful, did not pluck the heart out of the words and lay them bare before the hearer. The *Daily Chronicle* praised a brilliant cantata that aroused tremendous enthusiasm. The *Pall Mall Gazette* believed the work to be a serious contribution to English choral music and again, perceptively, welcomed it as a harbinger of things to come. Other major Yorkshire newspapers wrote well of the work. The *Leeds Mercury* praised Vaughan Williams as a coming composer with the work being an extraordinarily promising one that displayed imaginative feeling and sense of emotional beauty. The *Bradford Telegraph* saw the work as showing Vaughan Williams to be a man of considerable ability and, to the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, he had grasped the inwardness of the poem and had written some highly graphic music with confident touch. It pointed out that “he was cheered to the echo”. There was one eccentric report. For the *Daily Mail*’s critic “four new works in one day is rather a handful for the ordinary critic to grasp at once”.

The music journals, too, all wrote well of *Toward the Unknown Region*. The *Musical Times* believed it established a high reputation for its young composer and the *Musical News* that the composition contained much good work. It was, however, critical of VW’s conducting skill saying that the work would have come out even better under the baton of a more experienced conductor. The *Musical Standard* reported that it showed the composer as a man who has something to say but considered the work to be too sombre in tone. There was no relief from the gravity of the opening theme until the last verse when, echoing other critics, it reported that a magnificent climax was reached.

Early in 1909, the Leeds Festival Management Committee started planning for the 1910 Festival and, although adamant that they did not favour having much new music at this Festival, considered the names of “younger composers” and decided to write to Vaughan Williams (who was then thirty-seven years of age) and Basil Harwood (then fifty-eight!) enquiring whether they had anything to offer. Minutes of the 1 April 1909 meeting show that a letter was received from Vaughan Williams who was then asked for further details of his plans. Harwood, meanwhile, submitted two works for consideration but they were presumably rejected because neither was performed at the ensuing Festival.

The first reference to the *Sea Symphony* in Festival minutes is in July 1909 when the work was listed as being scheduled for the first evening of the Festival together with Rachmaninov’s 2nd piano concerto (to be played by its composer and, apparently, not considered to be a familiar work at that time) and Strauss’ *Don Juan*. It was minuted that Vaughan Williams had received ten guineas for *Toward the Unknown Region* and it was decided to ask him what his fee would be for the current work although the Committee believed that one of 25-30 guineas would “meet the case”. Later that month, a fee of 20 guineas was suggested and Vaughan Williams, in fact, wrote a letter asking for that sum. The authorities at Leeds were clearly astute men who planned their activities well because in October 1909, after the music publishers Breitkopf and Harrel published the score of the *Sea Symphony* at two shillings and sixpence, 400 copies were purchased at a 25% discount. Almost a year before the festival, the programme was essentially in place and the chorus was already rehearsing the work but it was not until the following April that the choice of the work’s male soloist was finalised when it was noted that Campbell McInnes agreed to sing the baritone part for a fee of 10 guineas. After the Festival, a general report recorded that the Chorus was the finest ever heard in Leeds.

The *Sea Symphony* was performed on Wednesday evening 12 October 1910. The composer conducted and the soprano soloist was Cicely Gleeson-White. The chorus was similar in size to that in 1907. Most must have been professional or semi-professional as a note in the programme indicated that “gratuitous services were volunteered for the occasion” by eleven singers. The final rehearsal required little correction and Vaughan Williams was warmly applauded after it. There was one humorous incident. The conductor’s desk that was holding the full score collapsed, motivating a wag to comment that this was due to “a heavy C”! Another point of interest is that Rachmaninov followed his concerto performance by conducting his second symphony the very next morning.

Vaughan Williams has put on record his belief that the *Sea Symphony* had a very doubtful reputation at Leeds but this is not borne out by most reviews of the work, although there was, admittedly, a more critical approach than there had been for *Toward the Unknown Region*. Many press accounts of the Festival appeared and the Vaughan Williams work featured prominently in these. The *Yorkshire Post* naturally wrote much on the work and a lot of copy was devoted to rehearsals as well as to personalities. Its critic praised the work as being impressive and sincere showing its composer to have the power to deal with a big canvas and produce music of breadth and grandeur. The scherzo was described as a remarkable *tour de force* and was a piece of virtuosity in choral singing that was rarely heard. The delicacy of the slow movement was described as astounding. The *Yorkshire Weekly Post* carried an amusing cartoon of Vaughan Williams conducting with his body in an eccentric position with his legs all bent. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* felt that the work was too difficult for any except a festival chorus so that it was unlikely it would be performed very often and it also reported that the chorus pianist found

the composition to be the most difficult work in which he had been involved. He found it was a struggle just to read it and to him the music “can be likened to nothing more than a walk in pitch dark through a wood bristling with jagged tree trunks to trip and throw the unwary”. The *Yorkshire Observer* found it to be an original and unusual work but added that it needed to be listened to more in order to gain full understanding. It reported that there were several recalls for the composer. The *Leeds Mercury* called it a remarkable work verging on genius and the slow movement was said to be as fine as anything in music.

The newspapers outside Yorkshire were more critical. The *Manchester Guardian*, however, whose chief music critic was the legendary Samuel Langford, considered the symphony to be a unique work and was the nearest approach to a real choral symphony in Britain. He believed it was much the finest sea work in the British repertoire. There were, however, some contrary opinions. The *Birmingham Post* believed the performance could have been bettered and the orchestra was criticised for hesitation. The *Glasgow Herald* complained that the work was overscored. The *Liverpool Daily Post* commented that the symphony presented problems through its almost endless schemes of changing rhythms and shifting tonalities.

Leeds did not ignore Vaughan Williams after the *Sea Symphony*'s first performance. His music may not have featured as frequently as that of Edward Elgar who over many years had a close association (albeit a love-hate one) with Leeds, but the *Sea Symphony* was played again in 1925 and 1947 and *Toward the Unknown Region* was performed at the 1931 Festival. The *Pastoral Symphony* was played in 1928 and 1974 and the sixth symphony in 1950. The 1937 Festival heard Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem*. 1953 was a special year for Vaughan Williams because he attended the Festival that opened with two of his works – the *Tallis Fantasia* and *Sancta Civitas* (with Peter Pears as soloist). Josef Krips conducted both works and Vaughan Williams considered the latter work was given the finest performance he had heard. When Krips had completed the *Tallis*, Vaughan Williams received “a warm and affectionate tribute of applause from the great audience”. The *Tallis Fantasia* was also played at the 1985 Festival. *Benedicte* and some unaccompanied part songs were also heard at the 1934 and 1922 Festivals he respectively. This was not all that was heard of Vaughan Williams' music in Leeds. The character of the Festival changed in the 1970's and even jazz, ragtime and cabaret songs were heard but a number of Vaughan Williams songs were performed, quite a few in the Parish Church that was used for some music activities. In 1981 the Festival even included a showing of the film *Scott of the Antarctic*.

MAD ABOUT ENGLAND'S MUSIC:

*Em Marshall, Managing and Artistic Director reports on the first
ENGLISH MUSIC FESTIVAL*

“An English music festival?! Impossible, dear girl! No-one can put on just English music on such a scale and make it work – impossible! Mind you, if anyone is mad enough to try – or tenacious enough to succeed – it's you!” So replied the conductor Hilary Davan Wetton to a letter of mine six years ago, in which I told him I had set my heart on trying to restore English music to its rightful place in the classical repertoire.



Julian Lloyd Webber

In the early years of the twentieth century this country experienced a remarkable phenomenon – an explosion of composers who poured forth original works that were brilliantly crafted, powerful, evocative, forward looking and often strikingly beautiful. Many of them became extremely popular and could be heard regularly abroad as well as in London's main concert halls (Stanford's third symphony was chosen to open the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and his fourth was premiered in Berlin's Philharmonic Hall; Sullivan's *Golden Legend* was the second most popular work in England after Handel's *Messiah*!) Yet in the 1950s and '60s, when atonal music became the vogue, and we began to be ashamed of our national culture and heritage – perhaps for fear of being seen as imperialistic if we promoted it – English music faded into obscurity and neglect. Concert promoters abandoned it as unfashionable and turned

increasingly to a small clique of popular composers who they felt would bring in the crowds or attract funding. Although the tide is now turning, and record companies and radio stations are rediscovering the appeal of these gorgeous works, English music has still not yet broken into the mainstream concert repertoire. I was determined to rectify this; to bring these unjustly overlooked pieces to live audiences.

My insanity and tenacity appear to have paid off, as in October this year, the charming Oxfordshire village of Dorchester-on-Thames hosted the first English Music Festival. Holst and Vaughan Williams provided a focal point for the Festival, which was entitled *Heirs and Rebels* after Ursula Vaughan Williams' and Imogen Holst's book. The Festival was an artistic triumph – members of the audience were left euphoric, reeling from the power of the music and the beauty of the interpretations. It opened at Dorchester's mediaeval abbey with the first ever professional concert performance of Holst's *Walt Whitman Overture*, performed by David Lloyd-Jones and the BBC Concert Orchestra, and this was immediately followed by a scintillating rendition of Vaughan Williams' *Norfolk Rhapsody No. 1*. The concert also featured Julian Lloyd Webber playing (more passionately than I have ever heard him before) Bridge's deeply moving *Oration*, and Holst's *Invocation*. Sullivan's *Irish Symphony* concluded proceedings, and the concert was broadcast the following evening on BBC Radio 3. Other highlights of the Festival included a stunning performance of York Bowen's virtuosic *Viola Concerto*, with Paul Silverthorne (Ronald Corp conducted the New London Orchestra), and James Gilchrist as the soloist in Finzi's *Intimations of Immortality* on the last night (followed by an impromptu speech by Festival President Boris Johnson).

The RVW Society sponsored a concert of British choral works by the vibrant young ensemble CC21, held on the Sunday morning. The *Spring Time of the Year*, *Just as the Tide was Flowing* and *The Lover's Ghost* were featured alongside works by Holst, Delius and Bax, and readings by Radio 3's Paul Guinery of Ivor Gurney poems. Conductor Howard Williams and CC21 impressed rapt audiences with passionate and persuasive performances.

Perhaps the greatest moment for me, though, was Jeremy Irons narrating Vaughan Williams' *Oxford Elegy*, with Hilary Davan Wetton conducting

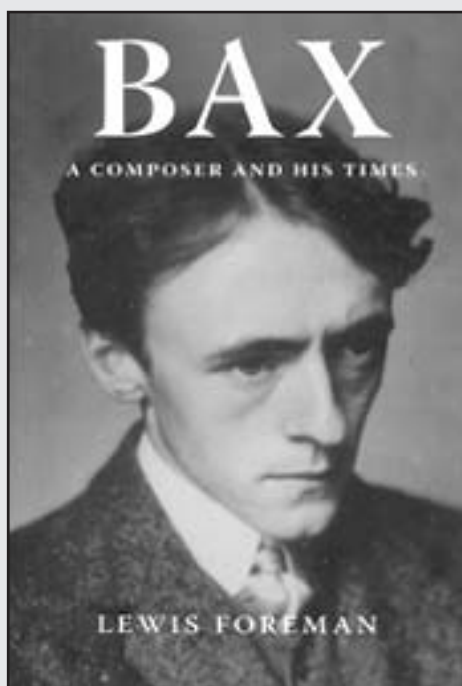
the Milton Keynes City Orchestra and City of London Choir. Not only was Dorchester Abbey the perfect setting for this work, but in the final lines, that great actor demonstrated his tremendous talents by throwing his heart and soul into a "Roam on!" of such electricity and power that it surely sent a shiver down the back of everyone present. I turned around at the end to see half the audience moved to tears.

Music featured throughout the Festival ranged from early music (with the acclaimed countertenor Michael Chance singing works by Dowland, Campion and Purcell, the Dufay Collective presenting a programme of music from Shakespeare's London, early English Guittar (sic) music and Tonus Peregrinus performing, amongst other works, an English St Matthew Passion) to the present day with an English Music Festival commission entitled Prayerbook. The world première performance of this work went down a treat with audiences in a double bill with the complete Britten Canticles. Works by rarely-heard composers such as Algernon Ashton, Dale, W H Reed, Armstrong Gibbs and Foulds complemented pieces by the slightly better-known names of Bax, Moeran, Elgar, Lambert, Delius, Rutter and Wesley. Morning, afternoon and late-evening recitals were held at All Saints in Sutton Courtenay – a tiny gem of a church a few miles from Dorchester, and in the Silk Hall at Radley College – which also hosted the joint schools concert, a precursor to the EMF proper, in which children from local schools delighted audiences with wonderfully accomplished performances of a huge range of English music.

With up to four concerts and a talk every day, it was a fairly intensive five days for all who stayed, but I was gratified by one couple who commented that it was "the most wonderful week we have ever had in our lives!" Personally, I was overwhelmed by the outstanding quality of every event - the performers seemed to pull out all the stops and surpassed themselves. There have been some excellent reviews in both national newspapers (the Daily Telegraph and the Independent both gave us excellent write-ups) and the local press (Oxford Times), and the opening night's broadcast was well received.

The reaction to the Festival has been so enthusiastic and positive – from both audience and artists – that I am already planning the next Festival. Meanwhile, we need help with fundraising to ensure that future festivals are as successful in financial terms as this year was artistically. We have a current introductory offer of a minimum donation of £25 to join our flourishing and much-valued Friends Scheme and would exhort anyone interested to sign up and help us in our crucial work to bring this amazing music back to national recognition. This year has proved, at least, that there are some stunning unknown works out there, that audiences love the pieces and will travel a long way to hear them, and that an English Music Festival can work fantastically well!

www.englishmusicfestival.org.uk/friends



The publisher Boydell & Brewer has recently published two books that will be of interest to members of the RVW Society. Lewis Foreman's *Bax: A Composer & His Times* was first published in 1983, when it helped revive the fortunes of this then-neglected composer. Now fully revised and updated, with a wealth of new material from the recently opened archives of the pianist Harriet Cohen, it remains the essential guide to Bax and his musical milieu. Members may order this title direct from the publisher for 25% off the list price (£22-45 instead of £29-95.) Also available from the same source is John White's biography of the first great virtuoso of the viola, Lionel Tertis, who played in the first performance of Vaughan Williams' *Flos Campi* and to whom the composer dedicated his *Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra*. This too can be ordered for the reduced price of £18-75 (instead of £25).

A review of Lewis Foreman's book will appear in the next issue of the Journal.

To order either of these titles, contact Boydell & Brewer by telephone on (01394) 610600, by e-mail on trading@boydell.co.uk, by post at PO Box 9, Woodbridge IP12 3DF or via the website at www.boydell.co.uk. In all cases please quote the reference 07025 to ensure these special prices. This offer is valid until April 30th, 2007 and postage will be charged extra at £3 in the UK or £5 elsewhere.

RELIGION - ANOTHER REACTION . . .

It seems to me not a little ironic that Eric Seddon's article "Beyond Wishful Thinking" should be headed with a quote from Eliot – "We had the experience but missed the meaning" – only to fall prey to it. Many of the responses in the October journal seem to suggest that Seddon is advocating a reappraisal of Vaughan Williams as a God-fearing Christian; a careful reading (or re-reading) of his essay, however, corroborates Stephen Connock's assessment that what he really does is propose that the composer "continuously investigated and deepened his meditation on Christianity." This conclusion is in fact supported, not undermined, by Ursula Vaughan Williams's oft-quoted statement that her husband "was an atheist during his later years at Charterhouse and Cambridge, though he later drifted into a cheerful agnosticism." The choice of the word "drifted" is pertinent. As Mrs. Vaughan Williams is a poet, she (like Mr. Seddon, as Bullock points out) would carefully choose her words – indeed, much of her book reads like poetry – and she would no doubt have chosen such a consciously *active* word on purpose, a word indicative of just that "continuous investigation" of which Connock speaks. In fact, even her word choices evolve: about a decade after the publication of her biography, in an article for the *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* (1972-2), she writes that Ralph was "a declared agnostic after he had *recovered* from a spell of atheism (italics mine)." Again, a poet's word-choice is telling. And an emendation from "drifting" to "recovered" is significant.

Now, if his own wife makes an adjustment as such after a matter of years, what's to stop an old friend like Bertrand Russell from making some adjustments of his own – consciously or not – after a matter of decades? In the case of his statement, it would certainly afford perspective to look at circumstances more closely. Vaughan Williams was, despite his father's early death, a preacher's son and he was raised as a regular Sunday church-goer; is there any more clichéd a situation than going off to school, a new environment and accompanying growing pains, and a subsequent reaction against religion? Isn't it curious that we have no statement congruent with Russell's offering from after the 1890s?

Michael Gainsford's letter regarding Adrian Boulton's remembrance of Vaughan Williams is noteworthy, as it addresses the native pleasure "Uncle Ralph" had in shocking others. If we are to take the spectacular statement cited in Russell's letter as gospel, then we should have to take on equal ground other sententious epigrams, such as "it wouldn't have mattered if Beethoven had never been born." Who could hold such a contention seriously? It was, as Leslie Russell said, a "calculatedly outrageous statement."¹ Certainly walking into Hall and saying in a loud voice, "Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know?" qualifies as "calculatedly outrageous." And if we know Vaughan Williams was prone to such "calculatedly outrageous statements," how do we determine where shock-value ends and creed begins?

Furthermore, his quote that "There is no reason why an atheist could not write a good Mass" suggests, to me at least, an experiment. Having written his perfectly good Mass, our hypothetical composer could sit back and say "See? I told you so!" This doesn't explain a lifetime of returning to Scripture, to religious and even liturgical music. I have no doubt he held close to his heart such experiences as Mr. Hoares relates in his letter, but Mr. Hoares, do you or would you turn again and again to the Bible as a source for self-expression?

Seddon's claim that "agnosticism may mean any range of positions" is also important. The term was coined by T.H. Huxley – incidentally, most noted for his defence of Vaughan Williams' great-uncle Charles Darwin – to express the unknowable, that God has no scientific proof. Huxley wrote in May 1863 regarding the immortality of the soul and the prospect of Heaven and Hell: "give me a scintilla of evidence, and I am ready to jump at them."² Jump at them how? To dissect them? To ridicule them? Or perhaps...to embrace them? Vaughan Williams' is a tale of searching, not rejection. And it is the same theme as Hardy's "The Oxen," included

in *Hodie* at Mrs. Vaughan Williams's suggestion. The poem's presence in Vaughan Williams' magnum Christmas opus is not, as some have proposed, the planting of a 'seed of doubt' into the Incarnation story. Its relevance is manifold: it is not just the incorporation of a folk belief/tradition certain to have struck a chord with the composer, or a looking back over the course of events,³ but it is a "'moment of vision' which gathers up the emotional experience of the years."⁴ It is about a man saying not only that he could believe, but that he wants to believe. And given the wide and undefined scope of meaning inherent in the label 'agnostic,' are we to believe that a curious and imaginative intellect and personality such as Vaughan Williams' would arrive at a blanket term to describe himself and then stop... drifting? The 'continuously investigative' nature of his music till the end of his life says otherwise.

For the last fifty years, scholarship on the spiritual aspects of Vaughan Williams' work has been predominantly founded on an a priori evaluation of the composer's personal beliefs, as understood through a handful of too-easily appropriated statements. Eric Seddon's article is ultimately a proposal for a new way of looking at the composer's spirituality – through his music. Vaughan Williams probably would have observed all our speculation and rejoined that "We are not called upon to peep into the mysteries of the laboratory; it is enough for us to delight in the lustre of pure gold."⁵ And really, that's what Seddon does as well: "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 worldview, informed by Christian theology, and resonant with the Christian message (pg. 23)." He avows that they are what they are – and, all personal beliefs aside, they certainly *are* informed by the Christian tradition; why get lost in what's behind them? If the lustre of Vaughan Williams' "pure gold" has a decidedly Christian gleam, then so be it.

Gregory Martin,

Oxford, UK.

NOTES

1. In Lewis Foreman, *Vaughan Williams in Perspective: Studies of an English Composer* (Ilminster: Albion for the Vaughan Williams Society, 1998), 188.
2. Quoted at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Henry_Huxley_and_agnosticism
3. The poem was first published on Christmas Eve 1915 in *The Times* – hence the "In these years!" – and it seems to me relevant that the musical language with which VW equips it is a simpler version of the language used in the *Pastoral Symphony*.
4. R.W. King quoted in Philip V. Allingham, "Image, Allusion, Voice, Dialect and Irony in Thomas Hardy's 'The Oxen' and the Poem's Original Publication Context," www.victorianweb.org/authors/hardy/pva141.html
5. Ralph Vaughan Williams, "Palestrina and Beethoven" (*The Vocalist*, i/2, May 1902), 37.

AND A REPLY...

Needless to say, I read the October responses to my June article with keen interest. I was not surprised at the amount of indignation – this is to be expected when challenging the assumptions of several decades. I was, however, disappointed that so many of my detractors seemed to have missed the point of the article. Thankfully, Stephen Connock summarized my thesis well on the front page. For those who were too furious to follow my argument closely, or to respond more reasonably, rest assured I did not attempt to create a Christian Ralph Vaughan Williams. Nor did I smear Mrs. Vaughan Williams and Mr. Kennedy, or take them out of context, as some seem to have implied. Indeed, some of the letters contained statements so unrelated to my actual writing that refutation becomes difficult, if not impossible. Yet mixed with the more furious and unreasonable responses were some serious points that I felt needed to be addressed. Here they are, with my replies:

Gavin Bullock wrote “ [Seddon] asserts that [*The Pilgrim’s Progress*] would be transformed into an overwhelming masterpiece if a cross was included in the staging.” Lamentably, Bullock appears ignorant of Act I, Scene 2 in the opera, where Pilgrim actually *does* come to the cross, kneels before it, then even physically clings to it: it is in the stage directions (see pgs. 21-22 of the vocal score). Bullock also seems unaware of my past arguments pertaining to the dramatic structure of this moment as related to the rest of the plot – points which I think deserve more than flippancy in response, and which I might add have gone unanswered and unchallenged for several years now. I don’t think it is too much to ask that next time Bullock desires to correct me in print, he take the time to acquaint himself with both a score and my actual arguments. As it is, this moment in his vehement response serves as a demonstration of my point: the Christian symbolism of these works has been ignored, to the extent that a publishing member of the Society has actually dismissed the composer’s own stage directions, while thinking he was berating me.

Unrelated to this, yet also worthy of response, was a letter from Frank McManus, who seems to have taken umbrage at my brief exposition of St. Thomas Aquinas and the doctrine of Transubstantiation, writing that ‘a) the doctrine was defined by the Lateran Council in 1215, before Aquinas’ birth in 1224’ and ‘b)...“Substantially” does not mean “physically.”’ Considering the delicacy of this issue, for many people, I hope to clarify here. Regarding his point “a”: though the term “transubstantiated” was indeed used by the Lateran Council of 1215, the doctrine was defined by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent, well after Aquinas’s Aristotelian understanding had become dominantly accepted; it was to this history that I referred. As for his point “b”: For clarity to a non-theological audience I took the term “physically” rather than “substantially.” Though McManus is technically correct, my use of the term was not meant in a technical sense, but rather in the common usage, for “corporeal.” Use of such terminology is not extraordinary (it can even be justified by citing Pope Paul VI’s *Mysterium Fidei*). Having said this, McManus’s point was certainly driven home, highlighting the very difficult problem of discussing the Eucharist when complicated by the multitude of historical opinions on the subject since the Reformation, particularly within Anglicanism. Facing Cranmer’s multiple understandings of the sacrament (Brooks delineates no less than three different stages: Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist), the anti-transubstantiation argument maintained by the 39 Articles, Hooker’s opinions, the ‘Elizabethan Settlement’, Keble’s or Newman’s views (all of which create a very difficult context for discussion), I decided to reference Catholic doctrine for several reasons, two of which must suffice

in this brief response. First, Catholic doctrine gives a clear and stable point of reference (as McManus’s own citation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* demonstrates) and, second, I believe Vaughan Williams has given enough allusions within his music and choice of texts to justify the comparison – *Five Mystical Songs* not excluded.

As for his other concerns, I can only ask for McManus’s charity in remembering that I did not reference Dr. Adams in the body of the text, but only as a comparison in my notes, when making my Brahms Requiem points. Brahms is indeed regularly referred to by scholars when discussing Vaughan Williams’ beliefs (during my own graduate work the comparison came up frequently from many faculty members). My citation of Dr. Adams was not meant to single him out, but to provide some written evidence for my response to the problem – for proof, that is, that I wasn’t attacking a straw man of my own invention.

For those who offered other ideas, such as Tatyana Egorova’s assertion of pantheism being undeniable in *Riders* and the *Sea Symphony*: please know that I have taken your suggestions into consideration, and intend to address them in subsequent research.

Most importantly, however, I very much appreciated E.J. Hysom’s exposing my incorrect assumptions regarding James Day’s beliefs! As early as last August, in private correspondence with Dr. Day, I had learned of my error and was hoping to have the opportunity to acknowledge it publicly, though he was too charitable a gentlemen to accept my offer of a published retraction. Hysom’s letter has provided me with the opportunity to acknowledge this properly, and publicly. For this I am grateful.

For the current issue, I have submitted some of the results of my research on *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. I ask only that members read it with an open mind and that if they desire to respond, either positively or negatively, they make more of an effort to be both reasonable and factual. Hyperbole, sarcasm, insinuation, false information, personal attack: these are the killers of true debate and dialogue, and they pollute public discourse by making it more difficult, if not ultimately impossible, to debate reasonably. Shall we be a society of common courtesy, welcoming open-minded debate? Or shall we rant at one another? I sincerely hope for the former.

Eric Seddon,
Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Letters

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

RVW IN THE NATIONAL CENSUS

Seeing the 1901 census entry for 10 Barton Street in the October Journal prompted me to look up Vaughan Williams in the other available censuses that took place after 1872. (I have been trying to trace my own ancestry for some years and my subscription to ancestry.co.uk gives me access to all censuses since 1841.)

The results of my search are as follows (there’s at least one surprise):

1881 April 3rd

Leith Hill Place, Civil Parish of Wotton, Dorking, Surrey (Ref RG11/794 folio 98)

Caroline S Wedgwood: Head/widow, age 80/Living on income derived from land [indecipherable]/Shrewsbury

Margaret S V Williams: Daur/widow/age 37/ditto/Shrewsbury

Margaret S V Williams: Granddaur/age 10/scholar/Down Ampney

Ralph V Williams: Grandson/age 8/scholar/Down Ampney

Elise Vital: unmarried/age 21/governess/Alsace

John Phillips: unmarried/age 42/butler/Shrewsbury

Alice Jones: unmarried/age 21/cook/Llanfyllin, Montgomeryshire

Anne Longhurst: unmarried/age 32/lady’s maid/Wotton, Surrey

Sarah Wager: unmarried/age 34/nurse/Tetbury, Glos

Esther Smith: unmarried/age 24/housemaid/Walford, Herefordshire

Sarah Lasson [?]: unmarried/age 19/kitchenmaid/Cranleigh, Surrey

Leith Hill Place Lodge

Thomas Powell: Head/mar/age 38/coachman/Albrighton, Shropshire

Eliza Powell: Wife/age 38/Newton, Shropshire

Leith Hill Place Cottage (1)

William Longhurst: Head/mar/age 30/stableman/Ockley, Surrey

Amelia Longhurst: Wife/mar/age 17/Capel, Surrey

William Longhurst: Daur/age 4 months/Dorking

Louisa Longhurst: Mother/widow/age 69/Ockley, Surrey

Alice Longhurst: Sister/unmarried/age 26/Ockley, Surrey

Abel Longhurst: Brother/unmarried/age 23/gardener/Ockley, Surrey

Leith Hill Place Cottage (2)

Mary Mitchell: Head/unmarried/age 39/laundress/Farnham, Surrey.

Note that Hervey (age 11) is not at home. He is to be found at Rottingdean as a boarder. His birthplace is incorrectly given as Ockley, Surrey.

The census shows a total of eleven servants (sharing five further dependants) to look after a family of five (admittedly in a very large house)!

In *Ralph Vaughan Williams - A Life in Photographs*, by Jerrold Northrop Moore (OUP 1992) there are two undated photographs of the servants. Sarah Wager, Annie Longhurst, and John Phillips are there identified. Two more identified (Mark Cook the gardener and Joseph Berry) do not appear in the census return. However, on both photos, Mr Cook the gardener looks rather old, so the photos probably precede 1881, Mr Cook having died or retired in the interim.

1891 April 5th

76 Ebury Street, Knightsbridge, London (Ref RG12/72 folio 106)

David J Pritchard: Head/mar/age 51/carpenter and joiner/Cardiganshire
Susan Pritchard: Wife/mar/age 45/St Agnes, Cornwall

Ethel A Pritchard: Daur/age 6/scholar/London

Mary J Jenkins: Single/age 35/domestic servant/Cardiganshire

Margaret S V Williams: Head/widow/age 47/living on her own means/Shrewsbury

Hervey W V Williams: Son/single/age 21/ ungraduate (*sic*) at Oxford University/Down Ampney

Margaret S V Williams: Daur/single/age 20/Down Ampney

Ralph V Williams: Son/single/age 19/student of music/Down Ampney

Katherine E L Wedgwood: Sister/single/age 49/living on her own means/Shrewsbury

Finding Vaughan Williams here came as something of a surprise. I can find no reference in Ursula's biography to a family house in Belgravia. Indeed she states that whilst studying at the Royal College of Music Ralph was living at Leith Hill Place, but would have rather stayed in London. Ebury Street runs behind the present Victoria Coach Station, and is about a mile from the RCM. In most of the adjoining properties the 'head' is recorded as 'lodging house keeper' (presumably a superior class of lodging house!) Oddly the Vaughan Williams family is sharing a house (there are two heads, that is, two households). Perhaps it was rented for a short period. No servants are shown.

Apropos the 1901 census, Adeline was absent because she was away for the early months of 1901 in Hove helping to look after her invalid brother Hervey Fisher (see Ursula's biography.) Having said that, I have been unable to find either Adeline or Hervey in Hove (or anywhere else) in the index to the 1901 census. This is possible as a result of mistranscription of the names, or perhaps they were out of the country (France?)

To close, whilst searching the fiches in our local family history society covering the civil registrations of births, I had a rest from the search for Gainsfords, and found the following:

1872 Dec quarter: Williams, Ralph. Cirencester 6a 357 (or possibly 377)

Armed with this information one can obtain a copy birth certificate from Registration Services at Southport (www.gro.gov.uk). Copy certificates cost £7.

Michael Gainsford
Burbage, Leicestershire, UK.

I was intrigued to note in the 1901 Census extract (Issue 37) that Down Ampney was indicated as being in Wiltshire. Whilst, admittedly, Down Ampney lies very close to the Wiltshire border, so far as I am aware it has always been in Gloucestershire. The Census returns for 1851, 1861 and 1871 all confirm this.

Vaughan Williams left Down Ampney at a tender age following his father's death, but I find it hard to believe that he was unaware he was a "man of Gloucestershire". A small mystery, then, as to who provided the information to the Census clerk.

Reg Hargrave,
Upton St. Leonards, Gloucester, UK.

LETTER FROM PARIS

Two articles in the No. 37 issue of the journal struck a chord and I would just like to react to them.

Firstly, I found the Editor's article concerning French choirs and Vaughan Williams very interesting, having tried myself to be an "RVW proselyte" as a member of some "Continental" choirs. These range from singing with the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, the Choir of the European Communities in Brussels, the *Choeurs de l'Orchestre de Paris* back in 1976 at its foundation and currently, the *Maîtrise des Hauts de Seine*.

With a bit of "tongue in cheek", I had always felt that one of the main problems in encouraging French choirs to sing Vaughan Williams was that of pronunciation: a composer who is usually pronounced "Vo-gan Williams" would always have a bit of a handicap...

A bit more seriously, I remember bringing the SATB score of the *Sea Symphony* to show to one of my choirmasters (who shall be nameless). He sat down at the piano and after having played through the opening fanfare, pronounced his final judgement that it was "*trop tonique*".

More recently, I was asked by my fellow choir-members to give them a brief insight into some English choral music since, in the words of one of my colleagues, "*rien ne s'est passé entre Purcell et Britten*". I have not yet managed to convince the *Directeur* to schedule some of these works but I am pleased to say that one of my (French) fellow basses came up to me afterwards and asked for the references of the *Sea Symphony* and he has, since, become a firm fan thereof, so a small seed has been sown and perhaps it will flourish later?

The second article was that of Christopher Cope on British music at the Proms, with whom I would like to concur 200%! When I looked through this year's programme, I felt a sense of disappointment such as I had rarely experienced before. Living in Paris, it is difficult to go the Proms as frequently as I would like but I do try, if possible, to make business trips coincide with an appealing concert. However this year, having looked through the programme at least three times, I found it difficult to identify more than one or two which, as the Michelin Guide would say, "*valent le voyage*".

It reminded me of a previous, and even greater disappointment concerning the 1972 season. In those days there was no Internet of course and so we all had to wait until – about March or April, I think? – the Prospectus was published. I was in the middle of the run-up to my Finals at that time, but clearly remembered thinking "We're in 1972, so they are bound to put on a special Centenary concert". How disappointed I was, to find that there was a dearth of Vaughan Williams works (I even had the feeling that there were none at all, but as Christopher does not mention 1972 as being an "RVW-less" year in his article, I was obviously wrong). It seemed to me that to not to have paid special tribute to Vaughan Williams in the centenary year of his birth must be a stain for ever on the Proms (compare with the Shostakovich flood this year, though I hasten to add I also enjoy Shostakovich's works). I am unable to say to what extent this decision in 1972 was the result of the personal preferences of the Controller of Music at that time, but I had already heard certain comments that the latter was entirely anti-RVW.

Whether this is the case or not, I heartily agree with Christopher's suggestion: bring the choice of repertoire away from being a "one-man band" back to being a joint decision, maybe even with some "prommers" co-opted in, (whilst avoiding of course the pitfall of a committee of thirty members: as the French say, if you want to be certain that a difficult subject is buried forever, just set up a committee to look into it...). Let's not forget that the Proms are a music festival taking place in London and as such, may the "beeb" not overlook the fact that some of Europe's – yes, Europe's – finest composers were born and worked there.

"Power to the people"!

Clive Carpenter,
Paris, France.

A TENOR IN A PASTORAL SYMPHONY

I read with interest Mr Jordan's article in Issue 36 of the Journal: *The Grandeur of Desolation: A Ruminant on the Pastoral Symphony*. I note that he is "...not aware of any performance where the usual soprano has been performed by a tenor..." I know of at least one such performance in recent years; at the Proms on 21st July, 1998. The tenor was Paul Agnew, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andrew Davis. A recording of this performance is listed in Issue 19 of the Journal under "Member Services" on page 28. (It does not indicate the presence of a tenor, however.) If this trail has gone cold I have a recording of it, which I will lend to the author if he wishes to hear it.

To my ears the effect of a tenor is less ethereal than that of a soprano, (as would probably be expected), but, as the announcer at the end of the performance said, if the symphony is to be regarded as a reflection on the First World War, then perhaps a tenor, representing one of the fallen, is more appropriate.

It is interesting to note that Vaughan Williams allowed a clarinet to be substituted for the voice if necessary (see the article by Mr. Barber on page 13 of Issue 36, where he heard Jack Brymer in a performance at the Royal Festival Hall). According to Michael Kennedy's *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, the second public performance included such a substitution. I wonder if there have been any such recent performances.

Andrew Slater
High Peak, Derbyshire, UK.

MEMORIES

My first recollection of Vaughan Williams' music is the incidental music he provided for a BBC radio serial of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and also the stunning effect of the Symphony No. 4, both before the war. I was subsequently present at the first performances of No. 5 and No. 6 – I seem to remember that there was a hushed mood and some sort of feeling of a 'Farewell' at the end of the 5th Symphony. When the 6th burst upon us, it made a huge impression. All the nine symphonies mean quite a lot to me now – as well, of course, as a wide range of his vast output in other categories.

In 1945-49 I studied at Trinity College of Music, Mandeville Place, London, W1, which is now relocated at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, with superb musical facilities. My fellow students included Heather Harper and my good friend Inia Te Wiata, the original John Bunyan in the Covent Garden production, just after his student days.

In the 50s I was teaching Music and English at the Kingsbury Grammar School. I used to come up to London University taking the MA(Education) part-time. On the other evenings I was dancing and singing at Cecil Sharp House. Vaughan Williams would occasionally come and join in, though he often circled left when the rest of the hall was doing a right hand star! Everyone fortunate to happen to be in his set followed him and it was huge fun.

The list of books on the back page of the Journal reminds me of my *viva* for a Ph.D. on Thomas Hardy and the English Musical Renaissance (1986) when one of the examiners was Wilfrid Mellers. The *viva* was a joy because the examiners were so fascinated with the subject and indeed WM wrote in the report that he had seldom been so engrossed with a Ph.D. thesis. Imagine my delight when, soon after the report arrived, Mellers' wonderful *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion* was published. I had no idea that he had simultaneously been engaged upon a parallel subject.

One further memory: after a concert at the Royal Albert Hall I recall Vaughan Williams introducing Roy Douglas – to the audience's delight – as "the man who writes my music"!

David Renouf
Wollaton, Nottinghamshire, UK.

MORE ...

I am a new member of the RVW Society who also happens to belong to the Walton and Weybridge Local History Society. They must be hard pressed for speakers since I have been asked to address the assembled multitude on the Subject of "Ralph Vaughan Williams and the Surrey Connection." And if I can hear loud cries of "Opportunism!" I can only hang my head in shame and respond *mea culpa*. I should say in regard to this undertaking that it will be approached far more from the point of view of a music lover than of an historian. This earth-shattering event is not scheduled to take place until March next year which gives me ample time to make a fool of myself several times over in the process of gathering my material.

In my own defence I must say that I am not totally ignorant of either the life or the music of the great man. My acquaintance with his music goes back to 1936 when at the age of twelve I heard a performance of *The Running Set* played by the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra (as it was then called) in the hall of the Royal Grammar School, Newcastle.

The next incident of note was on a much grander scale, for on the afternoon of Saturday 16th January (I think) 1942 I was privileged to see Vaughan Williams himself. The occasion was a Royal Philharmonic Society concert in the Royal Albert Hall. That great pianist Myra Hess had just performed (immaculately as always) Beethoven's G major concerto at the conclusion of which Vaughan Williams came on to the platform, wearing a tweed suit the material of which looked as if it had been woven from thick-cut marmalade, and presented Miss Hess (I don't think she had been "damed" at that point) with the Society's Gold Medal. I was seventeen at the time and after sixty-five more years this remains the high point of my concert-going career.

Then I might mention a less important incident. Some 15 years ago, as I was garnering material for a talk I was proposing to give about Kathleen Ferrier, Roy Henderson invited me to have tea with him at his home in Herne Hill. On one wall of his sitting room were five photographs, identically framed and set in an arrow formation. They were clearly of those musicians whom Roy had most admired over his very long life. At the top was Kathleen, then two conductors, Henry Wood and Adrian Boult. At the bottom, the composers Frederick Delius and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Besides talking to me about Kathleen (whom he had clearly adored) he spoke movingly of what a joy and a privilege it had been for him to sing with his fifteen colleagues in the first performance and the recording of the *Serenade to Music* in 1938.

David Wilson,
Walton-on-Thames,
Surrey, U.K.

MORE ...

I would like to share with you a short episode from the life of Ralph Vaughan Williams which I came across recently in an autobiographic work by Sven Berlin, English sculptor, artist and writer. In *Dromengro - Man of the Road* (Collins, London, 1971) Sven Berlin describes his time living and working with the gypsies of the New Forest during the early 1950s.

I first read one of Sven's books (*Jonah's Dream* - Dent, London, 1964) in the mid 1980s and I was fortunate to swap letters with him and visit him briefly at his cottage in Dorset. He and his writing made a big impression on me and years later I am still collecting his books. He was a powerful, idiosyncratic writer and influential artist. He died in 1999 but you can find out more about him nowadays from various sources including a website devoted to him - www.finpups-pwh.demonweb.co.uk/sven.berlin

In the meantime I have become interested also in the life and works of Ralph Vaughan Williams, hence my membership of this society.

And then, what a coincidence! In 'Dromengro', Sven Berlin recounts a visit to his dwelling of one Ralph Vaughan Williams!

Other artists had visited Sven by this time including Robert Graves and Augustus John but when it came to Vaughan Williams Sven makes a point of highlighting his awe filled admiration for the composer. He writes of Vaughan Williams in the same vein as Shakespeare, Keats or Blake – “a great man in a great island.”

The exact date of the visit is not easy to pin down but it went on over two days around 1951 or 1952. The purpose of the visit was to record the music of the gypsy people that Sven lived with, Ralph writing the music he heard, Ursula the words, a young (unnamed) male assistant also being present.

Sven notes the close rapport that Ursula had with Ralph, adding that he sees Vaughan Williams as an essentially humble artist.

On the first day of the visit at the gypsy site (Sven lived with the last generation, it appears, of the true Romany nomads, admiring their language, history and culture), Ralph and Sven drink Tollemache beer supplied by Ralph and transfer to a local pub where the gypsies gather to perform. Ralph, Ursula and their assistant focus on their tasks but the raucous evening is terminated by the fussy landlady.

The next day (with yet more Tollemache beer), Vaughan Williams returns for his second day and they remain on site. A calmer day ensues for the three musical visitors whilst individual gypsies, including Sven's wife, perform their handed-down songs. Sven admits that he failed to draw anything of Vaughan Williams during their time together; he puts this omission down to his own nervousness and humility in front of the composer.

Sven compliments Vaughan Williams on his music as they chat before his departure. Vaughan Williams advises Sven's oldest son, a musician, to learn 'everything by Bach'. Sven goes on to state that he and Vaughan Williams exchanged letters after the composer's departure. These were prompted by Sven's perceived need to apologise after a journalist "friend" broke Sven's confidence in retelling of the visit. Ralph however replied in a friendly and inconsequential tone and Sven closes the chapter on the visit by underlining his immense appreciation of Ralph as a fellow artist – “He who was falconer to the lark!”

So, what of the music that Vaughan Williams recorded during his visit? Sven states that the gypsy tunes collected led to a piece entitled “Stolen by the Gypsies”, though my initial enquiries to fellow RVW Society members have drawn a blank in respect of this title. Strangely, too, Vaughan Williams' visit to Sven seems not to have been documented elsewhere hitherto. Sven notes of the music encountered – “It could have been called ‘A Masque for Dancing’” – but this was written some two decades or more before the gypsy visit.

And I wonder, if Sven Berlin had not been living with the gypsies to fire his artistic inspiration, would Vaughan Williams have visited them as part of his research into folk tunes anyway? Perhaps it was coincidence that Sven Berlin was there but it strikes me that Vaughan Williams was drawn to the New Forest gypsies by the presence among them of a fellow artist like Sven.

And so many years later, quite by chance, I find myself reading of a meeting between two artists, my separate interests in them as individuals suddenly thrown together. Coincidence, again? Sven Berlin, in *Jonah's Dream*, writes of Chuang Tzu who “dreamt he was a butterfly”. On the day I first looked up Sven Berlin's details at the Barbican Art Centre, I noticed that it was, strangely, his 76th birthday, 14th September 1987.

I wrote to him about *Jonah's Dream* and the convergence of his birthday with my day at the Barbican. Over twenty years since he wrote *Jonah's Dream*, Sven replied in his letter to me that he had himself been reading of Chuang Tzu that very week and “dreamed he was a butterfly”. He added – “Another strange coincidence, perhaps...”

Mike Pope
Cardiff, U.K.

RVW ON THE WEB

In my role as one of the web editors for Musicweb International I have begun work on an index of all reviews of Vaughan Williams' music that have appeared on the site. For those of who aren't aware of us, Musicweb is the largest of the non-commercial classical review websites.

The fruits of my labours, covering the period 1999-2003 and more than 100 reviews, are now available. I'm hoping to catch up with the present day over the next few months.

The linked indexes have been created in two ways: firstly by the work, and secondly, by the recording. I hope Society members will find this useful, and if I may be permitted to “advertise”, those who haven't read our reviews in the past, might be tempted to give us a visit. The URL is.

David Barker
Newcastle, Australia

A LITTLE RELIGION

Oh, for goodness sake! It really does not matter one iota whether Vaughan Williams was an atheist, an agnostic, a closet Christian, or whatever. He wrote the most wonderful, beautiful, fantastic, sublime music and if it had not been for the Christian tradition a great deal of it would never have been composed. Come to think of it, an incalculable amount of music would never have been written at all, and the world would be a much poorer place for it. Don't knock Christianity – it has done music world wide a huge service. Let us just be grateful for it – thank God!

Sally Dewhurst,
Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, UK.

THE LAST WORD?

At the risk of prolonging the (probably rather pointless) ‘top ten’ discussion, I felt I must put finger to keyboard and respond to the letter from Graham D. Morris (Journal No. 37) about the omission of Handel from my list.

There is nothing sinister in this omission. He did not figure in my first list simply because I don't have enough LPs or CDs of his work. This was the basis of my list and does not necessarily reflect the order of my preferences anyway. I have nothing against Mr. Handel at all and rank him above Britten as far as British composers are concerned (always accepting that Handel was British). But then again I also prefer Parry to Britten. The reason that I don't have ever such a lot of Handel recordings is because I rank much higher his contemporary baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach, whom I think did everything far better, except for opera, which he did not attempt.

Michael Gainsford,
Burbage, Leicestershire, UK.

NOTICE TO UNITED STATES MEMBERS:

Please note that as a result of significant changes in the dollar/pound exchange rate since 2002 we have had to increase the annual subscription dollar rates to \$52 (full) and \$32 (concessionary) with immediate effect. The sterling rates are unchanged so you will only feel the difference if you pay by dollar cheque.

Concert Reviews

TRIUMPH IN PRAGUE

The idea of the predominantly amateur Cambridge Philharmonic Society's choir and orchestra receiving a standing ovation at the famous Rudolfinum in Prague before a near-capacity audience would probably have been unthinkable not so very long ago. Yet such has been the marked and steady improvement in its performance standards over the last two decades that it actually came to pass on 28 October 2006. Moreover, the programme included two substantial English works: Toward the Unknown Region and Walton's music to the Olivier film Henry V. The august Dr Burney once famously described the Czechs as 'the most musical race in Europe', so the prolonged and vociferous applause at the end of the concert was presumably not the result of mere courtesy.

The concert was part of the tercentenary celebrations of the Prague Technical University - yes, the adjective is correct: there has been a technical university in the city since 1706. The invitation to perform came from the University a couple of years ago via the then Mayor of Cambridge, David White, who sings in the Phil chorus and whose wife is Czech. The programme committee were asked if the orchestra would include Dvorák's 'Noontide Witch' in the programme: they did, but otherwise, the choice of music was left to them and their brilliant young conductor Tim Redmond.

Both the Dvorák and the Vaughan Williams were included in the first part of the concert; and it was plain from the opening of the former that the orchestra really meant business and was on its very best form. This impression was confirmed by its performance of two of the brilliant transcriptions of Debussy piano preludes recently made by Colin Matthews specially for the Hallé Orchestra. Here, the wood-wind in particular rose magnificently to the considerable challenges they were set in dexterity and dynamic control. I only regret that I had not heard these evocative display-pieces ('Puck's Dance' and 'Fireworks') from the Hallé itself for purposes of comparison. They were certainly rapturously received by the Prague audience.

Toward the Unknown Region, with its occasional echoes of Dvorák in 7th symphony mode and its majestic Parry/Elgaresque choral climaxes, deservedly went down well, the chorus singing with a fine body of tone, powerful attack and great sensitivity to diction, line, atmosphere and dynamics; and the orchestra making the most of the warm Rudolfinum acoustic. I hope RVW has won plenty of converts in Prague as a result!

The Walton, with the narrations delivered with flamboyant eloquence, dramatic intensity and acute attention to tonal nuance and characterisation by David Timson, brought the house down - metaphorically, at any rate and at times dangerously close to literally. The orchestra and chorus supported him with well-focused, expressive singing and playing. The battle sequence - particularly the intense and poignant calm passage after all the hurly-burly, in which one could have heard a handkerchief drop - was tremendously impressive, the Agincourt hymn must surely have roused memories of the patriotic close of Smetana's Blaník and the beautifully-floated tone of the Phil's ladies in their graceful lyrical passages was clearly greatly appreciated by the audience. No wonder they demanded - and got - an encore, in the shape of the polka from The Bartered Bride - boisterously sung in Czech, too.

James Day,
Cambridge, UK.

IN TORONTO

It was with a good deal of amazement, tinged with sadness, that I read Christopher Cope's article in the October Journal on British Music at the

Proms. When I was growing up in England I attended many Prom concerts at which British music was performed, including new works from time to time. Here in Toronto we have an excellent orchestra, the Toronto Symphony, and a Music Director and Conductor, Peter Oundjian, who states that he is a fan of the music of Vaughan Williams. Admittedly, we have had the fourth and sixth symphonies performed during the past three seasons, but the 2006/2007 calendar is sadly lacking music from British composers. We have three performances of *The Planets* and one performance of Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* to go along with full Beethoven and Brahms symphony cycles, the annual Mozart and New Creations Festivals and a special series of Russian music.

Therefore, imagine my excitement upon discovering that an "Evening of Music for Remembrance" on November 10th at St Paul's Anglican Church in Toronto was to include Vaughan Williams' *Song of Thanksgiving!* Better still, on the night, when printed programmes were handed out was to find *Lord, Thou has been our Refuge* also included. Two works by Vaughan Williams in the same programme that are not often otherwise heard!

The performances were excellent, with the Mississauga Children's Choir, the Tallis Choir of Toronto and the St Paul's Choir supported by soprano soloist Colleen Burns, narrator Susan Kerr and organist Marty Smyth contributing to the enjoyment. The rest of the programme was suitable to the occasion, with readings by John Neville of *For the Fallen* and *In Flanders Fields* giving pause for thought along with the music.

One of the difficulties here in Toronto is that reporting of concert programmes is sketchy at best and I only found out about this particular concert by a short announcement on a radio programme. Judging by other reports from the United States on performances of music by British composers, they seem to fare better sound of the border!

Alan J. Hanks,
Aurora, Ontario, Canada.

AND IN EDINBURGH

An innovation at this year's Edinburgh Festival was a series of 27 very short concerts in the Usher Hall, sponsored by Lloyds TSB Scotland and devoted to the nine Beethoven symphonies, the nine Bruckner symphonies, and nine 'Masterwork' concerts. One such 'Masterwork' concert, on 17 August, consisted of Vaughan Williams's *Serenade to Music* and the cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*. The performance of the *Serenade* was a real rarity, the original version for sixteen voices. The present writer had never heard this version live but knew it well from the Hyperion recording by the English Chamber Orchestra and sixteen soloists conducted by Matthew Best and, being firmly of the opinion that this was far and away the best of the four versions, he looked forward to it with impatient eagerness.

On this occasion the orchestra was the Scottish Chamber Orchestra conducted by David Jones. The visual impact was impressive since the soloists stood in a long line along the edge of the platform, emphasising that the work was for sixteen soloists rather than for a chamber choir. Technically, singers and orchestra were impeccable and the interpretation seemed exceptionally good. However, the overall effect was rather disappointing, for the extraordinary beauty of this unique work was apprehended, as it were, at a certain distance. Some of the men, especially, were not particularly audible when they sang solo, and even when the singers joined forces the result was, for this writer at least, a trifle insipid. Was Vaughan Williams' scoring at fault, or his vocal writing, or did the acoustics of the hall not suit the work, or did the

orchestra play too loudly and the soloists not project their voices? Or – which may be correct – are we so used to unnatural balance on recordings that the balance of any live performance now seems less than ideal? It may be that matters would have been improved had the singers stood in a group rather than a single line. How, one wondered, did the original balance of this combination of soloists sound in the Queen's Hall, London, in 1938? Whatever the explanation, sadly this writer's expectations were not entirely fulfilled.

The soloists in this Festival performance were Claire Booth (taking the part originally sung by Stiles Allen), Ha Young Lee (Isobel Baillie), Lee Bisset (Eva Turner), Kate Valentine (Elsie Suddaby), Anna Stéphany (Astra Desmond), Madeline Shaw (Mary Jarred), Doreen Curran (Muriel Brunskill), Louise Mott (Margaret Balfour), Robert Murray (Parry Jones), Benjamin Segal, standing in at short notice for the indisposed Wynne Evans (Frank Titterton), Adrian Dwyer (Walter Widdop), Ed Lyon (Heddle Nash), Garry Magee (Roy Henderson), Roland Wood (Robert Easton), Tim Mirfin (Harold Williams), and David Soar (Norman Allin).

However, no praise can be too high for the following performance of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, an outstanding occasion and a triumph for the conductor. In this anguished, ferocious and unbearably moving work the orchestra was joined by the Edinburgh Festival Chorus (chorus master also David Jones) and the soloists were Claire Booth and Garry Magee.

The splendid chorus sang magnificently (and it was to surpass even this achievement in a masterly concert performance of *Die Meistersinger* on the last night of the Festival) while the epithet 'Chamber' seemed more than a little inept as a description of the orchestra, given its tremendous and electrifying sonority, especially in the terrifying *Beat! Beat! Drums!* section and the jubilant finale. There can be no reservation about the contributions by the gloriously-voiced soloists. Garry Magee was profoundly touching in *Reconciliation* and nobly authoritative in *The Angel of Death* solo and in the introduction to the finale. Claire Booth's quiet yet totally audible projection of the closing *Pacem* was astonishing and unforgettable. Was this an expression of peaceful optimism, as the programme note would have us believe, or one of anxious uncertainty, as this writer is inclined to think? In that case, of course, the jubilant finale depicts 'what might be' rather than 'what will be'.

Incidentally, Vaughan Williams might well have noted with mild amusement that the preceding non-Beethoven, non-Bruckner 'Masterwork' concert consisted of *Das Lied von der Erde* by Gustav Mahler – 'a tolerable imitation of a composer' according (tongue in cheek?) to RVW – and that the programme notes for not only the Mahler but both Vaughan Williams works were by Michael Kennedy.

J. M. Y. Simpson,
Aberdeen, U.K.

CD Review

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: CHRISTMAS MUSIC

Fantasia on Christmas Carols

The First Nowell

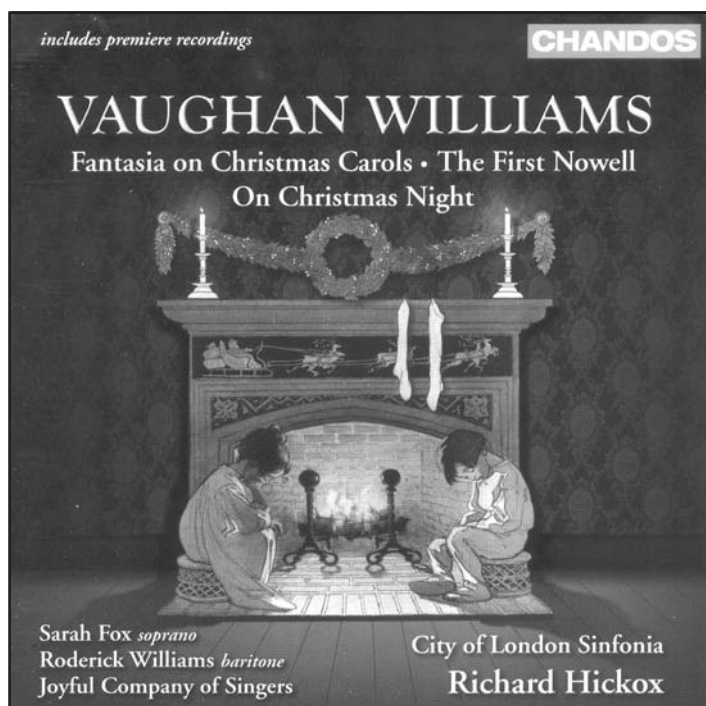
On Christmas Night

Sarah Fox, soprano; Roderick Williams, baritone;

Joyful Company of Singers;

City of London Sinfonia, conducted by Richard Hickox.

CHANDOS CHAN10385



A little late for Christmas, or a little early, depending on your viewpoint, here is a lovely and important new disc that every RVW Society member will want to hear.

The *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* has been recorded many times and most members will already have one or other recorded version of it. The present performance is particularly interesting, though, because it is a rare recording of Vaughan Williams' permitted alternative version for organ and strings. There is inevitably some loss of colour when heard in direct comparison with the more fully orchestrated version, but many will feel there is a gain in warmth. The organ is heard to touching effect at the beginning of *Come all you worthy gentlemen* but does not play an important role thereafter. And the timpani are included, as are the bells in the closing pages.

It was in July 1958 that Simona Pakenham received a request from Austin Williams, then vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, to write a nativity play and to try and persuade Vaughan Williams to provide the music. The work was to receive its first performance, for charitable aims, in December of the same year. To Simona's surprise, the composer agreed, presumably beginning serious work on the piece when he received the script from her at the end of July. Surprising, then, that so much music for *The First Nowell* had been written when he died suddenly on August 26. A few passages which remained to be orchestrated were completed by Roy Douglas, who also provided some short passages of original music, based on Vaughan Williams' sketches. A soprano and baritone alternate with choruses, the whole beautifully orchestrated. Given Vaughan Williams' love of Christmas and of traditional carols we are not surprised to find many of them here, including *The Truth from Above* and the *Sussex Carol* in arrangements which are touchingly similar to those of the much earlier *Fantasia*. There are extensive spoken parts in the original, staged version which are not included in the concert version recorded here. Some short passages of music are missing also, which are directed to be played only when the work is staged. Roy Douglas insisted that the passages for which he was

responsible be clearly marked in the published score to ensure that “Vaughan Williams would not be blamed for my shortcomings.” Amongst these is a short postlude or coda, composed for those stage performances where “there is no curtain and the cast have to disperse in view of the audience.” It could almost be Vaughan Williams speaking. And the final bar of the work carries the marking, presumably by Roy Douglas, but as so often by the great man himself, *a niente* – to nothing.

This Christmas programme is completed by a real rarity, the ballet *On Christmas Night*. Written in 1924, this masque – as Vaughan Williams termed it – is based on Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, and indeed originally shared the same title. The composer disliked classical ballet danced on the points of the toes and this work is one of four – including the masterpiece *Job* – in which he sought to establish an English ballet style. The scenario roughly follows Dickens’ story, but is used as a pretext for a series of dances based not only on favourite carols but also on a whole series of English folk songs, and the work reminds us of the composer’s long association with the English Folk Dance Society. There are small parts for a chorus as well as a solo mezzo-soprano and a baritone, the latter a night watchman singing *Past twelve o’clock* just as midnight

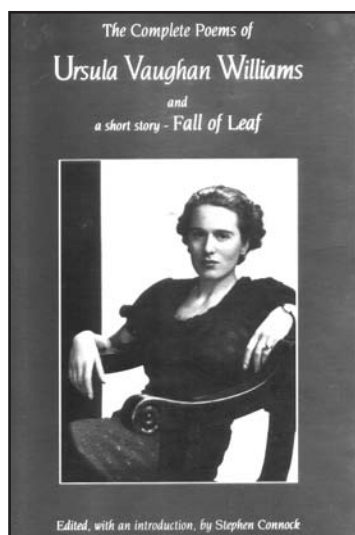
chimes, a typically magical Vaughan Williams moment. Sarah Fox sings beautifully, as does Roderick Williams whose name now features regularly in recordings of English music. The Joyful Company of Singers live up to their name and their excellent reputation, and the City of London Sinfonia bring heartwarming sincerity to the whole programme under the direction of Richard Hickox.

Neither *The First Nowell* nor *On Christmas Night* are amongst the most demanding of Vaughan Williams’ music, but they are beautiful and touching works and every member will want to get to know and love them. The performances are irreproachable and the recording is rich and atmospheric. The disc is presented to a high standard, and if anyone is still hesitating I can do no better than quote the final words of Stephen Connock’s informative and readable accompanying notes. “Vaughan Williams’s Christmas music in its freshness and warmth speaks directly to the heart. It is music to be played and cherished on Christmas Eve, at home, near the fire, with children safe and all at heart’s-ease.

William Hedley

William Hedley introduces . . .

Albion Music Limited



Items which appear regularly, immutable, on the same page of the Journal, tend to be passed over. The eye skips past looking for something new. In future issues of the Journal I would like to draw your attention to the box at the bottom left of the back page, serially ignored, especially by the many fans of Mike Gainsford’s crossword.

Albion Music Limited is a division of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society. Think of it as the Society’s commercial arm, or its publishing arm. A glance at that back page box reveals a growing list of publications of

interest to enthusiasts of Vaughan Williams, especially those, perhaps, who have gone so far as to join the Society. These publications can be ordered at bookshops or bought by mail order on the Internet. Perhaps the quickest way, however, is direct from the publisher. Details are to be found on the back page.

The very first title on the list is *The Complete Poems of Ursula Vaughan Williams and a short story – Fall of Leaf*. This is, for obvious reasons, a very special book for the Society. Most members will already have a book by Ursula Vaughan Williams on their shelves. Rereading passages from this famous biography for this article, I am struck above all by the extraordinary restraint of the writing. She describes their growing intimacy in language which is at once discreet and tender. The composer’s death is dealt with in a single, moving sentence, that last one of the book.

Ursula Vaughan Williams was already an accomplished writer when she met the composer, and it was a proposed collaboration which brought about their meeting. She continued to write during their life together, her husband setting many of her words to music. After his death she wrote opera libretti for other composers as well as much poetry and other original work.

Albion Music Limited published Ursula Vaughan Williams’ *Collected Poems* in 1996. This poet was delighted by the reaction to that volume, and so made available many other poems from the later part of her life. These poems, as well as a (rather long) short story entitled *Fall of Leaf*, are included in the new volume, edited by Stephen Connock and published in 2003.

The careful control of language which we note in the biography is very much in evidence in these works, but gone is the slight detachment with which she described events in Vaughan Williams’ life, both before and after she began to play a part in it herself. On the contrary, the language is surprisingly rich and highly charged, the imagery abundant yet carefully controlled to evoke the moods and emotions she seeks. They are as a rule reflective rather than narrative poems, and if they seem less abstruse than Yeats and less gloomily fate-obsessed than Hardy, one can nonetheless see Stephen Connock’s point when he evokes these two influences in his Introduction.

The book is professionally produced to a high standard. A delightful series of photographs complements the poems and the story. In such a collection as this, representing a lifetime’s work, it is impossible to pick out anything which might be taken as typical. Instead, as a taster, I have selected the poem below. It deals with a theme frequently found in her poems, touchingly and amusingly applied to a musical context.

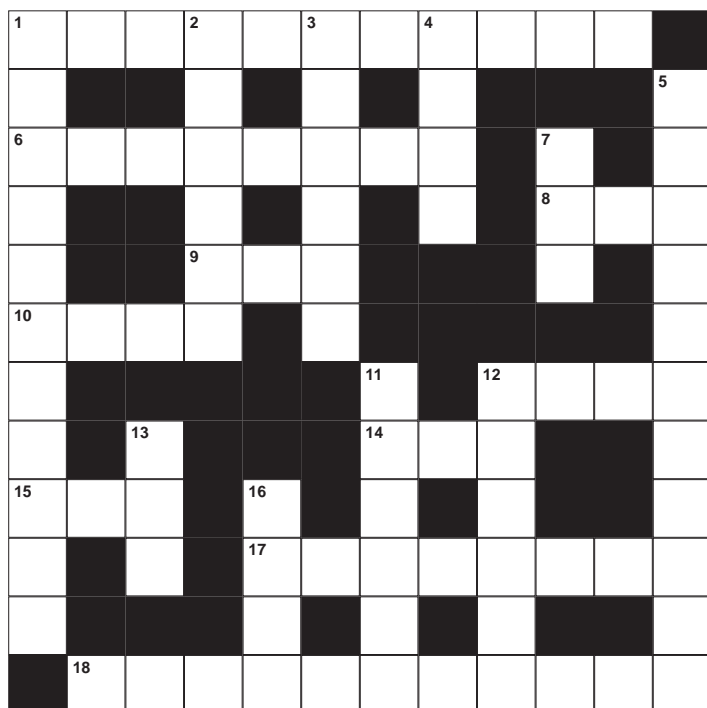
To the man who wanted a symphony to have a happy ending

Do not suppose sequence is any clue,
or that serenity following on despair
cancels its pain, for both are true.

Grief’s not dethroned by joy, or dark by light;
they are man’s equal hemisphere’s of day and night.

Do not suppose succeeding years make plain
a secret code transcribing joy and grief,
interpreting man’s journey. This is vain.
Either may perish, either endure through skill;
the spirit is incarnate where it will.

RVW Crossword No. 38 by Michael Gainsford



Across

1. She's in a lather at Vanity Fair (5, 6)
6. (with 15 ac, 13 d) Synge opera (6, 2)
8. Indian music or forerunner of jazz (3)
9. Version of Scots Gaelic John (3)
10. Dumb thing to put in your trumpet bell (4)
12. Start of Mozart opera sounds comfortable (4)
14. She was sweeter than apple cider according to the old song (3)
15. See 6 across(3)
17. Pezzo, No 3 of *Birthday Gifts* (8)
18. The film for which RVW wrote music, in 1943 (7, 4)

Down

1. Murdered in the Red Barn, according to folk song (5, 6)
2. RVW portrayed this type of penguin in music (6)
3. Italian pianist/composer, (1886-1924) (6)
4. This composer sounds as if he comes after Suk, but he's much older (1649-1708) (4)
5. Conductor of first English performance of the *Harmonica Romance* (4, 7)
7. Built in *Noyes Fludde* (3)
11. Size of RVW's *Cloister* hymn tune (6)
12. Accompanies the crane in RVW carol (6)
13. See 5 ac (3)
16. Ronald, British conductor (eg of BBC Singers) (4)

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April 16 2007

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Deadline for contributions
August 16 2007

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