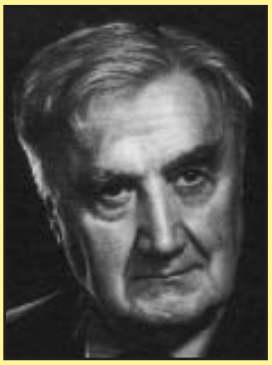


Journal of the
RVW
Society

No.40 Oct 2007

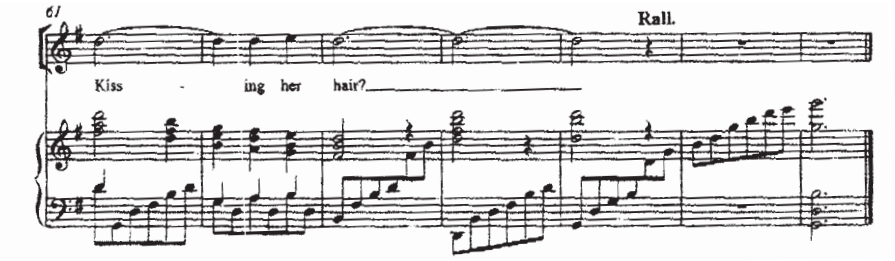
In this issue...

Kissing her hair.....

The public launch of Albion Records on 8th October in central London provides the ideal opportunity to explore the riches included in our two new CDs of rare RVW songs. Top of the list is the world premiere recording of *Rondel*, with these words by Swinburne:

> Kissing her hair I sat against her feet,
> Wove and unwove it, wound and found it sweet;
> Made fast there – with her hands, drew down her eyes
> Deep is deep flowers – and dreamy like dim skies.

The final reference to 'Kissing her hair' is a moment of exquisite beauty as the following musical example shows:



What is remarkable is that this work was composed in 1895 – six years before *Linden Lea*. Its perfect match of words to music and lyrical invention demonstrates that the 23 year-old composer developed much earlier than he is normally given credit for. The tenderness of this song may also have reflected his feelings for Adeline Fisher with whom he was to become engaged a year later. Early pictures of her show pre-Raphaelite good looks, attractive long hair and a face not yet etched by the pain that was to come. Was Adeline the impetus for the wonderful inspiration of *Rondel?*

Sleep were no sweeter than her face to me

Our first CD – *The Sky Shall Be Our Roof* – is on sale from 8th October at £10 to members, plus p & p. It is available from Cynthia Cooper at:

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Rondel is available from early February - full details in the February Journal.

Just before printing we learned of the very sad death of Ursula Vaughan Williams. She was a wonderful companion to Ralph for 20 years and, since 1958, championed both his music and that of British composers generally with vigour and commitment. She was a remarkable friend to the Society and we are proud to have published her 'Complete Poems' and her autobiography. She will be greatly missed. Tributes will appear in a later Journal.

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From the Editor

Members will be aware that 2008 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Ralph Vaughan Williams. At the beginning of this very special year I would like the Journal to look at the composer from an international point of view. Is Vaughan Williams' music often performed overseas? Do people enjoy listening to it? And exactly how is this music, which many of us think of as "typically English", perceived and appreciated in other countries? 28% of Society members live outside the United Kingdom and I feel sure that many of them will have a tale to tell. Simple reportage will do: I have written myself about the pleasure and privilege of performing Vaughan Williams with amateur choirs here in France. Then there are endless possibilities for philosophical rumination, on Englishness in music, for example (and members need do no more than look back over a few previous Journals to stimulate their thinking on this subject). Finally, and crucially, the debate is by no means closed to those who choose to live within Albion's shores.

Members may find the current issue rather "text heavy". I make no apology for this: there are four major articles, as challenging as they are well written and readable, but which do not easily lend themselves to illustration. Distinguished Vaughan Williams scholar James Day writes about two major masterpieces with his customary insight and wisdom, but many will be surprised at how easily digested even learned articles like this can be. Then there are three pieces from members who responded to the call for papers on *Riders to the Sea*. It is one of the many remarkable aspects of Vaughan Williams' art that, whilst almost always sounding like himself, each of his works is different from its companions. To cite the most obvious example, there are nine symphonies, but no two of them are alike. On the contrary, each one represents a quite different approach to the challenge of writing a symphony. The same can be said about the operas, and we might also point out how very different Vaughan Williams' operas tend to be from the operas of any other composer. More than once in these articles the point is made that *Riders to the Sea* is essentially composed of recitative, and that the vocal line only really flowers towards the end with the long soliloquy of the central character, Maurya. One might expect this to lead to monotony, but not at all. For one thing, the opera is very short (though it seems a much bigger piece) but also, and more importantly, the composer demonstrates a remarkable dramatic gift. Consider the mastery and restraint with which he treats the scene where the two sisters finally examine the bundle of clothes to see if they really belong to their drowned brother. Above all, the extraordinary unity of action and music as Maurya recounts her nightmare vision and the sad litany of all her men folk lost to the sea. Women's voices are heard offstage, *preparing* the moment when the body of the last of these, whom we have seen and heard only minutes before, is carried in. Most members, like myself, will never have seen the opera on stage. It is hoped that this will be possible during the anniversary year, and I am convinced that it will be prove to be a gripping piece of theatre.

Vaughan Williams began work on this very singular piece in 1925, the year of the first performance of another of his works featuring a wordless chorus, *Flos Campi*. The composer, dryly reticent, called it a "Suite", and each of the six movements was headed by a quotation, originally in Latin only, from the *Song of Solomon*. There is a solo viola as well as the chorus, and the orchestra is very small. There is more than a little kinship, I think, between the chorus here and the keening women of the West Coast of Ireland, but we can only wonder at what they are really singing about. Orchestral players reportedly delighted the composer by renaming the work "Camp Flossie". Holst, famously, "couldn't get hold of" it at all. Searching for meaning amongst the notes of this unique masterpiece – and once again the composer's denials on the subject of "mottoes and meanings" seem wilfully obstructive – can only add to our appreciation of it. *Flos Campi* will be the theme of the Journal in June 2008.

William Hedley

J. M. SYNGE, RVW AND THE PLAY, *RIDERS TO THE SEA*

by John Barr

INTRODUCTION

The story of *Riders to the Sea* grew out of a real-life incident observed by its author, John Millington Synge (1871-1909) during his third visit to the Aran Islands off the west coast of Northern Ireland in September, 1899[1]

Synge is considered:

> *…the greatest dramatist of the Irish literary renaissance. His understanding of the Irish peasant, his detached, unsentimental compassion, and delight in the vitality – even violence - of peasant life, enabled him to blend irony with a tragic and elemental power. He molded the syntax and idoms of Gaelic into a unique poetic diction, capable both of rising to musical heights and of serving as a lively instrument for his ironic humour.*[2]

Written in the summer of 1902, and published in 1903, *Riders to the Sea* had its first performance on 25 February, 1904 by the Irish National Theatre. The play gained a reputation for its tragic beauty and was the inspiration for another playwright, Winifred Lett causing her to write her play, *The Eyes of the Blind* (1907). Commenting on *Riders to the Sea,* she recalled in later years:

> *This was not a play, it was life: it was the eternal battle of man with the sea, the sea as they knew it in the western coast, not our polite sea that let us bathe so safely at Blackrock Baths. This was tragedy as the Greeks knew it. I cannot remember any applause, only that which falls on supreme art.*[3]

Synge's tragic drama shows the collective suffering of a community which is dependent on the sea for its livelihood, but regularly loses its sons to the sea's dangers.

Ralph Vaughan Williams composed his setting of Synge's drama during the years from 1925 to 1932. The reason for this span of time on a relatively short work is likely that he was at work on two other operas: *Sir John in Love* and *The Poisoned Kiss*. The earliest evident interest Vaughan Williams had in *Riders to the Sea* is apparently the time when he talked about Synge's plays to his student, Elizabeth Maconchy, soon after she began to study with him in 1923. "He told her that he had thought of setting *The Tinker's Wedding* as well as the tragic *Riders*."[4] He never got further, however, than thinking about the former. The music for *Riders to the Sea* was sketched, according to Frank Howes, in 1926 and completed in 1927, but was not published until 1936.[5] Vaughan Williams' setting of *Riders to the Sea* is composed for five soloists, a women's chorus and orchestra. It received its first performance on December 1 1937 in London at the Royal College of Music, produced by Clive Carey and conducted by Malcolm Sargent.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PLAYWRIGHT AND COMPOSER

Some interesting similarities exist between the author and composer of *Riders to the Sea*.[6] Both were born into Protestant professional families which included clergymen. Both families were well-to-do, and both Synge and Vaughan Williams were at odds with orthodox Christianity. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution caused Synge to doubt the traditional religious beliefs of his family. Though Synge is known as an eminent literary figure, he studied music, violin, theory and composition during his college years at the Royal Academy of Music. Both men also had a vital interest in rural culture. It has already been noted that Synge was a frequent visitor and observer to the Aran Islands. Vaughan Williams, as is well known, had an avid interest in collecting English folk songs which brought him into contact with many rural people. Both men were, however, observers rather than inhabitants of rural culture. Nevertheless this type of interest led Synge to write plays set in the location of the Aran Islands and Vaughan Williams' contact with rural culture and his informed literary tastes must have encouraged him to read Synge's plays. Many readers will be aware that Vaughan Williams' first large symphonic work concerned the sea (*A Sea Symphony*, completed in 1909).

THE PLAY'S GENESIS

On Synge's third visit to the Aran Islands in September of 1899, he observed an incident which he later used as the basic plot for *Riders to the Sea*. The incident was told by Synge as follows:

> *Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty [a type of shoe worn by Irish seamen] on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.*
>
> *For three days the people here have been trying to fix his identity. Some think it is the man from this island, others think that the man fits the description of a man from the south island more exactly. Tonight as we were returning from the slip we met the mother of the man who was drowned from this island, still weeping and looking out over the sea. She stopped the people who had come over from the south island to ask them with a terrified whisper what is thought over there.*
>
> *Later in the evening, when I was sitting in one of the cottages the sister of the dead man came in through the rain with her infant, and there was a long talk about the rumours that had come in. She pieced together all she could remember about his clothes, and what his purse was like, and where he had got it, and the same of his tobacco box and his stockings. In the end there seemed little doubt that it was her brother.*
>
> *'Ah!', she said, 'it's Mike sure enough, and please God they'll give him a decent burial.'*[7]

THE RESULTING PLAY: SYNOPSIS

Synge's dramatization of this real-life incident consists of four characters excluding the drowned man for whom the name of Michael is retained. The four characters are Maurya, an old woman and mother of Michael; Bartley, her other son; Cathleen,

her daughter, about twenty years of age; and Nora, her younger daughter plus men and women of the community.

Nora and Cathleen in their cottage on an island off the West coast of Ireland, are quietly talking (so as not to waken their mother) about a bundle of clothes (a shirt and a plain stocking) that was gotten off a drowned man in Donegal and brought to them by the local priest. Nora and Cathleen were planning to determine if the clothes belonged to their missing brother, Michael. They decide to hide the bundle because Maurya was waking from her nap and soon enters the kitchen. The three discuss the likelihood of the remaining son, Bartley, taking horses to the Galway fair at Connemara. Bartley enters, confirming their fears by gathering the things he needs to go to the fair which he heard would be good for horses. He also instructs Cathleen regarding some chores with the sheep and the pig they own. Inspite of Maurya's words warning and complaint, motivated by her less obvious love and concern, Bartley leaves without his mother giving the words of blessing, "God speed you."

After Bartley leaves, the women discover they forgot to send with him the cake that was prepared for him on his trip. Since he is riding on the red mare with the gray pony behind him only a short distance down to the spring well where he will board the boat going to the fair, the daughters tell their mother to go there and give him the bread and also nullify her hard words by saying to him, "God speed you."

Being alone for a sufficient time, the daughters examined the bundle of clothing from the drowned man. They took a little time talking in low voices while comparing material from the bundle of clothes with the material they used. The evidence was inconclusive until Nora observed the plain stocking. She recognized it as the second one of the third pair she knitted and she counted the stitches which turned out to be three score stitches with four of them dropped. 18 When she had determined this, Nora cried out, "It's Michael, Cathleen, it's Michael; God spare his soul, and what will herself say when she hears this story, and Bartley on the sea?"

After this climactic moment, the daughters decide to keep this information from Maurya until Bartley is safely returned from the Galway fair. Sooner than they anticipated, however, Maurya enters and begins to keen softly as if she were in a trance. She does not respond immediately to Cathleen's questions if she had seen Bartley. She said in a weak voice, "My heart's broken from this day." She then describes what sounds like a vision in which she saw Bartley riding the red mare with the gray pony behind on which was seated Michael dressed in fine clothes and new shoes. As she looked up to Bartley the words "god speed you" which she hoped to say choked in her throat so she couldn't say anything. Bartley rode by her quickly and said, "the blessing of God on you." The daughters, responding to Maurya's account as an objective event, tell her she could not have seen Michael, "for his body is after being found in the far north, and he's got a clean burial by the grace of God." As Maurya pauses in her mourning the loss of her husband and sons, Nora and Cathleen hear through their half-open door someone crying-out by the seashore. Soon Maurya and her daughters notice a group of women coming, followed by a group of men carrying the body of Bartley which they bring into the house and lay on the table. One of the women explained, "The gray pony knocked him into the sea, and he was washed out where there is a great surf on the white rocks."

The conclusion of the play takes place as Maurya kneels at the head of the table, drops Michael's clothes across Bartley's feet and sprinkles Holy Water over him. She talks to herself saying that now that she has lost all of her men, the sea can no longer do anything to her. She then prays for the souls of her sons, her own soul, and for the souls of everyone left living in the world. She concludes, as does the play, "Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied." The curtain falls as Maurya kneels.

J. M. Synge (1871 - 1909)

THE PLAY UNDER DISCUSSION

The author's aim was to project into his drama of this real-life event as much realism as possible. When writing his plays, Synge used largely those words, "heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read a newspaper." Some phrases he used he had heard "also from herdsmen and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad singers near Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these fine people."[8]

Since the chief element of realism here is in the spoken word, it is important to examine the author's use of language to portray convincingly the personalities of the people with their cultural characteristics. The reader will immediately observe that their general manner of speaking is that of unlettered, devoutly religious people who have a noticeable amount of superstition. Some examples of their religious devotion are reflected in such phrases as: "God forgive you", "God help her", and "God rest his soul." An example which reflects superstition is "I seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen since the day Bride Dara seen the dead man with the child in his arms." An example of their unusual syntax is "we're to find out if it's Michael's they are…" A "saying" which reflects their life on the Aran Islands is "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old."

These people also lament for the dead in loud wailing voices or wordless cries which they call keening. An example of this is "…isn't it nine days herself is after crying and keening and making great sorrow in the house?" Another example of Synge's desire for realism is shown in the use on stage of a spinning wheel. He indicated that the actress actually learn to spin, "so that there may be no fake about the show."[9] Synge also got from the Aran Islands some samples of cloth and some pairs of pampooties to provide correct clothes and shoes.

Two negative observations about the drama are of interest. The first observation concerns the question of the play's realism. Skelton (op. cit.) admitted its "tragic beauty" but objected to the presence of a coffin on stage. The second observation claims that Synge was not fully informed on Irish peasant religion. The critic wrote "The widow…who consoles herself with the thought that her prayers to Providence may cease, leaves off her praying just when the Irish peasant's prayers would really begin."[10]

These contrasting observations may show that Synge did not always understand correctly the cultural and religious life of the Aran people. When he first visited the Aran Islands in 1898 we are told that he stayed for two weeks in an hotel and then stayed in a native cottage where he heard stories of folk-lore. He left the islands on June 25 1898 with a number of superb photographs and a notebook full of material. This plus additional information from his later visits formed the basis of his knowledge about the people and culture there. This material was reworked into the book, *The Aran Islands* (1901) "which has long been accepted as a faithful and moving account of life on the islands."[11] We can surmise from this information that Synge was quite knowledgeable about the people of the Aran Islands, if not always flawless in his portrayal of them.

In concluding the consideration of this one-act play it is clear that this text provided Vaughan Williams with an eloquent and compelling drama for him to set to music. In this literary work Vaughan Williams found a text with which he could work directly without the aid of a librettist.

Notes

1 Robert Skelton: J.M. Synge and His World; A Studio Book; New York, The Viking Press, 1971, pp 62, 64-65.
2 Anthony Cronin: "John Millington Synge" in Encyclopedia Britannica; Chicago, London, Toronto… Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., William Benten, Publisher, 1968, Vol. 21; p. 567.
3 Robert Hogan and James Kilroy: The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge 1905-1909; The Modern Irish Drama a documentary history III; Dublin, The Doleman Press, 1987; pp. 174-175.
4 Ursula Vaughan Williams: R.V.W. A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams; London, Oxford University Press, 1964; p. 161.
5 Frank Howes: The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams; London, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954; Repr. Westport, CT, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1975; p. 317.
6 These facts are documented by Robin Skelton and Ursula Vaughan Williams in their works cited above. (Skelton, p. 7; U.V.W., pp. 5 and 13.)
7 Skelton: op. cit. pp. 64-65.
8 Both quotes from J.M. Synge: The Complete Plays of John M. Synge; New York, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, [The Modern Library, Inc. 1935]
9 Ann Saddlemyer: Theatre Business: The Correspondence of the first Abbey Theatre Directors: William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge; Selected and Edited by Ann Saddlemyer: University Park and London, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982; p. 122.
10 Hogan and Kilroy: op. cit., pp. 18-19.
11 Skelton: op. cit., p. 48.

Can you help?

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There is an opportunity for one of our members who has e-commerce and website experience to undertake an extremely valuable role for the Society. The webmaster has supported our website for many years but, owing to pressure of work, he will have to relinquish this role in the near future. Members with website experience and who would like to help us should contact either Stephen Connock or John Francis with a note of their experience relative to this role.

In particular the role requires the following attributes:

- An investigative mind, willing to explore activities that might be included in the website such as concerts and other events.
- Experience of web design and management
- An understanding of e-commerce as we use our website for subscriptions and other services that require credit card payments.
- Willingness to attend meetings of the Trustees where we review progress of our website.

We look forward to hearing from interested candidates.

Crossword Solutions:

Across: 1. Gerald, 3. Finzi, 5. Fa, 8. *Lovely Joan*, 9. No, 10. Isle, 11. Tuba, 13. HP, 16 *Magnificat*, 17. Ah, 18. Helen, 19. Bidder

Down: 1. Gallanthus, 2. Angel, 3. Famous, 4. Noon, 6. Tye, 7. Woodcutter, 12. Bag man, 14. Dim, 15. Tired, 16. Mill

THE DUTY OF WORDS TO MUSIC: *RIDERS TO THE SEA*

by Cairean Shannon

Riders to the Sea has been hailed by many Vaughan Williams scholars as one of his greatest successes. Acclaimed by critics, yet neglected by opera companies, there can be little doubt that it is the composer's most significant work in this genre. Michael Kennedy has remarked:

This is Vaughan Williams's most successful opera, perhaps because the subject – man against nature – was one which always drew strong and characteristic music from him, as in A Pastoral Symphony *and* Sinfonia Antartica.

It has been similarly described as his 'operatic masterpiece', his 'most perfectly realized theatrical work', and 'among the half-dozen finest achievements of its composer'. Not only has the opera been commended within the corpus of his own compositions, but it is also regarded by some as occupying an important place in the wider genre of twentieth-century opera. James Day describes it as 'one of the most effective and moving operas ever written', while Kennedy asserts: 'This extraordinary work has been consistently under-rated while other works of a similar kind not by Englishmen have been over-praised.' Vaughan Williams turned to opera six times during his lengthy career, yet he seems to have suffered from an element of self-doubt when it came to this genre, and in fact only labels one of his operas, *Sir John in Love*, with the term. The other five possess vague titles: *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* is a "pastoral episode", *The Poisoned Kiss* a "romantic extravaganza", *The Pilgrim's Progress* a "morality", *Hugh the Drover* is designated a "ballad opera", while *Riders to the Sea* is not labelled at all, and is simply declared to be "by J. M Synge, set to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams".

Many scholars suggest that the success of this opera can be attributed largely to the choice of libretto; the almost completely unaltered text of Synge's play. There is little information in the literature as to where and when the composer happened upon *Riders to the Sea*, and whether he read it, saw it performed, or was simply referred to it as a possible libretto by some third party. In this essay I propose to tender some explanations as to what may have drawn Vaughan Williams to use Synge's play as a libretto, to explore the already inherent musicality of the play and how this may have affected the composer's setting, and finally to place the opera in the wider context of European opera in the early twentieth century.

Ralph Vaughan Williams does not appear to have had any remarkable connection with Ireland, the Irish, or indeed with Irish literature. One of his earliest tutors was an Irishman, a violin teacher from Tipperary by the name of Quirke, whom he described as "a fine player and a good teacher, but not a very cultivated musician." It is well known that while a student at the Royal College of Music in London, both Parry and Stanford instructed him in composition. Although he believed that Stanford never showed any great enthusiasm for his work, Vaughan Williams remembers his time under the direction of the Irishman with some fondness: "With Stanford I always felt I was in the presence of a lovable, powerful and enthralling mind. This helped me more than any amount of technical instruction." It seems, however, that Parry may have been somewhat more influential in Vaughan Williams's compositional development than was Stanford, and thus although some aspects of his style may be attributed to Stanford, he does not appear to have inherited any notable inclination towards Irish literature or Irish culture from him.

Vaughan Williams' song settings reflect his love of poetry and literature. Among his favourites were Housman, Whitman, Blake and Bunyan. In an article on Vaughan Williams' choice of words for music, William Kimmel maintains that 'With a few exceptions all the poems selected were written by Englishmen', and goes on to mention some of these notable exceptions:

> *The most important exception is that of Walt Whitman, who is one of the composer's primary sources for texts. Seamus O' Sullivan, two of whose poems were set to music, is Irish, as was also Synge, whose 'Riders to the Sea' is the basis of an opera of the same name. Verlaine, whose 'le Ciel est par-dessus le toit' was set as a song, was French.*

In this essay, Kimmel explores the choice of *Riders to the Sea* in some detail, making some suggestions as to why the play may have appealed to Vaughan Williams:

> *The opera, 'Riders to the Sea', is related to that body of literature stimulated by a love of common people and simple life. Synge had temperamental qualities in common with both Whitman and Stevenson.*
>
> *The plays [Synge's] are permeated with a "typical Syngesque combination of realism and symbolism." There is the same subtle, elusive quality animating his works that was noted in the poetry of Seamus O' Sullivan and Housman and Whitman, and which is felt in much of Vaughan Williams's later music.*

A similar article by the composer's second wife, Ursula Vaughan Williams, explores in some detail his choice of a wide range of English literary figures as the basis for his works, and lists them as follows:

> *I think I have said enough to show how widely Ralph ranged through English literature – from Skelton and Chaucer, Sidney, Spenser, the authorised Version of the Bible, the madrigal poets, the anonymous poets, to Shakespeare and – inevitably and devotedly – on to Herbert and his contemporaries: Milton, Bunyan, and Shelley, Tennyson, Swinborn, both Rossettis, Whitman, Barnes, Hardy and Housman.*

It is obvious that Vaughan Williams was a well-read individual, and although there is no evidence to enlighten us as to when and how he came across the works of J. M. Synge, it is not such a

surprise that he should have done so when his voracious appetite for literature is taken into consideration. I refer to "works" above, and not merely "work", as it is evident that Vaughan Williams happened across at least one other play of Synge's, namely *The Tinkers Wedding*. While discussing the neglect of *Riders to the Sea* by opera companies, one author makes the following comment:

> *Its relative neglect by opera companies is due to the difficulty of finding a suitable companion piece, which only makes it the more regrettable that the composer abandoned his original idea of setting Synge's the Tinker's Wedding which would have made the appropriate comic contrast.*

In likening Synge's style to O'Sullivan, Housman and Whitman, Kimmel has already offered one reason as to why the play might have appealed to Vaughan Williams. The success of the setting, and therefore the appropriateness of the composer's choice of libretto, must surely be attributed to more than a mere similarity of style with other literary figures that he found appealing. Indeed, many Vaughan Williams scholars have praised the choice of libretto and commented on why exactly the combination of Synge and Vaughan Williams works so successfully. Day makes the following observation:

> *Synge was an appropriate choice in more ways than one; like Vaughan Williams, he collected folk poetry, only his medium was words rather than music, and he collected colourful expressions, not songs. Many of these expressions he included, by his own admission, in the texts of his plays.*

Mellers makes a similar point, and also likens Synge's style to Whitman and Biblical English:

> *Synge, an Irish poet and dramatist with a fin de siecle background, lived for the early years of this century among fishermen on the remote Aran Islands, shared their archaic life as fully as a sophisticated modern man could hope to, and wrote in the poetic rhythms and imagery of the language they spoke – which had affinities with both biblical English and Whitman's free verse.*

This ties in well with Day's image of the two sharing common ground as collectors of folksong and folk-speech, and one cannot help but liken Synge's absorption of Gaelic life on the Aran Islands to the many accounts of Vaughan Williams' jaunts around the English countryside in search of folksongs.

This aspect of common interest between the two leads to another point, Vaughan Williams' interest in Gaelic speech rhythms. An interesting account of a summer holiday he shared with friends is given by Ursula Vaughan Williams:

> *One summer, he, Ralph Wedgwood, George Moore, and George Trevelyan were in Skye and it was there he heard a Gaelic preacher at an open-air service. Not understanding the language, he listened to his voice and noted how emotional excitement, and having to speak so that the words would carry, changed speech rhythm into song. He remembered the melodic formula into which the sermon grew and recognised it when he started work on folk song, and found it common to the opening of many English and Scottish songs.*

With this in mind it is not surprising that Synge's style of writing in natural Gaelic speech rhythm should appeal to him. Kennedy links the above incident directly to *Riders to the Sea*, claiming: "The Synge setting is, in fact, the ultimate expression of Vaughan Williams' fascination by the Skye preacher whose excited words broke spontaneously into musical rhythms."

It was not merely the Gaelic speech aspect of Synge's writing that must have appealed to Vaughan Williams, but also the innate musicality of Synge's style. To explore this aspect of Synge in any detail is beyond the scope of this essay, but his background as a musician sheds some interesting light on the subject. In an article entitled "Synge's Soundscape", Ann Saddlemyer explores the musical aspect of Synge's plays, and discusses his musical background:

> *Synge (like James Joyce) was an accomplished musician; had, in fact, contemplated a career as a performer and composer. And so he brought to his experiments with prosody a technical awareness evident not only in his theorising, but in his plays.*

It is apparent from his biographers and critics that Synge was highly musical. He was taught to play the concertina and the violin, in addition to attending classes in theory and composition at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He himself composed a number of works, including a scherzo for string quartet, sonata movements for violin and piano, and a theme and variations for violin and piano. When his gift became apparent and suggested a possible future career, his mother expressed her concerns to his older brother, in a rather amusing fashion:

> *Johnnie is so bewitched by music that I fear he will not give it up. I never knew till lately that he was thinking of making his living by it seriously; he spares no pains or trouble and practises from morning till night, if he can. Harry had a talk with him the other day, advising him very strongly not to think of making it a profession. Harry told him that all men who do take to drink. And they are not a nice set of men either, but I don't think his advice has had the least effect… the sound of the fiddle makes me quite sad now. I used to think it was only a harmless amusement and it kept him out of mischief, but it seems now likely to lead to mischief.*

Despite an obvious lack of enthusiasm from his family, Synge left Ireland to study violin and piano in Germany, but within a year of arriving there he abandoned plans to make music his career. It is not exactly clear why he did so, but in correspondence he hints at one of the reasons why: "I saw that the Germans were so much more innately gifted with the musical faculties than I was that I decided to give up music and take to literature instead." Although he abandoned music as a profession, he brought his knowledge and understanding of music and musical form to his literature. As Ann Saddlemyer tells us, he was particularly concerned with form:

Concern with form was a constant. So too was concern with harmony and rhythm. He found all three in nature: "Every life is a symphony, and the translation of this life into music, and from music back to literature or sculpture or painting is the real effort of the artist," he wrote in his autobiography.

Saddlemyer specifically discusses the musicality of *Riders to the Sea* in some detail in her article, maintaining that he "drew upon his knowledge of music as one of the arts of Time", and in particular suggests that his rhythm represents the rhythm of the sea: "the rhythm takes on the relentless beating of waves – it provides signature and leitmotif for the entire work, while the

insistent voice and presence of Maurya offer the only counterpoint." She even likens the play to a symphonic poem:

> *This prevailing mood and atmosphere produce the quality of the symphonic or tone poem, one unbroken great movement rising to the caoine (Keening) of the chorus of women and Maurya's paean of grief and resignation. Yet within that overarching movement we can observe the carefully worked smaller phrases of action, punctuated by silences as deliberately counted as bars of music. For Synge wrote and re-wrote each passage of his plays until they were so seamless not a word or gesture can be displaced without wrenching the whole.*

Although Saddlemyer here suggests that to remove anything from the play would surely destroy it, she mentions the Vaughan Williams setting without appearing to criticise it for doing so. She comments:

> *His [Synge's] first completed play, Riders to the Sea, so nearly approaches operatic form that when Ralph Vaughan Williams chose it for libretto, he was able to take over the text completely, barely adding one line; kept instrumentation to the barest essentials; employed folk songs for colour and immediacy; made effective use of the chorus of keening women; and made the sound of wind its only conclusion.*

Here we find, in an otherwise richly informative article, two unfortunate inaccuracies. Saddlemyer claims that Vaughan Williams set the libretto "barely adding one line", when, in fact, he removed a small amount. Secondly she asserts that he "employed folk songs", which is quite false. What is invaluable in this article, however, is that Saddlemyer gives another reason why Vaughan Williams may have been drawn to this play: the undeniable attractiveness of its innate musicality.

It is widely known that Ralph Vaughan Williams had something of a fascination with the sea, and relatively early on in his career, having read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, he decided that he would write a large work about the sea:

> *It [Leaves of Grass] was full of fresh thoughts, and the idea of a big choral work about the sea – the sea itself and the sea of time, infinity, and mankind, was beginning to take shape in many small notebooks. It was an ambitious and terrifying project, for the scope was to be unlike that of any choral work he had yet attempted.*

The result was, of course, the *Sea Symphony* of 1909, and the sea was a topic revisited many times throughout his career, most notably in the *Sea Songs* of 1923, the film music written for *Coastal Command* in 1942 and *Scott of the Antarctic* in 1949, and the resulting *Sinfonia Antartica* of 1952. The theme of man versus nature, and in particular man versus the sea is something that always produced a powerful response in Vaughan Williams's music. Kennedy notes: "[*Riders to the Sea*'s] theme of man's fortitude in the face of implacable nature is the same as later evoked powerful music from him to illustrate Scott's journey to the Pole."

That the composer felt drawn to the musical evocation of the sea is obvious; but the reason for this is less so. There is, however, a clue to be found in an incident described by Ursula Vaughan Williams. The event took place while Ralph was alone on something of a retreat in Yorkshire, working on the *Sea Symphony* in 1904:

> *He was nearly drowned one afternoon bathing on a deserted and rocky beach: the sea was rougher than he thought and, after swimming, he found he could not scramble back on to the rocks. He had almost decided to give up and let himself drown, when a wave washed him on to the shore – he crawled out of reach of the sea and lay exhausted until he felt able to climb to the place where he had left his clothes.*

It is quite possible that this brush with death profoundly affected Vaughan Williams, and undoubtedly gave him a healthy respect for the power of the sea. The tragedy of Maurya having lost six sons and a husband to the sea is, perhaps, something that struck a chord within the composer.

There are many credible suggestions as to why Vaughan Williams might have chosen Synge's play as his libretto, and many of these also explain why the setting is such an effective one. If one has never heard the opera before, one may anticipate that Vaughan Williams has coloured it with touches of Irish folk music, as Saddlemyer mistakenly suggests he has done. It would have been a simple task for the folk song collector, as on his travels around Britain he collected many Irish folk songs and regional variations on Irish folksongs, including *Star of the County Down*, *The Pride of Kildare* and *The Lads of Kilkenny*. In many of his works he did not quote folksongs directly, but added touches of folksong modality for colour. It would have been all too easy to do the same for Synge's play, but nothing could be further from the final result, and this is another reason for the success of the setting. He had used English folk songs in his earlier operas *Hugh the Drover* and *Sir John in Love,* but it is something of a relief to discover that Vaughan Williams did not follow in the footsteps of one of his mentors, Charles Villiers Stanford, in producing a somewhat darker *Seamus O'Brien.* John Warrack too has expressed relief that Vaughan Williams did not introduce an apparent "Celtic note" to the work: "Imagine Bax or Bantock setting it: we should have another piece of 'Oirish whimsy' a long way after Yeats. Vaughan Williams's score takes comparatively little note of the Celtic twilight."

Riders to the Sea was a work in progress for some seven years, having been begun in 1925 and not completed until 1932. It was not premiered until even later, in December 1937. The result of seven years of work and revision is something very different from his earlier operas; according to Hugh Ottaway it is a work that "strikes to the deepest level of human experience, working a vein very different from the benign good humour of *Sir John in Love* or *Hugh the Drover*". Thankfully, another "piece of Oirish whimsy" was avoided, and the result is thirty minutes of delicate orchestration and recitative, with the vocal lines restricted to chant-like plainsong, staying faithful to the already musical Celtic speech-rhythms so wonderfully reproduced by Synge.

One of the things that makes the setting so powerful is the very fact that it is so restrained and subdued, paying little heed to operatic convention. The instrumental scoring is very light indeed, with only two flutes, one oboe, one cor anglais, one bass clarinet and one bassoon required in the woodwind. The brass section only calls for two horns and a trumpet, and the strings are also kept to a minimum with not more than 6, 6, 4, 4, 2 to be used. As regards percussion, only timpani and a bass drum are required, with the interesting addition of a sea machine. There are only four named characters in the play, and these are scored for two sopranos, a contralto and baritone. Further requirements are a mezzo-soprano and two female choruses, one off-stage. Each chorus contains parts for solo voices, and there are also non-singing men and woman required.

The Vaughan Williams setting of *Riders to the Sea* succeeds because it does not try to outdo what Synge has already done, it is a profound story, but one about simple people told in simple language. In the case of Synge, it is told through English but in the native Celtic speech-rhythms of its principal characters. In the case of Vaughan Williams, the musical setting is faithful to those speech rhythms, telling the story through recitative with only light orchestral colouring, and little dramatic embellishment. James Day comments that the opera "succeeds in being dramatic, colourful and deeply moving simply by relying almost entirely on reticence and understatement." Day explores the effectiveness of this almost minimalist opera in some detail, and makes some important points:

> *The astonishingly effective vocal line, conveying both the atmosphere of plainsong and of Celtic speech at the same time, is backed by uncannily telling orchestration. There are no sensational effects, yet the way in which two or three solo instruments embellish the voice parts, such details are etched with a master hand. This is not local colour, painted in to decorate an otherwise unimpressive canvas; there is not a superfluous note in the score nor a superfluous strand of colour in the scoring.*

Day also explains how Vaughan Williams manages to avoid the usual operatic conventions used to indicate action and drama, such as sudden modulations, strange harmonies, agitated rhythms and striking orchestration. He manages this by "keeping his vocal line within so restricted a pitch that the moments of urgency and tension can be simply indicated by rising from the usual chant." Day's appraisal of the sheer understatement of this opera is very much in line with the thoughts of other, previously cited, musicologists on the subject. Frank Howes claims: "It is an opera in recitative, and the voice part never takes wing in song save perhaps at the consummation of the tragedy, where Maurya's words rise on a curve of melody *largamente* over diatonic chords. Elsewhere the musician makes himself the servant and follower of the poet rather than the leader and master."

Despite the immediately obvious vocal and instrumental simplicity of *Riders to the Sea,* the almost seamless recitative masks a wonderful and highly organised web of motivic complexity. Many Vaughan Williams scholars have pointed out some of the more obvious *leitmotifs* associated with Maurya, the other main characters, and the sea. But it is only in a highly informative and detailed article entitled "Motivic Unity in Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Riders to the Sea*" by Anne-Marie H. Forbes, that the true underlying web of interrelated motifs is revealed. Scholars such as A. E. F. Dickinson had previously claimed that there were only six or seven motifs in the opera, but Forbes provides clear evidence for the existence of some twenty-three interrelated motifs. Furthermore, Forbes illustrates how these motifs may be grouped into four "families" of motifs, one group relating to the character of Maurya, another to the character of Bartley, one to the concept of death and the last to the unseen protagonist of the play, the sea. As Maurya, Bartley, death and the sea are all vitally important characters and themes within the play, the evidence for these webs or families of motifs is indeed compelling, and reveals rich and hidden complexities within the understated recitative on which the opera is built.

It is evident that Vaughan Williams felt that the already inherent musicality of the writing in Synge's play required minimal embellishment vocally, and only light orchestral colour. Thus in committing only to recitative and chant-like plainsong he successfully and faithfully translated the Celtic speech-rhythms of Synge's islanders into music. His motivic development of the main characters and concerns of the play also reveals his understanding of and affinity with the drama, and it is this sensitive treatment of subject matter that may account for the success of the setting.

Finally, it is important to consider *Riders to the Sea* in the wider context of twentieth-century opera in Europe. As has been mentioned before, the opera has been greatly neglected by opera companies, due unfortunately to its brevity. Running to only some thirty minutes, *Riders to the Sea* presents opera companies with the difficult task of having to find a companion piece. What, then, is the place of this short work in the genre of twentieth-century opera? A comparison, which is found again and again in the literature, is with Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande.* While Dickinson points out stylistic similarities between the two, he also comments that differences between the two make close comparison difficult:

> *In keeping close to the spoken drama, while allowing the orchestra some rein, Vaughan Williams had various precedents. Debussy's spacious and exquisite setting of Maeterlinck's* Pelléas et Mélisande *is often mentioned for comparison, as a thorough-going translation of an independent piece of spoken drama. But the differences of level are vital. The struggle of the Galway family for bare existence has no living contact with the mannered, and partly symbolist world in which Mélisande, her husband and her lover become so irresistibly involved together. The cultivated simplicity of Maeterlinck's dialogue is an entirely different medium from the poetic naturalism that Synge learnt to make his own. The music is correspondingly diverse and differently aimed.*

Dickinson maintains that although there are certainly surface similarities between the two such as "the exaltation of the free rhythm and pungent brevity of the spoken word", there are also vital differences. Kennedy is of a similar view: "It has been called 'the English *Pelléas*', with some justification (if rather superficially) because, though on a much smaller scale, it is based on the same principle of subordination of the music to the inflections and rhythms of the characters' speech."

Frank Howes goes a step further and likens the opera not only to *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but also to Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov:*

> *In* Pelléas et Mélisande *the characters are shadowy almost to the point of unreality. In* Boris Godunov *they are real and solid. In* Riders to the Sea *they are real but oppressed and overwhelmed. The motives of the composer in each case are therefore alike in that they all three wish to reflect in music the natural intonations of speech but different in so far as the emotions to be conveyed are different. Mussorgsky aims at realistic portraiture, Debussy at the creation of people in a world of shadows. Vaughan Williams aims at a true presentation of real people (like Mussorgsky) and (like Debussy) at the creation of an enveloping atmosphere of half-tones.*

Kennedy and Mellers have also noted the influences of both Debussy and Mussorgsky, whilst a third comparison, with Holst's *Savitri,* is also to be found. Holst, who was a close friend of Vaughan Williams, completed *Savitri* some time earlier in 1908. Dickinson is particularly emphatic in pointing to similarities

between the two, such as the importance of death, and the similarity between Maurya and Savitri being women confronting death. *Savitri* is an opera set to Holst's own text, and is perhaps one reason why Vaughan Williams found himself so drawn to Synge's play. But it is really only in the similarities inherent in the libretti that the two are alike, as their musical styles are quite different.

The crucial point here is that *Riders to the Sea* has much in common, both thematically and stylistically, with other operas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from France, Russia and Britain. Unfortunately and undeservedly, it has failed to gain the recognition and attention that both *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Boris Godunov* have enjoyed.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly touch on the composer's own views on the duty of words to music:

> *The duty of words is to say just as much as the music has left unsaid and no more…the relative importance of words and music will vary exactly as the dramatic situation approximates to feeling or mere explanation. At one end of the scale are those passages where the words are a bare statement of fact; in which case the singer's utterances will be a near approach to speaking, and the orchestra will be almost silent. At the other end are those passages where the music rises to a height of lyrical intensity and the words merely supplement the music by giving utterance to the human voice.*

Although Vaughan Williams was here discussing opera in general and not his own works in the genre, he might well have been summing up the rule that seems to govern *Riders to the Sea*. At one end of the scale, as he describes it, is the almost endless recitative, song-speech of the opera, and at the other, the only occasion where this speech evolves into song, the moment of Maurya's triumph over the sea, when after uttering "there isn't anything more the sea can do to me", she is transformed by the realisation that she is finally free of fear and dread.

Perhaps this is the ultimate reason for the success of *Riders to the Sea*; Vaughan Williams adheres rigidly to his own belief in exactly what opera should be, and what it should seek to do. The unusual and unexpected fusion of Vaughan Williams and Synge, a patriotic Englishman and a patriotic Irishman, thus produces a highly effective and successful opera.

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CATHOLIC BELIEF AND CRIES OF PAGAN DESPERATION: OVERCOMING FROZEN TIME IN RIDERS TO THE SEA

by Gregory Martin

Somewhere along the line Celticism became so popular that it necessitated the mandatory academic backlash. Reaction surpassed the modesty of "let's clarify a few things" and went right for the kill, even calling into question the Celt's very existence (Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?*). More recently, researchers like Bryan Sykes have used genetic samplings from across the British Isles to conclude "the genetic structure of the Isles is stubbornly Celtic, if by that we mean descent from people who were here before the Romans and who spoke a Celtic language."[i] But eighty years ago, before science intervened on its behalf, Celticism wasn't so much in danger of being argued into oblivion on the one hand and being absorbed by New Age fanatics on the other. The Celtic Twilight was in *its* twilight, maybe, but there were still some rays weathering through the clouds, and Vaughan Williams was certainly not untouched by their glow. When he came to set John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, W.B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, Æ (George Russell), and even Lady Gregory were all still alive and active, and though he was never engrossed in the misty imaginings like his compatriot Bax, his experiences in the Great War would hardly have left him untouched by a drama which laments "in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old."

But beyond any biographical resonances he might have found in Synge's play, Vaughan Williams' setting focuses on its sense of paralysis, of fossilized time. There is an inherent tension between old and new that, for the majority of the opera, doesn't seem able to resolve. This is most visible in the inability of the younger generation to live long enough to inherit its mantle (see Maurya's quote at the end of the previous paragraph); in the impending sense of a violent shift in social structure; and in religious expression, the peculiar blend of paganism and Christianity that was of such note to Synge and is such an overwhelming aspect of his drama. This essay concerns itself most directly with the last of these, and Vaughan Williams's articulation of it. I am, thus, drawn to a portion of Walter Aaron Clark's essay "Vaughan Williams and the 'night side of nature': Octatonicism in *Riders to the Sea*":

Another aspect of the drama that undoubtedly resonated with Vaughan Williams's personal philosophy is the fact that the characters in the story find no consolation in religion. In the struggle between relentless nature and stoic human resolve, the deity appears to occupy a marginal position in the drama. Vaughan Williams's skepticism and outright agnosticism are often remarked upon, so speculation that this aspect of the play reflected his ambivalence towards organized religion is on firm ground.[ii]

Unfortunately, Clark's statement shows not only a lack of understanding for Synge's working context, but also – as so many discussions of Vaughan Williams and religion often do – relies too much on the oft-cited remembrances of Bertrand Russell and others. There is, in fact, other source-material than this, including a *much* more revealing letter which he wrote to Herbert Howells upon the death of his son Michael (more revealing especially in that it is in the composer's own hand, rather than a second-hand retelling). This letter has been sorely overlooked in Vaughan Williams scholarship, but is essential to understanding not only his approach to Synge's work, but to the whole religion debate:

> *I cannot help believing that a life once begun can never really stop – though it has stopped for us – and that there may, after all, be a real joining-up someday.*[iii]

Not only does this stand in stark opposition to "skepticism and outright agnosticism", it more than suggests that Vaughan Williams harbored belief in something more akin to the Judeo-Christian concept of Heaven than is often allowed in discussion of his religious views.

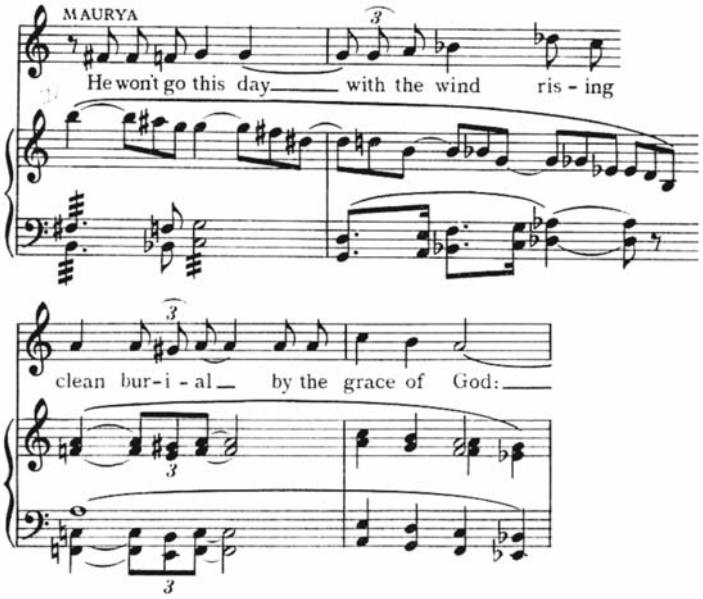
Furthermore, Clark's assessment that "the characters in the story find no consolation in religion" and that "the deity appears to occupy a marginal position" betrays a less than thorough engagement with Synge's work. To presume that religion was not central in the lives of the rural people of western Ireland c.1900 is absurd; Synge unquestionably took that as being understood. What he most certainly *did* contend, however, was that a very strong undercurrent of the ancient pagan customs and beliefs were still present, mixed with more doctrinal aspects of Roman Catholicism. This is something taken almost for granted in *Riders to the Sea*, but articulated baldly in his prose volume *The Aran Islands*. We find here a recounting of "the Catholic theory of the fairies"[iv] – by its very nomenclature emblematic of this duality – and elsewhere Synge asks a local "if he ever heard the fairy music on the island." He receives the following answer:

> *I heard some of the boys talking in the school a while ago…and they were saying that their brothers and another man went out fishing a morning, two weeks ago, before the cock crew. When they were down near the Sandy Head they heard music near them, and it was the fairies were in it. I've heard of other things too. One time three men were out at night in a curagh, and they saw a big ship coming down on them. They were frightened at it, and they tried to get away, but it came on nearer them, till one of the men turned round and made the sign of the cross, and then they didn't see it any more.*[v]

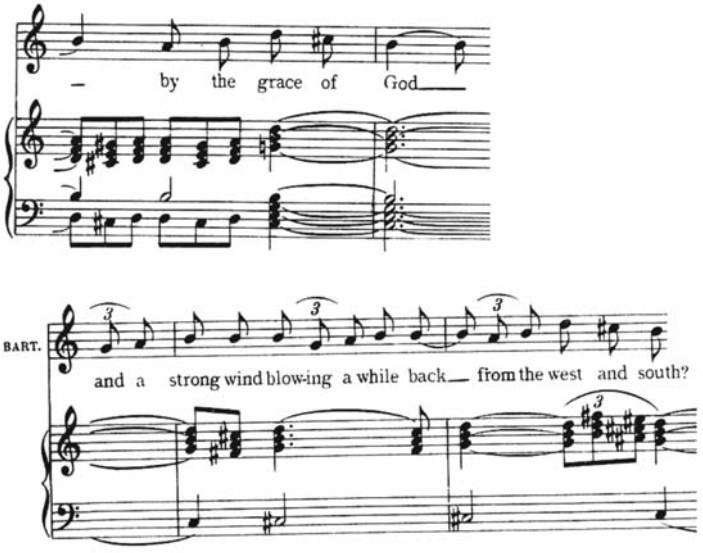
More immediately, he states regarding his attendance at a funeral: "There was an irony in these words of atonement and Catholic belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation."[vi] Regardless of how one chooses to interpret Synge's work, what is certainly present is a highly superstitious people that turn time and again to a power above them, a divine construct of pagan and Christian elements, for protection from the sinister (and supernatural) goings-on in nature. And aspects of both paganism and Catholicism are met with abundance in the play: ghost-riders and Holy Water, man, sea, and signs-of-the-cross.

Vaughan Williams' sensitivity to this dichotomy is underscored by

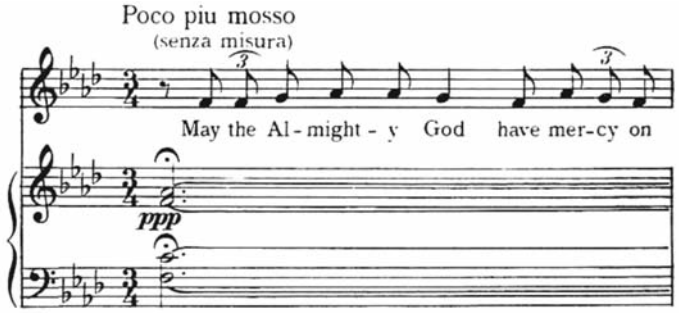
the dual-manner in which he uses his musical material. The opera is unified by a series of motives which are by design able to pivot between the more naturalistic and mystical language of *Flos campi* when nature is evoked (the sounds of the sea and wind are heard throughout; Vaughan Williams was just completing *Flos campi* when he began *Riders to the Sea*) and a more orthodox "religious" texture when the Christian God is invoked. In short, the music is flexible enough to represent the duality of the characters. The greatest mitigator in this process is the open 5th. Witness its text-painting function at Rehearsal 10, rushing upwards in parallel to Maurya's "He won't go this day with the wind rising from the south and west," and again at Rehearsal 43 ("I'll have no call now to be crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south"), versus a more religious appropriation (with a 3rd above it) at Rehearsal 5: "he's got a clean burial by the grace of God" and Rehearsal 48: "may the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn."



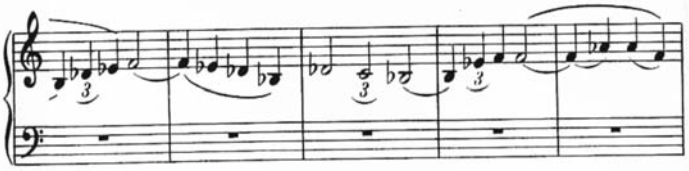
As can be seen above, the fifth is employed as an archaism indicative of both the primitive and something closer to organum. Likewise, parallel triads are used reverentially when Maurya sings of the deep grave they'll dig Michael "by the grace of God," and more brazenly when Bartley references the "strong wind blowing a while back from the west and south."



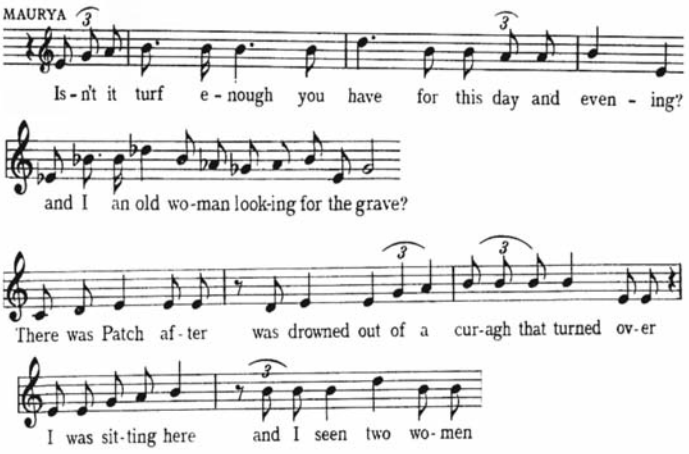
This goes hand in hand with the double nature of the vocal lines, which are representative not only of prosody or the vernacular, but, as has been noted elsewhere, of plain-song as well (Scott Goddard, "The Operas of Vaughan Williams," *The Listener* 20, no. 511 (27 October 1938), 917; James Day, *Vaughan Williams* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1961, 121-2)) – especially at moments like the following, with its brilliant organ-esque accompaniment:



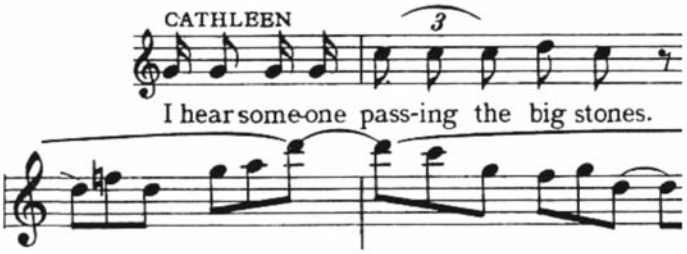
As with the vocal lines, the musical structure itself takes on two roles: one a relative of folk-song and the other of a more hymnic quality. Clark charges: "That this [the opera] is not, ultimately, a product of Celticism is also borne out by the absence of any use of folk music to mark the score as 'Irish' (69, FN 3)." That there are no obvious quotations of Irish song here as there are of English song in works like the *Norfolk Rhapsodies* or *Sir John in Love* may be true, but a quotation set in relief is by no means the only way to evoke the folk idiom, or Celticism in general. Would anyone argue Bax's *Tintagel* or *What the Minstrel Told Us* are devoid of Celticism because no folk music is used? Surely not, and the same is true of *Riders to the Sea*. Celticism isn't *Danny Boy* or *My Wild Irish Rose*; this opera most certainly *is* Celtic, regardless of the techniques used to achieve it, and the *vox hiberionacum* is absolutely present. And though no authentic folk music is incorporated, the melodic structure of much of the opera is one device of which Vaughan Williams makes effective use in articulating the folk, particularly through pentatonic writing. *Riders to the Sea* contains more pentatonicism than might at first be obvious, as it is often elided with other melodic constructions or harmonized in a manner that disguises it. Examples are found in the opening tableau,



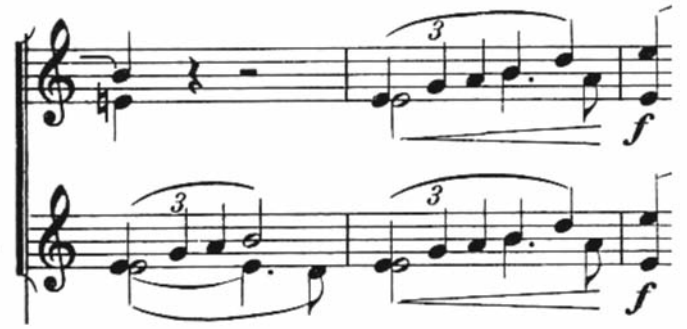
in the vocal parts,



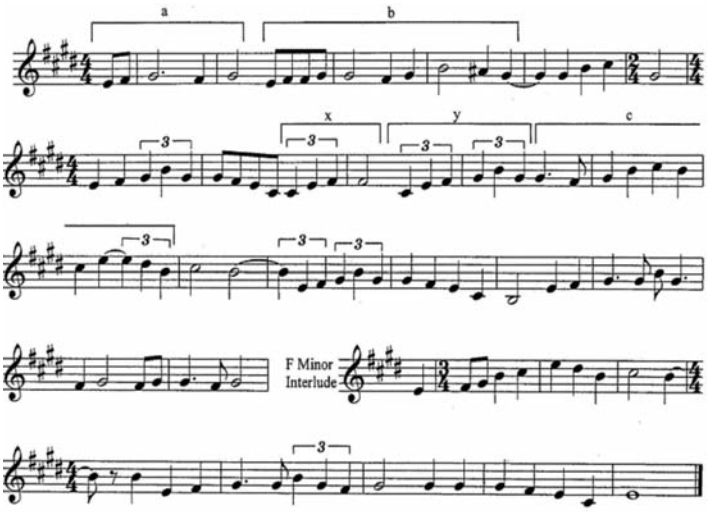
in collusion between melody and accompaniment,



and in the keening.

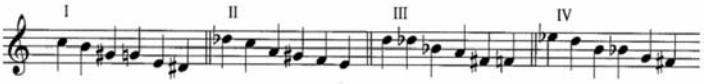


Furthermore, there are moments in the opera that are as idiomatically 'folk' as anything else in the composer's output: if the Adagio passage at "They are all gone now" is perhaps a more recitativo example, the music "But it's a great rest I'll have now" is without doubt representative of folksong, especially when heard in conjunction with the solo violin line:



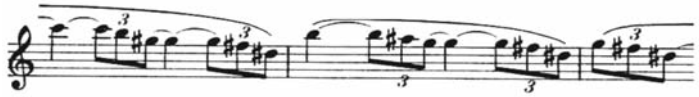
Note the way the melody flowers forth in an unfolding much like so many of the folksongs VW collected, naturally and organically (a:b:c; x:y).

Finally, we should not forget that melodic *shape* can be just as representative of a style without being a literal reproduction. Throughout the opera, Vaughan Williams employs not only octatonic collections (which Clark points out), but also the following four hexatonic sets:

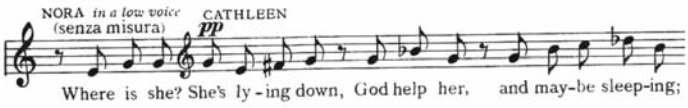


When strung together in small repeated cells, often in triplets, the contour and flow – though certainly "expressionistic" – is without doubt redolent of the shape of folksong; for example,

or

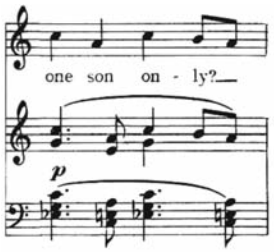


Not coincidentally, this use of 'modes of limited transposition' in his melodic design facilitates some of his favorite harmonic patterns. For example, the first entrances of Nora and Cathleen at Rehearsal 4:

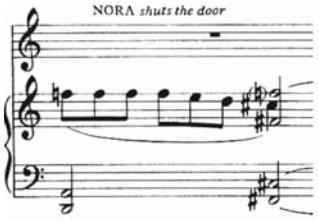


E minor *G minor* *B-flat minor*

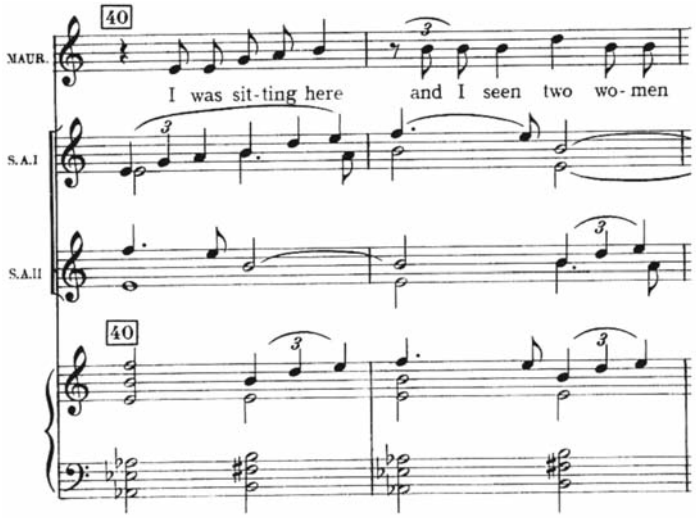
While utilizing an octatonic collection, this melody is built around a series of chromatic-mediant modulations, one of Vaughan Williams' favorite progressions; in this case, the chords Em-Gm-Bbm. Such third-related progressions are replete in this score (as in most of his scores), though not always the product of octatonic or hexatonic functions, such as at



or



or



[B=C-flat]

Yet, all this seems miles away when the music adopts a hymnic character commensurate to Maurya's eventual acceptance of her fate; instead of bitterness, she offers a resigned prayer: "may he have mercy on my soul and on the soul of everyone left living in the world."

The keening that closes the opera is allocated the middle point between the expressionistic/folk manner and the more topical sacred music. The word 'keening' comes from the Irish *caoineadh*, and a hundred years ago, when Synge attended the

funerals he describes in *The Aran Islands*, this public expression of grief was still common not only in Ireland, but in places as diverse as Greece, Corsica, and Finland.[vii] That Synge would have been especially sensitive to the musical component of keening is perhaps not surprising, given his musical training at both the Royal Irish Academy of Music and later in Germany. He writes:

While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstacy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs. All round the graveyard other wrinkled women…rocked themselves with the same rhythm, and intoned the inarticulate chant that is sustained by all as an accompaniment.[viii]

Angela Bourke offers an elaboration:

> *It is important to note that he describes only the accompaniment to the caoineadh, by women other than the chief keener, as inarticulate. 'Keening' has entered the English language from Irish, and usually suggests a sort of high-pitched moaning – a cry without words, even an animal sound – but the Irish caoineadh was anything but inarticulate. As well as stylized sobbing and wailing – the ochón or olagón of Synge's 'perpetually recurring chant of sobs' – it included a whole tradition of poetic utterance, such as we find in Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire and other texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is impossible to know now how much of this poetic tradition was still to be found in Aran at the turn of the century, but this was what Synge called 'the leading recitative.'*[ix]

This extraordinary manner of mourning is at least 1300 years old, and is cited in various medieval texts, including prayers to the Virgin Mary which promise to keen for Christ. For a man so interested in the authentic voice of the people, it seems unlikely that Vaughan Williams wouldn't have done at least some research on this practice during the opera's composition. His keeners are appropriately accompanimental – the untexted choir being another hint of the proximity of *Riders*' compositional genesis to *Flos Campi* – though here they collaborate not with a *caoineadh* but, necessarily, with the unfolding drama. The extraordinary denouement in Synge's play is that while the keeners should be accompanying "a profound ecstacy of grief, swaying to and fro" and a calling out to the dead "with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs," instead they accompany resignation and brutal acceptance. "She's quiet now and easy. But the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this to the Spring well." Cathleen knows Maurya is "old" and "broken," but no sooner does she utter these words than Maurya prays for mercy from Almighty God – an act of incredible strength in the face of her lot, an act wholly personal, and not one easily dismissed as habit (though some might think it so).

When the keeners are first heard from offstage at Rehearsal 38, they sing music from the opera's opening portrait of the restless and superhuman power of the sea, doubtless meant to create a parallel between their grief and nature's menacing potential. Vaughan Williams utilizes them as more or less another instrument – that is, while he marks them immediately as mourners, they also double as another orchestral color, flowing as something of an obliggato through Rehearsal 41, when the women enter the cottage. What he does with them next is a stroke of genius: he essentially reduces them to interludes (excepting only their first re-entrance, appropriately at "making a great stir with the two noises and they hitting one on the other"). This is partially to adjust for their relocation to the stage, to be sure, but such pragmatism becomes sheer beauty at Rehearsal 50, the conclusion of Maurya's prayer, by which point the keening is used to bridge each of Maurya's lines to the next. The structure of the music has in essence shifted to that of a chorale prelude. One need look no further than Vaughan Williams' *Hymn Tune Prelude on 'Song 13'* of Orlando Gibbons or his transcription of Bach's *Ach, bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ* to find other examples of this practice in his output or prove his familiarity with this practice. What he has effected here is a sublimation of the music of human pain into reverential expression. Then as the stage darkens, the sea is heard again; the characters and their drama slowly recede, but the keening music, now in a more placid state, is heard one last time from offstage, supported by a calmed and non-violent version of the opening music. The funereal grievers have become fused with nature, a part of the musical and spiritual texture. The soprano solo that closes the opera bears a striking resemblance with the finale of the *Pastoral* Symphony – in each, after death and devastation, a human voice remains, in song if not word.

As I have noted in a previous Journal entry, the relationship between the Celts and the land is greater than anything we find in classical antiquity, and this relationship is certainly in keeping with the whole school of English Musical Renaissance composers of which Vaughan Williams was a focal point. As Howells recalled, Gurney once said to him regarding the Malvern Hills, "unless that influences you for the whole of your life in tune-making, it is failing in one of its chief essentials." Howells added, "And of course outlines of hills, and things, are tremendously important especially if you are born in Gloucestershire, God bless it!", elsewhere noting that as the outline of Napoleon could be seen in the *Eroica* Symphony, "Vaughan Williams's tunes...will often give you a shape akin to such an outline as the Malvern Hills present when viewed from afar."[x] In this context it is, I think, worth proposing that the unique blend of Celtic naturalism and Christianity that found expression in the Celtic Church may have been of interest to Vaughan Williams not only vis-à-vis his work on *Riders* but as a more comfortable vehicle for his spirituality/beliefs which, whatever they were, certainly were not aligned with organized religion as he knew it. The Celtic Church was not a formal religious body, but rather a part of the Catholic Church, varying from region to region, and between 1870 and 1935 came a profusion of books and articles in England on the topic: Warren's *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*; Browne's *The Christian Church in these Islands before the Coming of Augustine*; Healy's *The Ancient Irish Church*; Kenney's *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland, I Ecclesiastical*; and Stokes and Lawlor's *Ireland and the Celtic Church*. There are dozens and dozens more. Whether Vaughan Williams read any such literature is impossible to say, but, given the academic nature of much of it (and indeed the connection between many such volumes and Cambridge), that he may have come across it while at university or while researching for *Riders to the Sea* seems to me not unlikely.

Regardless of any thoughts Vaughan Williams might have had on the subject, in Synge's play the relationship between the pagan and the Catholic is so unified, as it absolutely would have been in the unconsciousness of the people, that the Christian God and the

pagan gods seem themselves part of the same continuum. It is this relationship that is so often, I believe incorrectly, referred to as pantheism, though this in no way means it didn't find expression in nature. So rather than invoking pantheism for answers, I'd like to turn to J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." In this seminal work, Tolkien argues that in *Beowulf* we observe "not confusion, a half-hearted or muddled business, but a fusion that has occurred *at a given point* of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion."[xi]

He goes on to argue that in *Beowulf* we are privy to an imagination whose special beauty is its ability to look back on the still-palpable "heathen, noble, and hopeless" days, but to express them from a position now imbued with a specifically Christian hope. "We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit...and yet feeling this more *poetically* because he [the poet] was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair."[xii] The characters in Synge's drama are stuck in this moment, believing in the Christian God, but not always trusting in Him.

And so what does all this have to do with Vaughan Williams? Other than being perhaps a reflection of his own religious dialogue, it may be that he found in the ethos of Synge's play a moment like the Beowulf poet's, one poised in time. And if Synge's drama suggests the point where paganism touches Christianity, Vaughan Williams equips it with music reflective not only of the point where speech becomes song, but more poignantly where folksong becomes hymn. In 'Some Tentative Ideas on the Origins of Music' from *National Music*, he writes: "Song, then, I believe, is nothing less than speech charged with emotion," adding "I was once listening to an open air preacher. He started his sermon in a speaking voice, but as he grew more excited the sounds gradually became defined, first one definite note, then two, and finally a little group of five notes."[xiii] He relays this experience again in *The Making of Music*, now specifying that it was a sermon on the Isle of Skye and that the preacher was speaking Gaelic.[xiv]

It was obviously a powerful moment for him, and that this epiphany occurred while listening to speech that was both Gaelic and religious may be significant in his decision to capture the process in this particular work, for the vocal writing is certainly at the margin where speech becomes song. It is not until Maurya's acceptance that Vaughan Williams loosens his control, and speech is allowed to blossom into music – first somewhat timidly at "They are all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do for [sic] me," and finally obtaining full melody at "But it's a great rest I'll have now." Once her spiritual paralysis has ended, song can emerge.

And as the drama concerns itself with the dichotomous nature of the characters' religion, so does the score concern itself with the dichotomous nature of their music. Synge was struck by the pagan relics in the Catholicism of western Ireland, a transition from polytheism to monotheism that never completed the process, but rather remained in the constant state of becoming. Vaughan Williams similarly captures the transition of folksong into appropriation by religious music. And his articulation of this process of becoming is a profound text-painting of the spiritual status of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands. In "The Influence of Folk-song on the Music of the Church" from *National Music*, he writes:

> *Pagan ceremonies with their accompanying music would be going on at the very church door making the struggle for existence between the two visible and audible to all. Now, as we know, the churchmen found it impossible to oust the pagan ceremonies. But they did the next best thing; they adapted them to their own use...Surely it is impossible to believe that with these ceremonies some of the popular music connected with them did not creep in also.*
>
> *We have direct evidence of the effect of folk-song on the plainsong or music of the church in the history of French song.*[xv]

In *Riders to the Sea*, Vaughan Williams re-creates this process. He sings the music of the people, or rather has the people sing their own music (often suitably folk-like in contour, as has been noted), and then – after having established it as vernacular song – appropriates it for a more sacred use. For example, at rehearsal 5, when Cathleen and Nora are discussing whether the shirt and stocking found in Donegal are Michael's, a triplet figure using hexatonic set II (see above) is introduced in accompanimental counterpoint to the prosody; by rehearsal 52, it has been appropriated for the hymn-prelude music. Likewise, the orchestral music at rehearsal 41, when the keening women begin to enter the cottage, underlies the recitative of Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora; at rehearsal 47 it is paired with the more arioso music that comes out of Maurya's peaceful acceptance. And as Maurya's anxiety calms, so does this motive. That is, it acts as a musical corollary to her gradual repose, ultimately closing the work with the broadest rhythms of the entire opera:

These instances give local voice to a more far-reaching process: the distillation of the octatonic vocal melody at rehearsal 4 (the first line of text in the opera, initially centered on E), till it finally obtains the E major of the aria that precedes the hymn-prelude music, and which, indeed, closes the work.[xvi]

Riders to the Sea is a still-frame photograph of a process. Synge saw in the people of western Ireland not just the accidental residue of pagan elements in their Catholicism, but more dynamically a conversion that never completed itself, a transition from ancient polytheism to Christianity that got stuck. He captured a second in that process, and stretched it out to examine the drama within it. Vaughan Williams seized this as an opportunity to explore in still-time musical processes that he had observed – the transition from speech to song; the appropriation of vernacular tunes by the composers of sacred music – and utilized them to express the complex nature of spirituality, his own included. The sense of release finally obtained by the end of the work signals an end to the paralysis, for these characters at least.

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge noted that he was "surprised at the abundance and fluency of the foreign tongue [English]... a number of them [the locals] still used the Gaelic, though it seems to be falling out of use among the younger people of this village."[xvii] It seems particularly poignant that Vaughan Williams should latch onto speech-patterns more in this opera than in any of his other works. The word *Celtic* is, after all, a linguistic term, and as they watched silence slowly overcome the Irish tongue, both Synge and Vaughan Williams seem to have effectively frozen time to examine dialectic and speech rhythm and inflection, to study language in a way unique in each of their respective outputs, all-the-while trying to keep their wits about them in pursuit of "the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic."[xviii]

Notes

i Bryan Sykes, *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* (Norton, 2006)

ii Walter Aaron Clark, "Vaughan Williams and the 'night side of nature': Octatonicism in *Riders to the Sea*" in Byron Adams and Robin Wells, *Vaughan Williams Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 56.

iii Quoted in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells—A Celebration* (London: Thames Publishing, 1996), 94.

iv John Millington Synge, *The Aran Islands* in Alison Smith ed., *John Millington Synge: Collected Plays, Poems, and the Aran Islands* (London: Everyman, 1996), 56.

v Ibid., 165.

vi Ibid., 75.

vii Angela Bourke, "Keening as Theatre" in Nicholas Grene ed., *Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School, 1991-2000* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000), 68.

viii Synge, 74.

ix Bourke, 72.

x Quoted in Palmer, 335.

xi J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 20.

xii Ibid., 23.

xiii Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and other essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1996), 17.

xiv Ibid., 206.

xv Ibid., 75.

xvi The fact that the opera ends on an un-resolved second inversion triad merits brief discussion. The instability of the chord is mitigated by its extreme quiet (ppp, diminuendo to nothing), producing an effect of open-endedness; continuation is implied, but without struggle or restlessness. I would also contend that the series of six-four chords which closes the work are related to a modernized appropriation of the contenance angloise, a practice traceable in Vaughan Williams's music as early as the first decade of the twentieth-century and dominant in works like the Tallis Fantasy and the G minor Mass.

xvii Synge, *Complete Works* II ed. Robin Skelton (London: OUP, 1962-28), 50.

xviii J.R.R. Tolkien in Humphrey Carpenter ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 2000), 144.

SHORT NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Editing the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society Journal is a privilege and a pleasure, but the time required is not always easy to find in a busy life. This short list of simple guidelines should help.

1 All submissions, however presented, are welcome and receive equal attention, but email or disc is preferred. Hard copy, typed or handwritten, always requires some retyping which takes time and can lead to mistakes.

2 Please try to submit your piece as early as possible, especially if it is in hard copy sent by post.

3 Keep the layout simple. Leave a clear line between paragraphs, but let me decide what should be in smaller or larger type and so on. Important: please keep the margins constant throughout the piece.

4 Try to avoid footnotes. Supplementary information is better incorporated into the text. If you want to cite sources of information a list of sources at the end, along the lines of Cairean Shannon's article elsewhere in this issue, is better for the purposes of our Journal than a footnote after each quote.

5 If you are planning a big piece, please get in touch first to make sure I don't already have a similar piece lined up.

6 Finally, please note my new address and email details on the front page.

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

MASS in G MINOR and *SANCTA CIVITAS*

by James Day

James Day addresses AGM, October 2005

In a sense, the two works we are to look at together in this session complement one another. The Mass is a personal tribute to a friend and his choir. *Sancta Civitas*, one of Vaughan Williams' many works to a Biblical text, which he himself designated as an oratorio, was composed for what was at the time his own choir, the Bach Choir: it was, in fact, the first work that he had written with that particular choir in mind.

The friend is of course Gustav Holst, the choir his Whitsuntide Singers. Holst himself was delighted with the dedication and wrote to acknowledge it in fulsome terms in a letter which unfortunately bears no date other than simply "Friday". His daughter Imogen and Ursula Vaughan Williams date it as being written in 1922:

> *Dear R*
>
> *It arrived on Wednesday but I only got It yesterday and shall not be able to look at It properly until tomorrow morning.*
>
> *. . . How on earth Morleyites are ever going to learn the Mass I don't know. It is quite beyond us but still further beyond us is the idea that we are not going to do it. I've suggested that they buy copies now and then when we meet in September I'll sack anyone who does not know it by heart!*
>
> *I'm thinking that the best plan for next season will be to chuck J S B and at the first concert do a little Byrd and a little R V W - then at the summer concert do a little Byrd and a lot of R V W.*
>
> *We are all tremendously proud of the dedication.*
>
> *Yrs Ever G*

Now there are already some interesting small but possibly significant points to note about this. First of all, there is the dedication. Settings of the Mass are more often than not either published without a dedication or prefaced simply by the four letters A.M.D.G: *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – to the greater glory of God. The Mass in G minor is prefaced by the words: "for Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers". Checking the references to the Whitsuntide Singers uncovers some interesting facts about the Singers, their place in the musical scheme of things and possibly about the *raison d'être* of the Mass itself.

The dedication seems to imply, despite the fact that the Whitsun Festival at Thaxted, at which the Whitsuntide Singers played an indispensable role, was in abeyance at the time of its composition, that Vaughan Williams intended the Mass to be sung if not *at* Thaxted, then at any rate at Whitsun and by Holst's "Whitsuntide" choir. Without expatiating at length on one word it's worth considering for a moment the exact wording of this dedication. It's the word "for". The work is inscribed not "*to*" Holst and the choir, but "*for*" them. Moreover, it's not for the Morley College choir, as it might well have been, but the *Whitsuntide Singers* – the choir, composed largely but by no means exclusively, of Morleyites, that sang at the Whit Sunday services at Thaxted. At the time when Vaughan Williams composed the Mass, Holst had been Musical Director at Morley College in South London for more than a decade. "Morley College for Working Men and Women" was intended by its founder, the philanthropist Emma Cons, to help the poorer classes of the capital "by providing entertainment dissociated from the customary evil of alcohol." In 1907, Vaughan Williams himself had originally been approached to take over as Director of Music. The post would have suited him well and certainly conformed with his liberal outlook and socio-political attitude. He was too busy to do so and recommended that Holst be appointed. Holst's energy, imagination and enthusiasm soon built its music department up to a high standard.

Holst lived at Thaxted from 1917 to 1925. During this period, he was particularly active in two areas of practical music-making that are of relevance to Vaughan Williams' *Mass in G minor* and its dedication. Holst had quickly become a prominent figure in the musical life of the community there and his daughter Imogen wrote that he soon became friends with Conrad Noel, the incumbent of the local parish church.

Noel was a remarkable man. His successor and son-in-law, Father Jack Putterill, who was actually one of Holst's pupils at Morley, wrote thus of him:

> *Conrad Noel is famous as a pioneer of Christian Socialism and for his unique treatment of Thaxted Church and its Services…He was a disciple of Frederick Dennison Maurice the Christian socialist theologian and philosopher and was a member of Father Stewart Headlam's [Socialist Christian] Guild of St. Matthew… In his book on "Socialism and Church*

History", (1910) he traces the social message of Christianity all through the Bible and shows how essential this message is to the full understanding of the Church's teaching and the Sacraments.

Putterill also quotes direct from one of his father-in-law's sermons:

…the Kingdom of God… is the Commonwealth of God – of inspired men and women who have made the worship of God the warp and the love of man the woof of the fabric of their lives. The love of God and the love of neighbour run through the Commonwealth, inspiring its public worship, its arts and crafts, its commerce and politics and its pleasures; they are the inspiration of all its citizens in their private lives and in their public acts.

Thaxted was thus an important centre of Anglican worship with a high church vicar who held strong socialist beliefs and who felt that the love of God permeated all aspects of human life, including the arts. Holst may not have shared Noel's interpretation of Christianity, but his own views on the nature of society and the place of the arts in it were certainly quite similar to Noel's. Vaughan Williams himself wrote of him:

It was Holst's strong sense of human sympathy which brought him when a young man into contact with William Morris and the Kelmscott Club. The tawdriness of London, its unfriendliness, the sordidness both of its riches and poverty were overwhelming to an enthusiastic and sensitive youth; and to him the ideals of Morris, the insistence on beauty in every detail of human life and work, were a revelation. No wonder then that the poetic socialism of the Kelmscott Club became the natural medium of his aspirations…

Whitsun of course celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit that, according to Christian beliefs and practice, is an integral personality of the triune Godhead. The Spirit enables believers to live a true Christian life and under Noel's incumbency, Thaxted celebrated this Feast with colourful processions and ceremonial at the main eucharist of the day. The effect on Holst and the Whitsuntide singers involved in the Thaxted Festival, was clearly both uplifting and exciting. All the music performed, with Holst in charge, was integrated into the Whitsuntide liturgy and in 1916 included at least one Bach cantata and the Byrd *Mass for Three Voices* – presumably but not necessarily in the original Latin. "We kept it up at Thaxted about fourteen hours a day", Holst told a friend, "and I realise now why the bible insists on heaven being a place where people sing *and go on singing."* It seems likely then that Vaughan Williams conceived the Mass not merely as a tribute to and repertoire piece for the choir, but as a work to be used liturgically wherever possible and particularly at Thaxted when Holst's choir took part in the Whitsuntide celebrations. Vaughan Williams was also a keen advocate of works being sung in a language that the audience understood. Yet the Mass is composed to the Latin text. So he may also have had another choir besides the Whitsuntide Singers in mind when composing it, a choir that *would* require a Latin version if it was to be used liturgically. This was Sir Richard Terry's choir at Westminster Cathedral. Although the first public *performance* of the Mass, on 6 December 1922, took place neither at Westminster Cathedral nor at Thaxted, nor even at Morley College, but in Birmingham, the first *liturgical* performance, some three months later, on 12 March 1923, *was* at the cathedral and under Terry's direction. I am not sure when it received its first performance at Morley, but it was clearly later than 6 December 1922. Vaughan Williams revised it in 1923 for an adaptation by Maurice Jacobson to suit the Book of Common Prayer.

Vaughan Williams's own beliefs, as is well known, were complex and eclectic. In a sense, they were rooted in an inter-relationship between his great-uncle Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, of which he was a firm adherent, the pantheist Transcendentalism of Walt Whitman – and possibly therefore indirectly with the agnostic transcendentalist thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson – and the Christian doctrines that he had absorbed at home and at Charterhouse under the Rev. Haig Brown's headmastership – "muscular Christianity" with its emphasis on upright living and the practice of Christian personal and social virtues.

He would almost certainly have approved and practised this code of conduct, whilst utterly rejecting its theological basis. Through his Cambridge friends, such as Moore and Trevelyan, he would also have known a good deal about Platonic and neo-Platonic thought. It's very unlikely that he believed in Plato's doctrine of the Music of the Spheres, but he certainly contended that the greatest music had an element of the transcendental about it. The emphasis on the importance of good works and helping the poor was also enjoined and practised by a man whom he certainly admired: General William Booth of the Salvation Army. Mr E. J. Hysom, in a letter to the Journal in October 2006, succinctly summarised how his ideas gradually took shape through contact with friends and other fellow-undergraduates:

It was in 1889 that Bertrand Russell met Alys Pearsall Smith – his first wife. She was on friendly terms with Walt Whitman. Soon Russell put Vaughan Williams on to Whitman's Leaves of Grass*, and in turn Ralph Wedgwood and G. M. Trevelyan were reading him. They were already into Carlyle's* Sartor Resartus *with its mystic idealism. Walt Whitman much admired Emerson who in his time had travelled from the USA to the UK to visit Carlyle, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. His Transcendentalism spills over into* Leaves of Grass*… We must not forget VW's father. Did Vaughan Williams feel some slight family obligation to set Christian texts to music? Maybe. Religion was the subject for discussion at the 1895 Seatoller Reading Party. On their first day, Sunday March 24, the prevailing subject of argument was – Theology… and on their last day; Wed. April 10th we have:* Subject of Discussion: The Universe in its Relation to God*. By that time VW had departed to take up an organist's job at St Barnabas' Church, South Lambeth. Ursula Vaughan Williams tells us that he "disliked his work at St Barnabas. He had given up taking communion, even as 'part of the show', so when a new vicar was appointed who made this a condition of his continuing as organist, he resigned his post with great thankfulness."*

Vaughan Williams continually emphasised throughout his long life the *spiritual* side of human activity. His atheism, if such it was, was thus not of a purely Benthamite or Marxist materialist kind. He certainly believed that there were matters that transcended the material world and were true independently of any temporal or material context. He himself wrote:

What the musical composer, in effect, says to his performers is: 'I desire to produce a certain spiritual result on certain people; I hope and believe that if you blow, and scrape, and hit in a particular manner this spiritual effect will result. For this purpose I have arranged with you a code of signals in virtue of which, whenever you see a certain dot or dash or

circle, you will make a particular sound; if you follow these directions closely my invention will become music, but until you make the indicated sounds my music does not exist.'

It is undeniable that at no time after his adolescence could Vaughan Williams sincerely accept many aspects of the Nicene Creed, which is a central feature of the Mass. And his attitude to the efficacy of prayer and praise of a transcendental Divinity which also forms an important aspect of it is perhaps defined by his curt rejoinder to the devout H. Walford Davies, who claimed to have composed his *Solemn Melody* on his knees: "I wrote *Sancta Civitas* sitting on my bum." The service known too the Roman Catholics as the Mass and to many Anglicans as the Eucharist is central to their worship. The familiar Anglican Matins and Evensong were actually intended by the reformers to act as a preface to a celebration of what was renamed "Holy Communion", but the Church of England had grown to expect attendance at Matins and/or Evensong as independent services. Attending the Eucharist, whether or not those present participated in the act of communion, had become for many Anglicans a sporadic *privilege* for the confirmed, not a regular *duty* incumbent on all.

St. John writing the book of revelation (anon: 14th century

The 1662 Anglican Communion service, both by its structure and by its language emphasises the *ethical* aspect of Christianity by such changes in the liturgy as inserting a recitation of the complete Decalogue before the "action" of the service, as it were, gets properly under way. The *sacrificial* aspect – the re-enactment of the Last Supper – is played down, though the Anglican church explicitly insists that the Lord's Supper is one of the two sacraments – "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace" – the other, of course, being baptism. The emphasis of the 1662 prayer of consecration, the emphasis of the two alternative post-communion prayers, and the inclusion of words like "such good works *as thou hast prepared for us to walk in"* even hint at predestination of a kind more appropriate to Calvinism or mechanistic determinism than the Catholic doctrine of freedom of choice between good and evil. And the placing of *Gloria after* the sacrament has been received and deliberate avoidance of "Ite, missa est" in any shape or form at the end change the emphasis of the liturgy completely.

Michael Kennedy writes of Vaughan Williams as a person:

There was always a twinkle in his eye…the visual equivalent of the paradox in so much of his speech. "Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know", he declared to Bertrand Russell when they were undergraduates at Cambridge in 1892, and he went on to compose the music of the gates of heaven opening to receive the weary Pilgrim after his progress from this world to the next!

What then did he mean here and elsewhere by "spiritual"; and how does this affect the G minor Mass, the text of which is certainly intended as part of a sacramental – "inward and *spiritual*" - action. Perhaps a glance at his approach to setting the text of the Mass itself will help us find out.

At first sight, his approach does seem to have been purely aesthetic, skilfully contrasting linear and often (but not always) modal counterpoint with sturdy block chords, combined perhaps with a tinge of musical patriotism by deliberately aiming at adding to the great tradition of Anglican choral music of the 16th and early 17th centuries. The musical style of the Mass is full of consecutive chords and parallel fifths; false relations between major and minor thirds and sixths; and diatonic or modal melodic lines, but there is considerably less use of the complex bi- and tri-planar harmony that so strongly characterises the first movement of the *Pastoral* symphony and remarkably little chromaticism such as would cloud the harmonic texture in a highly resonant building. Antiphonal effects between the two choirs abound, as if he were expecting them to be spatially separated and answer one another across a gap, as in the choir of a church or cathedral rather than on the platform of a concert hall.

To this listener at any rate, the use and sonority of consecutive triads in the Mass smacks more of Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie* than of any directly medieval or Tudor model. Moreover, the very same stylistic procedure is put to far more violent and dramatic use in *Sancta Civitas,* as we shall shortly see. These are elements of a recognisably 20th-century impressionist style, like Vaughan Williams' juxtaposed unrelated triads and "ungrammatical" progressions (e.g. the undulating *Sanctus* theme, drifting like distant bells or some kind of aural incense into the mind) creating an atmosphere conducive to reflection and awe that he would surely have called spiritual and others might even find religious.

To dismiss this style just as a deliberate thumb-to-the-nose flouting of the accepted academic harmonic procedures in the interests of archaic musical jingoism is to cast inexcusable and quite unjustified doubts on Vaughan Williams' moral and musical integrity. I would contend that he is not just fancifully returning to an earlier, purer, more "English" style but carefully exploiting his fully-developed personal idiom in the service of the liturgy.

Take, for example, the opening of the *Gloria.* Vaughan Williams was at pains to provide a solo-voice introit to both the *Gloria* and the *Credo*, which surely indicates that he hoped and expected that the Mass would find a liturgical use. But the plainsong introit *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, sung by a solo tenor, is immediately followed, not by a choral repetition of the same words decked out in blazing *fortissimo* chords or brilliant roulades of imitative counterpoint, but by a solemn *pianissimo* entry in massive block

chords to the words *Et in terra pax.* Such a striking contrast between the two phrases of the text and between solo and choral sound would surely have a particularly powerful effect in a large church where the congregation was (one hopes) attuned to the liturgical context than in a concert hall where the musical interest might be centred more on the skill of the performers.

The block chords create an atmosphere of meditative devotion that gets right to the heart of the text: expressing a humble hope that God in His glory will grant peace on earth. Whatever Vaughan Williams' beliefs at the time he composed the Mass, he certainly took the inner devotional meaning of the text seriously. It is only with the words "Laudamus te" that the chorus rouses itself from its contemplative mood. There are numerous other "modern" touches in the Mass, especially in the use of dynamic variation. For example, Vaughan Williams expects the choir to sing *ppp* at the words "Incarnatus", softening even further to an awesome hushed *pppp* at "et homo factus est" on hushed block triads to be followed by the alto soloist delivering the "crucifixus" like some desolate Mary Magdalene watching the Saviour's body being slowly taken down from the cross. Here again, he shows that he knew and empathised with the context of the eucharistic liturgy well enough to understand the significance of these words to any Christian believer. He seems to have treated them with great respect and tenderness, not merely as routine liturgical phrases, nor even as rhetorical effects, but as a living presence — a 'spirit' – that was at least ethically, even if not theologically relevant whenever the mass was performed.

Vaughan Williams' setting in fact fits the Roman Catholic rite extremely well, especially with its sympathetic approach to such passages as the *Incarnatus* of the Creed or the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus.* There are problems, however, quite apart from the use of the Latin text, with using it in an Anglican (especially 1662) context. The biggest stumbling-block is the triumphant culmination of the 1662 rite in the *Gloria* and the complete omission of the *Agnus Dei* before the solemn procession to the altar to receive spiritually the Body and Blood of the Sacrament. We should also remember, firstly, that the *Mass* was composed six years *before* the 1928 tinkerings with the 1662 liturgy moved the eucharist discreetly and in a typically Anglican way towards a rather more Catholic interpretation of the service as a sacrificial act of thanksgiving than Cranmer and the Restoration churchmen had intended. Secondly, the only really significant as opposed to formal and imitative textual repetitions come in the *Agnus dei.* It seems to me at any rate to contradict Vaughan Williams' carefully structured sequence of movements if the Mass is used liturgically in an Anglican church following the 1662 rite. This is particularly so as the thematic cross-references between the opening *Kyrie* and the closing *Agnus dei* would be lost if the *Agnus dei* had to be omitted.

Vaughan Williams' remark about *Sancta Civitas* to Walford Davies – "sitting on my bum" and, incidentally, underlining consciously or sub-consciously the special importance that his magnificent oratorio must have had for him – is a sufficient refutation of any suggestion that he was in any way a prayerful person. If he did ever pray, it was certainly not in any churchy posture. He had little time for the smugness, the "bonnets and bombazine" with which he associated the conventional religiosity of some churchpeople. His attitude to the emotions underlying the text of the Mass might be described, as a colleague of mine once defined himself, as that of "an atheist with a vested interest in Christianity", who willingly suspends his disbelief when writing with a specific choir, conductor and liturgical occasion in mind. The Mass is double-edged: the liturgical text is faithfully projected to a believing congregation, yet it also provides an excellent experience in "spiritual" contemplation for an audience interested in the musical text without reference to the verbal one.

Elgar himself personally acknowledged the quality of *Sancta Civitas*. It is well known that he had originally intended to compose a "last judgment" oratorio to complement *The Apostles* and t*he Kingdom*, but he told Vaughan Williams that in *Sancta Civitas,* Vaughan Williams had already done that for him. Holst's biographer Michael Short tells us little of what he thought of this work. Surely he and Vaughan Williams *must* have discussed it as it was taking shape at one or more of their "field days". Although we know that he found *Flos Campi*, another of Vaughan Williams' pioneering works of the 1920's, difficult to grasp, one cannot but feel that the man who composed *Mars* and *Neptune* would hardly have baulked at anything that Vaughan Williams did in this neglected masterpiece.

For this work, Vaughan Williams selected his text almost exclusively from the Authorised Version of the *Book of Revelation*. But before we get down to discussing either the text or the music, there is just one small but possibly significant philological point of which Vaughan Williams, with his extensive knowledge of hymns originally written in Latin, must surely have been aware. It is this: the celestial city as a concept is usually referred to as *Urbs beata* and the Latin word *urbs* is usually taken to refer to the layout and architecture of the buildings of a city. The word *civitas*, however, which Vaughan Williams chooses to use in his title, is usually taken to imply the human community that lives in an *urbs*. Without involving ourselves in splitting lexical hairs, either about this distinction or about the difference between *beata* and *sancta*, let us not forget this when considering what Vaughan Williams had in mind when he composed this remarkable work.

Before I introduce Vaughan Williams' chosen text I should like to quote the comments and summary provided by the BBC Radio presenter Brian Redhead[1], who was a practising Christian, in his book.

> *…It is a book that people either read obsessively, and know everything about, or have never touched. It is an unloving book. There are only two references to the love of God or Christ…*
>
> *…John sees a dying world where power has become meaningless and even kings and great men lie cowering in caves and rocky fortresses longing to be no more. For those from the tribe of old Israel, and those from the new Israel gathered from all the nations, all that will matter is the seal of faith, the only guarantee of a new life beyond the horror of a ravaged earth…*

Europe in 1918 must surely have seemed like this to many who had witnessed the horrors of mechanised warfare in World War I and we know that it affected Vaughan Williams deeply.

Later on in his book, Redhead goes into more detail about some of the weird symbolism that abounds in the text. Reminding us first that "*Revelation* concludes with a vision of the new heaven and the new earth and a vision of a future life in the presence of God…" he continues:

> *After Armageddon John paints a lurid picture of a whore*

dressed in scarlet and adorned with gold and pearls. She rides a seven-headed beast and, in the manner of the prostitutes of ancient Rome, she bears her name written on her forehead. She is Babylon the Great, the Mother of Abominations: at one level a byword for occultism and materialism, at another the Jewish apocalyptic codeword for 'Rome.'

No-one in his right mind would describe either Vaughan Williams or his music as "lurid". He may be said to have taken a light-hearted tilt at "occultism" in *The Poisoned Kiss* and the very word "materialist" as he used it in his critical writings always had scornful and pejorative overtones, in *National Music and Other Essays*, for example. Yet he prefaced his score with a quotation implying that the part of *Revelation* that he chose to set, properly understood, was the work of a genuine visionary, a prophet – not a bloodthirsty crackpot junkie; and that his music could help interpret his message for a post-World-War I generation – music that befitted an Englishman and a democrat.

In fact, it is of major relevance to any consideration of Vaughan Williams' "spiritual" beliefs to try to answer these questions:

- What induced him to choose and arrange this text, drawn as it is from what is *in toto* a somewhat hair-raising vision of the end of this world?

- How did he understand the symbolism exploited in the section of it that he chose?

- Of what did he consider Babylon to be a symbol?

- What clues, if any, do his treatment and musical setting of the text as edited by him provide of the answers to these questions?

- What *spiritual* message, if any, was Vaughan Williams trying to convey with the black dots he put on paper in this strange and powerful work?

The answer to the first question might lie in remembering the state of the world in the 1920's. for clearly, despite his own sense and knowledge of history, Vaughan Williams cannot have been expecting his audience to transport themselves back mentally into the age when *Revelation* was probably written. Equally clearly, the man who had composed the moving motet *O vos omnes* for the choir of a Roman Catholic cathedral only a few years previously is hardly likely to have been pandering to those in his audience who regarded the Roman Catholic Church as the Scarlet Woman of the Seven Hills and the Mother of Abominations. I'm pretty sure, too, that he was not attracted to St John the Divine's vision as set out in the Authorised Version simply by the quality of the English, which is certainly highly coloured and visionary. He may of course have been stimulated by certain details of the savage narrative and the vivid imagery, but how does that square with the quotation from Plato that prefaces the work? Plato and St John the Divine make strange bedfellows. It requires a truly Spike Milliganesque sleight-of-mind to associate their very different visions of a transcendental world by an inferential quotation in the original Greek just for fun, or just to confuse the issue. I just don't see Vaughan Williams trying on either.

Vaughan Williams always believed and frequently said that the artist's business was not to live apart in an ivory tower, but to be part of society and thus to help cater for its spiritual needs. The apparently secure world in which he had grown up had been ravaged by the most cataclysmic war in history. He had experienced at first hand its devastating effect as an orderly during the Battle of the Somme. The old order had been swept away in Austria-Hungary, in the Ottoman Empire and in Tsarist Russia. Yet by the time that Vaughan Williams composed *Sancta Civitas*, it really had begun to look as if a new international order was gradually coming into being. The galloping inflation of post-war Germany was being brought under control. A League of Nations had been established. A sort of peace had been patched up between Greece – where Vaughan Williams had also served – and Turkey. Perhaps the "ravaged earth" – or at any rate ravaged Europe – was now able to look forward to a new life. For him, perhaps, the "seal of faith" meant a faith in humankind's future.

St John's vision of the sacred community rests on an unshakable conviction – a doctrinaire atheist would certainly dismiss it out of hand as an "obstinate delusion" – that Christ will eventually return to this earth and out of the specific hope that He will return quickly – to judge it and destroy all that is evil in it. The second coming would not feature the gentle, loving Jesus of such a poem as George Herbert's *Come Love, come Lord*, but rather, a Christ more like the fierce, vengeful figure of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco. It is no surprise, then, that *Revelation,* though not *Sancta Civitas*, begins by warning most of the Christian churches of his day known to the author that they had better watch out, for they need to amend their behaviour if they are to become citizens of the New Jerusalem, his vision of which he is about to describe.

Vaughan Williams, interestingly enough, returns to the posture of watchful, even prayerful commentator at the end of the work, but although he ends with an appeal to "the Lord" to return quickly, as St John does, he omits both the word "Jesus" (I am grateful to Dr Eric Seddon for pointing this detail out to me) and the subsequent valedictory grace that follows, closing the book and with it the New Testament. Such apparently trivial details are certainly relevant to the manner in which he reshaped the text. Like Elgar and like Britten, he could, after all, as A. E. Housman among others found, be pretty ruthless when he felt that part of a text did not suit his musical aims.

The immediate context of the passages from *Revelation* selected and set by Vaughan Williams is, to say the least, somewhat lurid. Indeed, any composer attracted to the text purely by its literary qualities – its abundant colourful symbolic detail and emphatic, sonorous descriptive rhetoric – would surely have had great fun meeting the challenge of portraying the various events in vivid programmatic terms. Vaughan Williams always abhorred purely "illustrative" programmatic music such as he found in the tone-poems of Liszt and Richard Strauss and avoided any allusions to such aspects of the vision. To underline this point, let's remind ourselves of some of the portents in *Revelation* that Vaughan Williams chose *not* to set.

Firstly, St John claims, afflictions will fall upon humanity such as sores breaking out on those who worship the "beast" (species and genus undefined). The sea will dry up; and in an almost blasphemous and probably unintentional parallel to the miracle of the wedding at Cana, all fresh water will be turned to blood. The sun will become scorchingly hot. The earth will be covered in darkness and men gnaw their tongues (cue for some imaginative string, high bassoons, soft percussion and muted brass effects). Satan, the anti-Christ and the false prophet, the unholy trinity, will persuade men to gather at a place called Armageddon – traditionally, incidentally, associated with Megiddo, in Israel, the scene of the great battle in which General Allenby defeated the Turkish army towards the end of World War I. There will – one is tempted to add, it goes without saying – be lightning, thunder and a cataclysmic earthquake.

Wow! Mahler, Richard Strauss, or Wagner would have had a field day!

Then come the chapters containing the passages that were actually selected and set by Vaughan Williams. Babylon, the mighty city, the "great whore", is destroyed. A marriage is announced between the Lamb (certainly intended by the writer to symbolise the terrifying Christ of the Apocalypse descending to judge the earth) and His Bride, traditionally associated with the community of Christian believers – the Church as a whole – clothed in the righteous deeds of the saints.

The heavens open. The Word of God incarnate – in other words, Christ Himself — rides out in triumph. The "beast" (the anti-Christ) and the false prophet are thrown into a lake of sulphur. Satan is bound for 1,000 years. When he is loosed, St John assures us, he will arouse the nations to war again. He will be defeated and thrown back into the lake. Only then will a new heaven and a new earth be established and the holy city which is the new Jerusalem descend from heaven. There will be no more tears and no death. Everything will be alive with God. In the middle of the city there will be a tree, not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil of the Garden of Eden or a Calvary, but the tree of life itself. In its leaves will be healing for all the nations. Nothing will again be accursed. Everything will be lit with the brightness of God.

Now let us consider how Vaughan Williams edits and adapts details of his chosen text.

First of all, he makes a number of small changes and omissions to the Authorised Version text itself. Most, but clearly not all, of these changes aim at omitting details that might hamper the flow of the musical narrative.

Effectively, he divides his text into five episodes, rearranging the order in which St John sets things out as he does so. The opening passage sets the scene of the vision in a mysterious **Prologue** in a slow tempo, harmonically ambiguous, arising out of the depths of the orchestra, their implied major scale of the rising opening tetrachord being clouded over by an ambiguous chord in the flutes. It is as if one of Gustav Holst's favourite "mystical" devices – slowly alternating and distantly related chords – has become frozen out of time into eternity. Then we hear the voice of the prophetic narrator:

Revelation, XIX, verse 1:

> *[I was in the spirit and] I heard a great voice of much people saying: . .*

The opening of the music immediately creates a strange, ambivalent other-worldly atmosphere. Vaughan Williams used to refer to "the divine afflatus", pointing out that composers like Dvorák, "a reed shaken by the wind", who possessed it, were in his view greater than more "literary" composers who did not. He himself is surely seized by the "divine afflatus" here. The atmosphere is both eerie and other-worldly. For whatever reason, Vaughan Williams now omits five important words: '*in Heaven praising God and*'. I don't think that this simple omission means that Vaughan Williams, as a good agnostic, was by-passing St John, for the narrator is at once answered by a *distant choir* of boys' voices singing the text: "Alleluia, salvation and glory, honour and power unto the Lord our God. Alleluia, Amen." The voices are accompanied only by a solo trumpet – the lonely, desolate *Last Post* of the *Pastoral Symphony* revived as a distant, eerie yet ecstatic *Reveille* as the world is called to judgment – and separated in space as well as in texture and timbre from the main body of the orchestra, the chorus and the semi-chorus. The dramatic impact of the choir of boys' voices is intended to be of something not of this earthly world, but of some spiritual world beyond the here and now: a kind of *Tuba mirum* – a prophecy and a warning.

Verses 2 to 4 of the Authorised Version text next refer to God's vengeance on "the great whore which did corrupt the earth with her fornication…" with an appropriate reference to clouds of holy smoke and the four and twenty elders and the four beasts. Eschewing all temptations to engage in gaudy illustrative writing, Vaughan Williams quite justifiably makes a cut here to verse 5. (Passages in square brackets are cut from the original AV text):

> *[And a voice came out of the throne, saying] Praise our God, all ye his servants and ye that fear Him both small and great.' And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude and as the voice of many waters [and as the voice of many thunderings] saying, 'Alleluia. For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.*
>
> *Let us be glad and rejoice and give honour to Him. For the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.' And to her it was given that she should be array'd in fine linen clean and white.*

Instead of thundering out the first seven words of this imprecation in triumphant majesty, as Handel did, Vaughan Williams treats it with what I can only describe as a sense of transcendental awe. Like Elgar in his original conception of the beatific vision momentarily granted to the Soul of Gerontius, remains at a discreet distance. But the effect is still very impressive.

The next verse, interpreting the symbolism of the bride's white linen, "the righteousness for the saints" is cut; and the narrative continues: *[And he said unto me] Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.* This ends the Prologue.

The action, which I take the liberty of referring to as **The Battle** (section 2) now starts with a vengeance.

Revelation, XIX, v. 11:

> *And I saw Heaven opened. And behold a white horse and he that sat thereon was called Faithful and True and in righteousness he doth [judge and] make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns: and he had a name written that no one knew but he himself:* [VW cuts verse 13]*…and the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a two-edged sword, that with it he should smite the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And on his vesture and on his thigh [there was] a name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And I saw an angel standing in the sun: and he cried with a loud voice saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come, gather yourselves together."*

Vaughan Williams sets this in one of the most powerful and exciting passages that he ever wrote, with much use of conflicting consecutive triads, uneven metre (bars of 5/8 are prominent and the tremendous rhythmic impetus of the music frequently carries

across the bar-lines) with a huge triple-*forte* climax on the almost savagely exultant acclamation of the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" supported only by the timpani and "military" percussion and answered by a brass fanfare similar to one which was to find a purely abstract context in the second movement of the Sixth Symphony.

Vaughan Williams omits the next passage, which explains *why* the fowls of the air are to gather themselves together. So his text continues:

> *And [I saw the beast and] the Kings of the earth and their armies [were] gathered together to make war against him that sat upon the horse and against his army, and were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse and all the fowls were filled with their flesh. ('Babylon the great is fallen'.)*

Now comes Vaughan Williams' most striking modification of St John's text. When introducing the distant chorus lamenting the fall of Babylon, he backtracks to the previous chapter of *Revelation*, transforming what started out as a prophecy into a lament *for something that has already taken place.* The reference here may have been to the carnage of the first World War and the destruction resulting from it, but there is nothing in the music to hint at what if anything of which Vaughan Williams considered Babylon to be a symbol. However, as Michael Kennedy has aptly and slightly mischievously pointed out, it must have been quite a fun place in which to live.

After the battle, there logically follows the **Vision of Desolation**. This starts with:

Revelation XVII, verse 11:

> *Alas, alas; that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come. The kings of the earth [who have committed fornication and lived deliciously with her] shall bewail her and lament over her. And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her. And the fruits thy soul lusted after are departed from thee. [And all things which were dainty and goodly are departed from thee and thou shalt find them no more at all.] Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, and purple and scarlet and precious stones. What city is like unto this great city! for in one hour art thou made desolate. Rejoice over her O heavens for God hath avenged you on her.*

The tumult and the shouting dies; the satanic captains and kings depart and Vaughan Williams' text now jumps to Verse 21:

> *And a mighty angel took up a millstone and cast it into the sea, saying: "Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all." And the voice of the harpers shall be heard no more at all in thee.*
>
> *And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee, and the voice of the bridegroom and the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee. Babylon the great is fallen.*

There follows a radiant passage of Vaughan Williams at his most musically seductive, yet there is a sharp-edged clarity to the rapt and very characteristic lyricism of the violin solo that leads into it, looking forward to Elihu's music in *Job* rather than back to *The Lark Ascending* or even the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis.* We are meeting, as it were, an old familiar friend, but in a new, more sinewy and transcendent rather than Romantic guise. Somewhere along the line, a catharsis has taken place. Could it have been the experience of World War I?

Then follows the **Vision of the New Heaven and Earth**:

Revelation, XXI

> *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first earth and the first heaven were passed away: and there was no more sea. And I [John] saw the holy city [the new Jerusalem] coming down from [God out of] heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, [having the glory of God.]*

Vaughan Williams omits the subsequent passage, notorious perhaps rather than famous in some musical settings, about God wiping away all tears etc. as he also does the vituperative passage detailing the fate of the unbelievers, and takes up the narrative at Verse 11:

> *And her light was like unto a stone most precious even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; and had [a great wall and high and] twelve gates and on the gates twelve angels, and the twelve gates were twelve pearls; and [every several gate was of pearl] the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.*

Another cut follows of the passage describing in illustrative detail the layout of the new Jerusalem, to verse 22:

> *And I saw no temple therein. For the Lord God Almighty* [VW omits and the Lamb] *is the temple of it. And the city had no need of the Sun, neither the Moon, to lighten her for the glory of God did lighten her; and the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there and they shall bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it.*

Unexpectedly – and perhaps significantly – Vaughan Williams now reverts to a much earlier chapter of *Revelation*, one, moreover, that has a quite specific religious reference. This interpolation, from *Revelation,* VII, vv 15-18, runs as follows:

> *Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his Temple. They shall hunger no more neither thirst any more. For he that sitteth on the throne shall feed them and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters.*

Might this be a reference to those who had died in the First World War, a plea, even a hope that their sacrifice is to be remembered beyond the material confines of time and space? Whatever the reason for the interpolation, it becomes the cue for a return to *Revelation*, XXII, v.v 4 & 5:

> *And I saw a pure river of the water of life, and on either side of the river was there the tree of life, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads, and there shall be no night there, and they shall need no candle, for the Lord God shall give them light and they shall reign for ever and ever. (Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. Glory be to Thee, O Lord most High.)*

If this passage is indeed intended to refer, even wishfully, to the

everlasting fate of those who sacrificed their lives for the "healing of the nations" and the future good of humanity in general, they could have no more fitting musical memorial.

Finally, to a variant of the music of the cloudy, mysterious opening, but introducing for the first time a tenor soloist instead of the baritone narrator, we have the **Epilogue**:

> *Behold, I come quickly, I am the bright and the morning star. Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord…*

Summing up, we should perhaps note the following details about Vaughan Williams' treatment of the text.

Most of the cuts relate to matters of detail – enumerations of the glories of the new heaven and so on. But three things are of particular interest. First, apart from one passage near the beginning, Vaughan Williams omits all the original's numerous references to "the Lamb". This can hardly be by chance. Second, he alters the order in which the events are narrated in the Authorised Version so as to emphasise not just the *impending* but the *accomplished* fall of Babylon. In other words, the ground has already been cleared for the New Holy City. Third, he has interpolated an isolated sentence from Chapter VII of *Revelation* which may possibly be intended as a reminder of the deaths of so many millions in World War I.

By these excisions and re-arrangements Vaughan Williams has done a number of things:

- He has concentrated the interest of the narrative on the final phase of St John's detailed symbolic battle in heaven, and its eventual positive outcome, omitting all the "signs and portents" and the gruesome and specific details of the final end of the current heaven, earth, Satan, the Antichrist and Armageddon.

- He has interpreted St John's vision of the end of the present era as something which can be thought of as at least *spiritually* possible in the here and now, by insisting in the prefatory epigraph that it can and must be interpreted symbolically rather than as factual prophecy.

- However, as Byron Adams has pointed out [2] (emphasis added): 'By employing this excerpt [the quotation from Plato] the composer clearly sets aside a Christian interpretation of the biblical text that follows, while pointing towards a reason for its selection. While the inscription from Plato is meant to distance the composer from the *literal* meaning of the biblical passages he has chosen, it also serves to guide performers and listeners of *Sancta Civitas* towards his *symbolic* intent. Part of the beauty of a living symbol is its inexhaustible potential for interpretation on multiple levels of meaning. By combining textual and musical symbolism, the composer gave his listeners the freedom to find their own meaning for both words and music.'

- He presents the Fall of Babylon as the symbol of something *that has already happened* but he does not relate it to specific political events such as the defeat of the Central Powers or the Tsarist or Ottoman Empires. The implication is not only that some external and unidentified Babylon has been overthrown, but that perhaps we each carry our own 'Babylon' within us; in which case, however appealing it may seem, we must recognise the prospect of its destruction and concentrate on our own vision of "Heaven" if we are to be true to ourselves and our human destiny. It is in fact as if he was lifting the veil on one aspect of the Unknown Region itself, providing an aesthetic map, as it were, of what he found when he got there. I believe that this expansion of his outlook and hence his style was at least in part due to his first-hand experience of the horrors and sufferings of war and the problems, whether physical, political or intellectual, to which the First World War could offer only destructive solutions. I also believe that while there is hope in the vision, as with Wilfred Owen, the spiritual message also conveys a warning: that the end is worth it, but the struggle to achieve it will not be easy.

Both Elgar and Vaughan Williams boldly tackled the huge problem of providing music for a vision of Heaven, not as a place, but as a state of being. Elgar did so of course, in Part II of *The Dream of Gerontius*; and Vaughan Williams does so in *Sancta Civitas* and of course in *Pilgrim's Progress.* The difference between them seems to be that Elgar, following Newman, expresses what heaven might *feel like* to the 'new candidate' for admission. Vaughan Williams *experiences* and wishes to communicate to the listener the final transformation of Heaven and earth into the *eternal* earth and Heaven – the eternal reality that he frequently mentioned as underlying all human endeavour. Elgar's vision – almost pastoral at times, refulgent and exhilarating at others, refers to the fate and experience of an individual, albeit, as the composer himself said, "a kind of modern Everyman". Perhaps one might say, following Jaeger, that Elgar's vision is pre-Raphaelite – though I would personally consider "Praise to the Holiest" and the Angel of the Agony more Turneresque – and Vaughan Williams is more Blake-like. Vaughan Williams' vision – I choose the word deliberately – centres round the advent of a spiritual city – the home of a community of the "faithful." He is careful not to limit this community simply to members of a specific religious faith nor to a life transcending this one – but musically he exploits St John's narrative and imagery to the utmost in order to do so.

Musically, Vaughan Williams rose magnificently to the challenge set by his ostensibly strange choice of text: it is one of Vaughan Williams's most thrilling, concentrated and powerful scores. From the wonderfully evocative opening to the mysterious, inconclusive, typically reflective end, which recapitulates that opening in concentrated form, the effect on this listener at any rate, is shattering. (Perhaps I may be permitted to add a personal comment here. I made my first acquaintance with this superb score half a century ago playing the double-bass in a performance of it in King's. I was thrilled by it then; and I am still thrilled by it now.) Certain passages and stylistic devices either refer back to the earlier symphonies (e.g. the *London* and the *Pastoral*) or foreshadow the later ones (particularly the 4th, 5th and 6th). But *Sancta Civitas* is one of the most significant of a series of major works that expand his style almost immeasurably, projecting a more intense, even violent passion and extending beyond Whitman his search for an unknown region of spiritual self-realisation.

Might the genesis of these two fine works at least in part lie in Vaughan Williams' experience in the first World War as a medical orderly on the Somme? And might World War I, instead of *destroying* his faith, as it did with so many people, have actually *re-kindled*, if not a sense of religious belief, at least a sense that materialist atheism was not a complete answer to the human predicament? Certainly his music from the 1920's onward remains totally congruent with his pre-war style, but becomes leaner, tougher, more comprehensive in its style, less "arty". *Hugh the Drover*, for example, despite its charm and theatrical effectiveness gives a somewhat over-simplified vision of rural

early 19th-century England. On the other hand, the *Pastoral Symphony*, for all its surface placidity, has an undertow of anguish and desolation and one unexpected outcry of fierce, almost violent passion. True, there *is* violence and grimness in the *London Symphony* but in *Sancta* it is shorn of the picturesque element that is so much emphasised in the later version of *London.* The elements presented under one compound vision in *Sancta* are separated out and considered in detail in the IV, V, VI and IX in purely abstract but none the less spiritual statements.

These conclusions totally beg the question of any "spiritual" component in purely abstract works such as the later symphonies, especially the Fifth and Sixth, the *Antartica* and the Ninth, not to mention the remarkable string quartet "for Jean on her birthday" and the Violin Sonata. Deryck Cooke's telling formal analysis of the Sixth Symphony in *The Language of Music* seems to me to provide a clue to at least one of them. Surely many of these works are *much* more than just "black dots on paper". *Sancta* and the Fifth Symphony avowedly have "spiritual" connections. (Why, incidentally did Vaughan Williams remove the Bunyan epigraph from the Fifth's slow movement?) I believe the same is true of many of his other works in similar vein and that this is why his music has such a powerful appeal – an appeal that many people choose simply to look boldly in the face and pass by on the other side. As Professor Scharma has recently said: "Art is a thug lying in wait. It delivers difficult and painful truths, sometimes in ways that nothing else does."

Vaughan Williams would not have put it quite so crudely, but I believe that it was in *Sancta Civitas* that he first realised and expressed that aspect of his own art.

[James Day presented this paper at the symposium on religion jointly organised by the Ralph Vaughan Williams and Elgar Societies in November 2006. The main casualty of the editing process for publication in the Journal has been the rich series of footnotes. Members wishing to follow these up are invited to contact the Editor.]

Notes

1 Brian Redhead and Frances Gumley, The Good Book, London 1987, p. 170

2 Adams, Byron, Biblical Texts in the Works of Vaughan Williams, in Alain Frogley (ed.) Vaughan Williams Studies, Cambridge 1996. It should be clear that my conclusions are much indebted to this perceptive essay.

'O THOU TRANSCENDENT…'

TONY PALMER writes about his forthcoming film on Vaughan Williams

Ralph Vaughan Williams holds an extraordinary fascination for a surprising number of fellow musicians. Known for his openness with advice to younger colleagues, he was often besieged by requests along the lines of "I'm thinking of becoming a composer. Can you give me a few hints?" Thus the 80 year-old grand old man of British music received the 16 year-old whippersnapper, Harrison Birtwistle. The great American composer John Adams was taken by his parents as a 9 year-old to his first orchestral concert in Boston, U.S.A. The first piece on the menu was by Vaughan Williams. Adams, previously (he believed) destined to be an engineer, told his parents he now wanted to be a composer – "like that!" Neil Tennant, of the Pet Shop Boys had a similar Damascus moment as a schoolboy in Newcastle. Mark Anthony Turnage, knocked sideways by his encounter with "the darkness, even hopelessness" of Vaughan Williams' vision of mankind…the list of such musicians included in this 3-hour film is considerable.

Next year will be the 50th anniversary of Vaughan Williams' death. Having made films about Britten and Walton, I knew I had to face up to the man whose shadow falls across the whole of 20th-century English music, and also as to why he was not immediately thought of in the same breath as, say, Elgar. It seems to me now, as I put the finishing touches to my film, that his importance exceeds the other three. Two stories illustrate this.

In 1936, Vaughan Williams went to Norwich for the première of his *Five Tudor Portraits*. When he arrived at the rehearsal, the leader of the orchestra asked him to "deal with" the composer of the other work on the programme who was being an hysterical pest, and in any case they hated the piece. Vaughan Williams asked who it was, and then apparently told the leader: "Sir, you are in the presence of greatness. If you do not perform his work, then you cannot perform mine". The other work was *Our Hunting Fathers*; the composer the 22 year-old Benjamin Britten. Michael Tippett tells the film, in an interview recorded some years ago, that although as a student he had despised everything Vaughan Williams stood for with "all that folk waffle", after Vaughan Williams died Tippett realised he had made the most appalling misjudgement because it was the older composer "rather than any of his contemporaries" who had "made us free". "Folk waffle"? I agree with Tippett – a profound misjudgement. It doesn't even begin to describe some of the bleakest, most desperate and yearning English music written in the last 100 years. This is the musician who leapt back across the centuries to Tallis, Byrd, Dowland and Purcell long before it became fashionable to do so. This is the scholar who read Walt Whitman, long before anyone had ever heard of him on this side of the Atlantic. This is the visionary who rescued the English Hymnal, who prodded the Churchill government during the Second World War to establish what became eventually the Arts Council and The Third Programme on the BBC.

But that's not the main thrust of my film, which is about the man himself. First, his family – related, either directly or by marriage to Darwin, to Wedgwood, to Keynes, to Virginia Woolf, centre stage among the intellectual aristocracy at the beginning of the 20th century. Then married, and devotedly so, for over 50 years to a woman who was for much of that time a cripple – can you imagine what that did to his psyche, his sexuality? And he was a devastatingly good looking young man, not the crumpled, cuddly figure that has become (until now, I hope) his lasting image. A man who *volunteered*, aged 41, to serve in the infantry in the First World War, but eventually served in the Ambulance Corps (and don't forget his very sheltered background – Charterhouse,

Cambridge, and a man who never needed to earn his living), picking up bits of bodies blown to smithereens in the Battle of Vimy Ridge. And this had no effect on him and his music? Of course it did.

In the end, of course, it's the music which speaks to us. Gergiev's Mariinsky Orchestra provides much of it in specially recorded extracts – all the *Symphonies*, *Job, Tallis, The Lark*, The National Youth Orchestra, which also celebrates 60 years in 2008, underlining Vaughan Williams' commitment to the young – he did, after all, help to put the National Youth Orchestra on its feet; The English Chamber Orchestra, the BBC Chorus, Simon Keenleyside, Joan Rodgers, the amazing Catalan viola da gamba player Jordi Savall, the great folk singer Martin Carthy and his daughter Liza who will perform the folk songs that Vaughan Williams heard (and as he probably heard them) on his walking tours with Gustav Holst in 1903/4, and not least Gloucester Cathedral Choir with the hymns and the *Mass in G minor*. Dorking & The Leith Hill Musical Festival, which Vaughan Williams conducted for over 50 years, is well represented. And all this quite apart from archive performances with Sir Colin Davis, Sir Adrian Boult and Sir John Barbirolli. Finally, there are the witnesses who knew and worked with him – Roy Douglas (now over 100), Michael Kennedy, David Willcocks, Lady Barbirolli, Lord Armstrong, Kiffer Finzi, Bill Llewellyn, Alun Hoddinott, Jill Balcon who remembers with tears her father's commissioning of the music for the film *Scott of the Antarctic*, Jerrold Northrop Moore, Hervey Fisher recalling his great Aunt Adeline, Vaughan Williams' first (and much overlooked) wife, Hugh Cobbe, the archivist of his letters…and of course Ursula Vaughan Williams herself in an extended interview she gave in 1990, recently discovered. Best of all, Vaughan Williams himself talking in hitherto forgotten interviews.

But my intention is not hagiography. It is simply this: to explode, I hope for ever, the image of a cuddly old uncle, endlessly recycling English folk songs, and to awaken the audience to a central figure in our musical heritage who did more for us all than *Greensleeves* and *Lark Ascending*, even if it is no.1 in the Classic FM "Hall of Fame"; who not only deserves his place among the greatest of British composers, but who deserves our respect and admiration as a man of phenomenal nobility and courage. Courage musically: we forget that in its time his music was considered progressive and "modern" – he had after all studied with Ravel – and performed at the Salzburg Festival (the first English composer to be so honoured) and the Prague Contemporary Music Festival. His music was even banned by the Nazis. The 15 year-old Margot Fonteyn even danced in the stage première of *Job*. And courage as a man. Never forget the man from a privileged background picking up bits of dead bodies, a shattered head, an arm, a finger, an eye, while married for most of his adult life to a cripple in a wheelchair. In my view, anyone who tells you that his music is just notes on a page or "visions of Corot" has missed the point – by a million miles. At the end of my interview with Roy Douglas, he jabbed his finger at me and said: "Young man, tell me, what is his music about?" I waffled, inevitably. "Oh," I said, "belief in humanity, visionary, optimism…" "Oh yes?" said Roy. "End of the 6th symphony? 4th symphony? 9th symphony? Even the *Norfolk Rhapsody*? A very bleak vision. Just think of the times he lived through. Think again, young man," he said. I have, and this film is the result. It does not make comfortable viewing.

The film will be shown over several weeks on Channel FIVE in November 2007. The première will be at the Barbican Cinema in the same month. The DVD of the full 3-hour film is being made available to RVW Society members at a special price. Please refer to the leaflet enclosed with this Journal.

Tony Palmer and Ursula during filming

ARTS IN RESIDENCE in association with the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society PRESENTS:

THE SYMPHONIES OF RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Friday February 29 - Sunday March 2 2008 Haddon House Hotel, West Bay, Bridport

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) is one of the great symphonic composers. His approach in his nine symphonies is imaginative, diverse and visionary, across a period of half a century. During our weekend we will consider them all, placing them in the context of their time and exploring the experience the music offers the listener, with music examples on excellent hi-fi equipment.

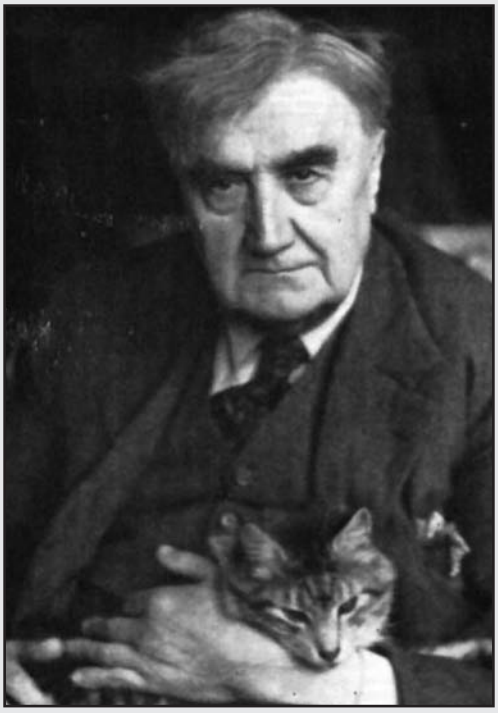
Haddon House is a delightful Regency style country house hotel situated just 300 yards from the harbour and beaches at West Bay, and has been refurbished to the highest standard. The location is designated as an area of outstanding beauty, with magnificent coastal scenery including sandy beaches, towering cliffs and shingle banks, such as the famous Chesil Beach. Inland can be found some of England's most picturesque villages.

The weekend is designed as an informal 'house party'. Guests need only the ability to enjoy music; no technical knowledge will be required. Arts in Residence offers an excellent cuisine including wine with dinner. The event will end with afternoon tea on Sunday, but for those wishing to depart on Monday, it will be possible to stay for an extra night at a special rate.

Terry Barfoot writes widely on music for Britain's leading journals, orchestras, festivals and record companies. A founder member of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, he lectures at Oxford and other universities, and is Publications Consultant to the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

James Day is the author of the *Master Musicians* book on Vaughan Williams. He worked as Lektor for English in the University of Basel, before returning to Cambridge to teach at the Language School of which he eventually became principal. He regards Vaughan Williams as the 20th century's greatest symphonist.

Haddon House Hotel, Bridport



The programme for the weekend will be as follows:

Friday
5.00 Assemble and welcome
7.00 Aperitifs
7.30 Dinner
After dinner: Symphony No. 5 in D

Saturday
8.15 Breakfast
9.30 London Symphony
11.00 Coffee
11.30 Pastoral Symphony
12.30 Lunch
4.00 Tea
4.30 Sea Symphony
7.00 Aperitifs
7.30 Dinner
After dinner: *Sinfonia Antartica*

Sunday
8.15 Breakfast
9.30 Symphony No. 4 in F minor
10.45 Coffee
11.15 Symphony No. 6 in E minor
12.30 Lunch
2.15 The final harvest: Symphony No. 8 in D minor; Symphony No. 9 in E minor
3.30 Tea and Departure

Price: £265.00 per person (twin/double rooms), £285.00 (single rooms) to include all meals, wine, beverages, course fees and accommodation.

Booking: Arts in Residence, 25, Mulberry Lane, Cosham, Portsmouth, PO6 2QU. £50.00 per person deposit with booking. (Cheques payable to Arts in Residence.)

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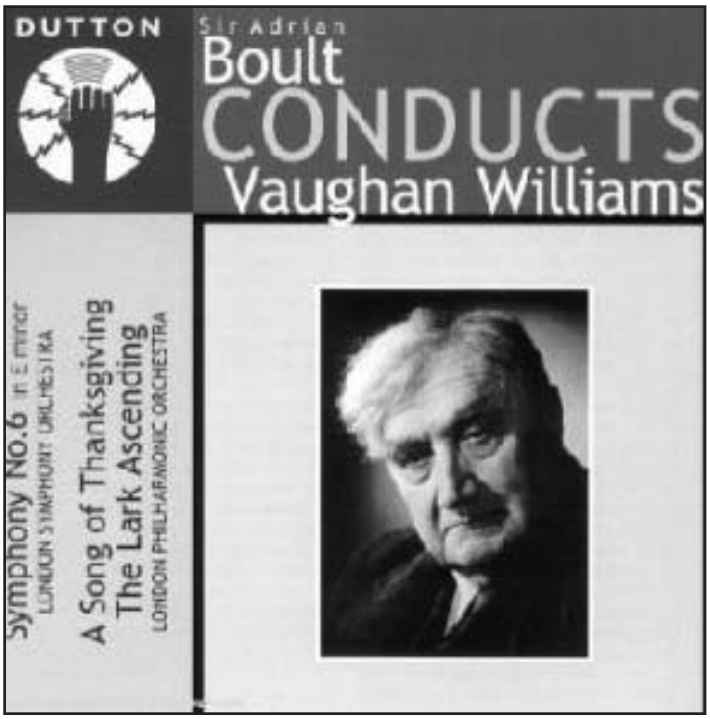


CD reincarnation of David's LP

In 1959, with long playing records still something of a novelty, I bought a ten inch vinyl (even the measurement now no longer exists, let alone that particular recording medium) of *The Lark Ascending* in Parker's Records of Todmorden, the then cotton manufacturing town on the border between Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. This was a recording made by Parlophone Odeon (incidentally the label which I believe was the first to record The Beatles) of a performance by Jean Pougnet and the London Philharmonic under Sir Adrian Boult. What I had not noticed until I took it home and played it was that *The Lark* was actually on side 2, the main work on Side 1 being *A Song of Thanksgiving,* commissioned by the BBC just before the end of the Second World War and originally entitled *Thanksgiving for Victory*. I had thus chanced upon pure gold, musically, sociologically and historically, a kind of time machine which transported us back fourteen years – to a world of euphoric celebrations amidst the misery of an almost bankrupt nation, with austerity, bombed sites, black market spivs and the universal endless queues for anything worth having, and much that wasn't.

Yet in these primitive and grindingly poor conditions the one thing we did have in 1945 was, incredibly, the seeds of hope, a hope wonderfully encapsulated – as much by the choice of words as by the music itself – within this arresting work.

Ten years later I was Minister of the former Congregational Church (now an ecumenical one) in the North Yorkshire town of Skipton. The local choral society was, to my surprise and delight, about to perform *A Song of Thanksgiving,* but they lacked a speaker. So many times had this recording been on my turntable that I must have been as conversant with the narration as Robert Speaight himself; in any case, I naturally felt quite at home declaiming passages of Biblical and Shakespearean text and so it was that with the arrogance of youth I offered my services. We had an inspiring but highly eccentric conductor aptly named Wildman, and it was going to be a mammoth event, involving the West Riding Orchestra (suitably augmented) and a chorus of children, some of them members of my own Sunday School (at that time about 50% of all British children had some connection with the Sunday School movement) who had no problem recruiting the more musically gifted of their friends from various local schools. The choral society had originated from an evening class at the Skipton College of Further Education, where their musical skills had been well honed over many years, so that it was in a large room at this college that we gathered for the first full rehearsal.

Of course it took no time at all, such being the short fuse of most musicians, before some of them, especially timpani and brass players, were complaining bitterly about lack of space. Mr Wildman was unperturbed; such large scale productions were meat and drink to him, but the orchestra was in no mood for sweet harmony, and the Principal was summoned. "Look, Mr Wildman," Mr Hothersall explained in conciliatory tones, "we do our best to accommodate everyone, but if you want to do Vaughan Williams, with all this wind, you must find larger premises." By this time I was on a roll, making a second master-stroke of sheer opportunism. I had a church with excellent acoustics and seating for an audience of 630. And so *A Song of Thanksgiving* lived again, with a capacity audience, and musicians, chorus, children and soloists with all the space they needed for a very businesslike performance. I had the incredible privilege of taking part in the wonder of Ralph Vaughan Williams' treatment of that unique historical moment, and I remember thinking – could this music ever be heard again, except perhaps by listeners such as myself in the luxury of private nostalgia?

by David H. Mason

RVW SOCIETY JOURNAL BINDER OFFER

We are pleased to inform members that a new Binder has been commissioned and should be available from late October 2007. The new binders will be in black, with elasticated cords to hold 12 issues (four years' worth) of the Journal. The Journal title will be in gold on the spine. The price will be £12.50 each inc P&P in UK, as before.

Please send your order to: Binder Offer, The RVW Society, c/o 24 Birdcroft Road, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, AL8 6EQ, UK.

Orders will be dispatched as soon as the new binders are available.

Letters

We are always pleased to receive contributions for this page

THE NINTH

I would like to express my pleasure and gratitude to the authors of the fine material relating to the ninth symphony in your most recent issue. I can well remember my puzzled disappointment on hearing this symphony in the first BBC broadcast, under the baton of Flash Harry. Was this perhaps also the very first concert performance?

I imagine I was hoping for something more immediately radiant and comprehensible, perhaps a return to the world of the fifth, my favorite at that time; instead, here was a more enigmatic and challenging piece, with apparently some rehashing of earlier works, that I couldn't easily find my way into. What was that curious second movement all about, with its abrupt contrasts, so different from the serene RVW music that I loved? Very much later (about 40 years), I got hold of the original Boult CD, and began to recognize the originality and strength of this music, although still unable to penetrate its true depths. I was not aware of the connections with Tess, Salisbury Plain, Stonehenge, the cathedral etc, until fairly recently. These associations came as something of a revelation, particularly as I grew up in a village on Salisbury Plain only a few miles from Stonehenge and attended grammar school in Salisbury cathedral's close, where I could look through my classroom window each day and wonder at the great spire. I can't claim that any of these associations dawned on me when listening to the music before I read about them, but they certainly have since thrown new light on the symphony. My familiarity with the region (and with Hardy's novel) definitely enhanced my appreciation of it, to the extent that I am sure now that it's one of the great 20th century symphonies.

However, I think it would be going a little too far to describe it as a symphony with a programme; it appears that the composer was incorporating material composed earlier because he felt it was too good to waste, something I believe to be entirely characteristic of the man, but the wonder is that he was able to use these diverse elements to build such a coherent and convincing musical structure that stands firm without any extra-musical scaffolding. The associations can be seen simply as bonuses that deepen our understanding in the same way as do the Pilgrim associations of the Fifth. Perhaps an even better example is provided by the war associations of the Pastoral, although in that case it appears no earlier material was used, only tragic memories. Looking at the whole symphonic output of the last two centuries, it seems to me there is very little music that can be described as totally abstract. Where there appears to be no associations, I think we naturally tend to supply them. Witness the titles that we give to works that are unauthorised by the composers, who tend to want their musical structures to stand alone, however much they were initially influenced by extra-musical ideas. Mahler is a good example, although it's hard to listen to his symphonies and ignore the images. Not that I believe we should try….anything that gives greater insight into the thoughts of the composer and the gestation of the music is welcome as far as I'm concerned.

Michael Farman
Palestine, Texas, USA.

My profound thanks to the Society for publishing my article on the experience of performing RVW's Ninth Symphony, and to Society member Michael Zelensky's kind critique of that concert. I would like to clarify one point. In discussing my post-concert comments, Mr. Zelensky says that "...Stern explained that Vaughan Williams wanted his symphonies played faster, and was happy to oblige." I believe that Mr. Zelensky was referring to my comments on RVW's 1937 recording of the Fourth Symphony, to wit: When I first encountered this recording, I found it the most powerful version I had yet heard, in no small part because it came closest to observing the score's metronome marks (as opposed to performances wherein conductors took slower tempi, to the work's disadvantage). My comments, therefore, were in favor of adherence to RVW's stated tempi - be they larghissimi, prestissimi, or anything in between - and certainly not an endorsement of playing his symphonies at a brisk clip overall!

Adam Stern
Seattle, Washington USA

I have read Adam Stern's article on RVW's Symphony No. 9 in the June 2007 edition of the Journal, and this has prompted me to listen to my recording with keener interest. I have a boxed set of RVW's complete symphonic output: Vernon Handley conducting the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Incidentally Mr. Stern; I too dislike Wagner both the man and his music. The majesty of RVW's last symphony; the vigour and assurance of experience are heard in every note of this work written during the two years before his death in 1958. The brooding tones of the music are never heavy and its dark hues are never dull. The closely woven texture of the composition is identifiable by the presence of flattened notes and dense orchestration. Listening to this symphony unfold, one is aware not of finality in its sombre notes but rather of a looking outward toward the future albeit with caution. This prompts me to look both into the past and to briefly consider RVW's musical achievements. Ralph of all trades and Master of many who mixed old modes and the pentatonic scale with today's key system of related notes. An expert who incorporated sixteenth-century church harmonies and folk melodies from a bygone age to blend comfortably within his twentieth-century compositions: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and *Five Variants of "Dives and Lazarus"* to give examples.

In conclusion, with Symphony No. 9 in mind, RVW looked through knowledge into several directions: past, present and future and gained from all he saw leaving behind him a unique and glorious musical legacy.

E. Anne Webb,
Ealing, London, UK.

I just wanted to say (a bit belatedly) how much I enjoyed all the writing about RVW's Ninth in the June issue of the Journal. It seems to me that the Ninth has been even more underrated than all the other RVW symphonies. The first and only time I heard a "live" performance was by the Pittsburgh Symphony, under William Steinberg, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the spring of 1959. I'm not sure whether that was the first U.S. performance. I still have – and play – the recording I'd bought just before attending that performance: the Everest recording of Boult's.

Martin Mitchell
New York City, USA

ARTISTIC INTEGRITY

The newest RVW Society Journal arrived just as I was putting the final touches to a talk on Vaughan Williams' *Willow-Wood*. Part of that talk is a retort to two commentators (including Simona Pakenham) who wonder why on earth Vaughan Williams should be attracted to Rossetti: seeing the ongoing discussion about religion in the Journal was a useful reminder about the folly of attempting to explain such things.

If I may just put my head above the parapet: Jeffrey Aldridge's piece (No.39 p.20) states that "Vaughan Williams was an artist. Artists create symbols; that is what they are about. The visual arts, poetry and music are crammed full of symbols; they may be called metaphors, they may be called representations or icons or visions." I do partly agree. However, artists not only create but also utilise, drawing their inspiration from any number of sources. The creeping tendency of twentieth-century art has been rather egocentric, I might add, the sad result being that the artist rather than the art has been considered more important. No such worries about Vaughan Williams: he was intensely public-spirited ("Are you satisfied with me?" to the London Symphony Orchestra), and furthermore happily admitted drawing his ideas from numerous places. We should not merely assume all his scrapbook-rifling was from music, but words too: anything could be utilised to get the idea across. He threaded together *Dona Nobis Pacem* from several texts to suit his humanitarian ideas just as readily as he admitted drawing from Beethoven's last Quartet for Satan's dance in *Job*.

John Francis's piece (p.19) mentions a comment that often creeps into pieces on VW and the question of religion: paraphrasing Michael Kennedy, he asserts that "for great creative artists like Vaughan Williams, their art is a religion; he needed no other." I do not think this entirely true: artists can be entirely devoted to both their art and their faith – think of Eric Gill, James MacMillan, R. S. Thomas. Unless we actually discover a scrip of paper in Vaughan Williams' own hand in which (when deciphered) he asserts "Music is my religion" it simply will never be known.

Another point in John Francis' piece is interesting. "[Vaughan Williams] embodied 'Christian' (actually humanitarian) values to such an extent that Christians are perhaps disappointed that he was not a paid up member." This is interesting in that it may equally have read "atheists are disappointed in Ralph Vaughan Williams because he was not a paid up member." Also this does Christians some disservice, as the assumption is that they might be thought of as contemptuous of Vaughan Williams as a consequence, and therefore can't truly believe in the *tunes* of the hymns they are singing: a remarkably comical concept.
I am sure that Vaughan Williams did not (unless asked) tailor his music in the assumption that his audience was of any particular faith. "Do not create what you think people want" – the rule every artist learns quickly.

It is surely important for us to remember that Vaughan Williams took inspiration from what he had known all his life: Biblical texts, Victorian poetry, the language he had assimilated in his formative years. I recently read Richard Jefferies' autobiographical *The Story of My Heart* (1883) in which he warns the reader that his attempts to convey the intense nature mysticism he had felt all his adult life must by sheer necessity use such terms as "deity" and "soul". Had he been a modern writer, he might have added things like "karma" to the useful battery of surrogate words he uses to express his innermost self.

Artists are not to be trusted. Many viewers who become confused about the Mona Lisa's facial expression or troubled by the architectural faults in Vermeer's *Het straatje* are mistakenly reading those great paintings as truthful records (both *look* real yet are conceits), and we ought to accept great musical pieces in the same way. That is not to call artists out-and-out liars, of course, but they are experts at manipulating the truth to their own end. (Which is not to call politicians artists I hope.)

For my part, the integrity of Vaughan Williams' religious music (assuming it is not *all* religious) comes in (a) his skill at word setting (b) the quality of accompaniment (c) the strength of the original text. The marrying up of superb music to superb text is everything – I have no doubt that Vaughan Williams believed in all those points himself before releasing a work. Finally, a composer cannot thread another person's faith into the bars of a musical work any more than an architect can stir it into the mortar of our great Cathedrals – that only comes from the beholder.

Rolf Jordan,
Wirral, U.K.

HISTORIC RECORDINGS

I have recently enjoyed listening to 3 Elgar Society CDs of excerpts from 1930s recordings made by Kenneth Leech, now held by the British Library Sound Archive. In an article on the recordings in Classical Record Collector by Lewis Foreman reference is made to virtually complete recordings of performances conducted by RVW of his 2nd and 5th symphonies (1946 and 1943 respectively) made by Kenneth Leech. I'm sure the society was aware of these recordings, but I am prompted to suggest that release of the works, albeit incomplete, would greatly enhance our understanding of RVW as conductor, as well as providing much pleasure. I wonder if consideration has been given to such an enterprise, or if not whether it will be in the future. As a member of the society from the start it has continued to surprise me that recordings from the past – from radio archives and so forth – has not formed part of the undertaking, possibly in association with a commercial CD organisation. The Elgar Society has trod the path and the latest results of their efforts has certainly been worthwhile, at least for this British music enthusiast.

David Lax,
Tyne and Wear, UK

Stephen Connock replies…

David Lax raises an excellent point. We have in our own archive RVW conducting the *Serenade to Music* and the Fifth Symphony. The latter has an unfortunate gap of a few seconds in the third movement but we have another recording that can be used to "patch" this problem. We are in discussions with our Albion Records technical advisers about the issues to be solved in transferring these tapes to CD and it is our hope that we could issue then under the Albion banner in 2008. There are two problems. First we need to raise the funds to make the recording. As we know from our two CDs so far, this is costly – I estimate that we would need at least £7,500 for an historical issue. Second we are not completely sure that it is RVW conducting the Fifth. We believe it is and we are conducting more research. We will keep our members informed of progress through the Journal.

SIR MALCOLM ARNOLD

This is in response to Rob Furneaux's letter on Sir Malcolm Arnold. In the 1960s I was very impressed by Arnold's film music to the British production *Albert R.N.* (1955), released in the United States as *Break to Freedom*. Arnold used muted variations on its themes in his later, better-known films, including *Bridge on the River Kwai*.

My efforts to obtain a videotape or DVD of the original film, or find a classical work on CD incorporating its themes, have met with dead ends in such a complete and systematic way that I have been inclined to wonder about Arnold along the lines of Mr. Furneaux.

In the case of this early film music, perhaps success frightened him. He was coming up with ideas as a composer on a level that didn't fit with his self-image; even trying to cover his tracks afterwards.

Of course this is only speculation. I'm not an Arnold scholar. I'm also in California (Gilafeldt@earthlink.net) and would welcome any practical suggestions on obtaining a videotape or DVD of the film; or perhaps an appropriate CD. Simply finding these were available in Britain would go some distance in proving me wrong.

George Ihlefeldt,
Carmel, California, U.S.A.

I write to say how much I agree with Rob Furneaux' s assessment of Malcolm Arnold's standing as a good composer rather than – as is RVW himself – a great one. I have long had a soft spot for Arnold's music nothwithstanding his rackety personal life which *Towards The Unknown Region* brings out to often painful, even harrowing, effect. It is not merely that he wrote "tunes" but there is a sort of earthy exuberance about much of his music which I find endearing. Perhaps he excelled in shorter forms – the "15 minute concerto", the dances (but I agree not the Irish set!) and the film music – rather than the symphonies although there are good things in these. Certainly the Sarabande from the *Solitaire* ballet is one of my Desert Island Discs. His neglect in the concert hall and particularly at the Proms is nothing less than shameful.

I was also interested in Rob Furneaux's other letter about RVW in "strange places". I was highly intrigued to say the least when in the storm sequence of *Master and Commander – The Far Side of the World* the *Tallis Fantasia* was suddenly heard on the soundtrack! I was surprised how well it worked, as it did in a later sequence. In the comparatively recent film *Ladies in Lavender* there is a scene in which the eponymous ladies are listening to the radio and one hears a brief snatch of *The Lark Ascending.* (In the film they befriend a mysterious young man who turns out to be a brilliant violinist.) And at the end of *Enigma* (2001*)* the hero and heroine are seen going into a concert of music by RVW. Finally, Yorkshire TV's series *Dales Diary* uses *The Wasps Overture* as theme music.

Michael Nelson
Leeds, U.K.

RVW LETTERS

In 1981 I bought from Maggs Bros. Ltd. in Berkeley Square an undated letter written by Vaughan Williams to the poet and publisher Frank Sidgwick. Although it is probably of no significance, I thought the text might be of interest to anyone researching the composer's folksong-collecting activities. I have transcribed it exactly as he wrote it:

13 Cheyne Walk S.W.

Dear Mr Sidgwick
I am almost ashamed to write at so long interval & thank you for so kindly sending me the words of the Bitter Withy If you wd care to come & hear Mrs Leathers phonograph record of it any time I shd be delighted to show it you. For the past two months I have been so busy that I have had to put off every thing that was not absolutely necessary
Yours very truly
R. Vaughan Williams

Ella Mary Leather and the composer collected *Bitter Withy* in 1912 near Weobley in Herefordshire, but Mrs Leather had already come across the song in 1904, and in July 1905 Frank Sidgwick had published the words in *Notes and Queries* (series 10, part IV).

On the subject of letters, it may not be widely known that two years ago Myles Glover, son of Cedric Glover, sold to the British Library about 120 addressed to his father by many distinguished musicians, including eighteen or so from Vaughan Williams and one from his first wife, Adeline. There were also some letters from Arnold Bax, in one of which he asks 'What do you think of "R.V.W.'s" F minor "bludgeon"? I think it is a grand work and am proud of its dedication to me'. In another he writes: 'I feel rather astonished that R.V.W.'s work was so dubiously received, for it got me from the very first rehearsal and became better and better. I believe myself that it is far superior to "Job"'. I should guess that the work referred to here is the Piano Concerto: Bax is known to have greatly admired the piece (especially the opening Toccata), and it is quite probable that he attended the first rehearsal to give moral support to the soloist, Harriet Cohen. In his review of Lewis Foreman's biography (Journal No.39), Robin Barber refers to the awe in which Bax appears to have held Vaughan Williams, and this is confirmed in a letter to Christopher Whelen dating from 1949 in which he wrote: 'V.W.'s works are always received with reverence (and quite rightly too)'.

Graham Parlett
London, UK

THE OXEN

Jeffrey Aldridge, in the June 2007 issue, calls Thomas Hardy's *The Oxen* "an explicitly agnostic poem". Its portrayal, however, has no bearing on the truth or otherwise of the Christian Faith, of which it forms no part. The kneeling of the oxen is either an unproved hypothesis or (more probably) a "fair…fancy" expressing "the desire for some less complex experience of life, for the earlier simplicities of faith and insight." (Douglas Brown, *Thomas Hardy*, 1961). Thus, Robert Gittings, in *The Older Hardy* (Heinemann, 1978) writes of Thomas that "the love of his mother's peasant fireside represents a wealth of superstition, which is somehow nearer the truth than either rational thought or religion, as in his poem *The Oxen*…based on a country legend…"

I find no incongruity in RVW's use of this enchanting poem in *Hodie* en route, via Christian verse by George Herbert, Ursula Vaughan Willans and others, to its ending in a "heaven-storming

last climax" (William Mann, programme note, Royal Festival Hall, London, December 12 1982) in which "we are come to Mount Zion" as per Hebrews 12:22! May I also respond to Eric Seddon in the March 2007 issue by citing the Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church as my source for saying the Western Church defined transubstantion in 1215.

Frank McManus,
Todmorden, West Yorkshire, U.K.

HOLIDAYS "IN PRAISE OF VAUGHAN WILLIAMS"

I think members will be interested to know that in Saga's "Music Review 2008", which I received by post on 14th September 2007, there are three advertised departure dates (28th January, 17th March and 26th May, all in 2008) for 4-night breaks entitled "In Praise of Vaughan Williams" at the Best Western Chine Hotel in Bournemouth on the south coast of England. Briefly, the arrangements include half-board, five music appreciation sessions and an excursion to Compton Acres. The host is Bryan Kelly, who studied (and I quote from music publisher Stainer and Bell's website) at the Royal College of Music with Herbert Howells and Gordon Jacob, followed by a brief stint with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. His output is copious and includes much choral music written for Anglican worship. He has written for every standard orchestral instrument, as well as for the descant recorder in the Globe Theatre Suite. His music is widely featured in examination syllabuses and competitive festivals, and has been recorded on the Naxos label. He also appears regularly as a solo pianist, accompanist and lecturer.

Full details are available in the "Music Review 2008" brochure I mention above and I guess that copies can be obtained through travel agents. Or you might try calling Saga's booking line free on 0800-50-50-30.

David Betts,
Brighton, UK

REPORTING FROM AUSTRALIA

Last year, the excellent Western Australian Symphony Orchestra gave a fine performance of Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral Symphony*, preceded by Thomas Adès' *Asyla* and Elgar's *Cello Concerto*. In June 2007, the WASO gave two performances of the Symphony No. 4, probably for the first time in Perth. (This city, with its population of one and quarter million people, 1400 miles from Adelaide, the nearest sizeable city, is one of the most isolated on earth, but has developed a vigorous musical life.) Once again, Elgar, in his 150th year, completed the programme, this time with a splendid performance of his *Violin Concerto* by Tasmin Little. Yan Pascal Tortelier conducted both works with insight and dedication, from memory, and in a balletic manner that conveyed his enthusiasm to the orchestra. The *Pastoral* and the 4th were the only RVW symphonies that I'd not previously heard live, so I am grateful to the WASO for their programming.

The visceral excitement of the opening movement of the fourth made my hair feel as if it was crackling with electricity. The quiet, sinister passages at the end of this movement and in the middle of the finale came over with eerie intensity. I appreciated the slow movement as never before, particularly the beautiful flute writing towards the end. (Coincidentally, Walton's first symphony, written at the same time as RVW's fourth, also has a magical flute solo in its slow movement.) The Friday concert was so good that I went to the repeat performance the following day, something I've never done before.

I was intrigued to read Fred Blank's review of *Antartica* in Sydney. I'm not sure that I would have appreciated the extensive readings and visual backgrounds, but not having been present should perhaps not judge. I seldom listen to Boult's recording as I find the superscriptions, although beautifully enunciated by Gielgud, disruptive to the integrity of the symphony.

I always feel a personal connection with this work, as my house in Stanmore (which I bought in 1976 and have not yet got round to selling) was the home, around 1900, of Edward Wilson, the most diversely talented of Scott's team, and his death the most tragic loss.

I was interested to read that the conductor of the Sydney performance was Richard Mills, a wide-ranging conductor and arguably the best living opera composer. I greatly admired his opera *Batavia* in 2004; its successor, *Love of the Nightingale*, based on a Greek legend, with libretto by Timberlake Wertenbaker, premiered in February at this year's Perth International Arts Festival, was even better.

Antartica received its first London performance a day or two after its Manchester premiere. I was there, and also at the later London performance by Sargent, at the Proms, if my memory is correct, which Fred Blanks attended. I was also at the first London performances of the eight and ninth symphonies – among my most treasured musical memories.

I greatly appreciated John Barr's article in the last Journal on the ninth symphony and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. I have always thought that there is a close affinity between RVW and Hardy and that they hold comparable positions in English music and literature. I have just read Claire Tomalin's excellent new Hardy biography, and recommend it to RVW Society members. (Happily, here in Australia, I live in Hardy Road!)

Tony Noakes,
Nedlands, W. Australia

2008: ADVANCE NOTICE

I've just received details of some RVW events to be put on in Leicester to celebrate the 50th anniversary next year and thought they might be of interest to members.

Feb 2nd at De Montfort Hall, Leicester: VW Anniversary concert by the Bardi Symphony Orchestra. Includes *The Lark Ascending* and Symphony No 6.

May 17th at University of Leicester, RVW Day, 2pm to 5 pm. Lectures and music. £10 (£5 for students)

May 23rd at De Montfort Hall: Richard Hickox, Philharmonia Orchestra, London S Chorus in the *Sea Symphony*.

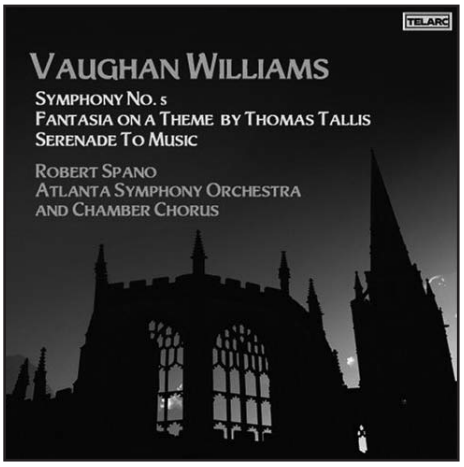
The De Montfort Hall box office and further details can be found at www.demontforthall.co.uk.

Michael Gainsford,
Burbage, Leicestershire, UK

CD Review

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS*:*
Symphony 5 in D
Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis
Serenade to Music
THOMAS TALLIS:
Why fum'th in fight?

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Chorus conducted by Robert Spano TELARC CD-80676



Society members who are also serious CD collectors will have noticed how easy it is to pick up astounding back catalogue bargains these days. I have recently been able to fill a few gaps in my Vaughan Williams discography by purchasing – at prices that make one fear for the future of the classical recording industry – all the symphonies in the versions conducted by André Previn on RCA and Sir Bernard Haitink on EMI. I also managed to pick up a copy of Previn's second reading of the fifth symphony, recorded with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and which I had previously heard only on a copy loaned to me.

Why not, then, I thought, listen again to Previn and Haitink in the fifth before subjecting the new Robert Spano version to critical listening, especially since I contributed a comparative review of all the recorded versions of that symphony to the Journal in October 2001?

Previn's London Symphony Orchestra version, recorded in 1971, is viewed as a classic of the gramophone, and surely rightly so. All the same, in comparative listening in 2001 I was less impressed by it than I expected to be, and even dared to evoke a "slight whiff of Hollywood" about the performance. Previn clearly relishes the glorious string writing, especially in the first and third movements, but much of it is louder than the marked *mezzo forte* and the result still seems closer to B-movie than to Bunyan, at least to this listener. I also find I am less convinced by the slow tempi than I was, but the performance as a whole is cogent and carefully thought through and the closing pages are wonderfully affecting. The recording is showing its age: we thought it so rich at the time, but it seems rather glassy now, and the woodwinds are rather uncomfortably spotlit at times.

In 2001, rather to my surprise, I preferred Previn's later performance, richly recorded by Telarc in 1988, to his earlier one, and I find I still do today. It is superbly played, and the comparative restraint in the violins in the opening pages is typical of the conductor's slightly cooler view of the symphony this time around, and the reading as a whole is devoted and convincing. I found the Epilogue less affecting than in some other performances, the conductor keeping things moving in a way that makes the music rather matter of fact, even a little busy, yet five years ago I found it "profoundly moving". What are we to make of this, apart from the obvious observation that giving an opinion on a musical performance is a dangerously subjective undertaking?

I wrote at length about Bernard Haitink's performance in 2001, acknowledging that it was a far from orthodox performance but nonetheless coming out in favour of it as the finest of all. Listening to it again now I have nothing to add. It is very slow, very serious indeed, as far from Sir Roger Norrington's reading, which I admire enormously, as can be imagined. It is superbly played and recorded, a reading of the utmost integrity, a profound meditation, the conductor's vision almost as intense as that of the composer himself, and the final pages almost unbearably moving.

And so to the latest reading, Robert Spano's with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. It is superbly well played and recorded, though some may find a certain sheen to the strings almost approaching hardness.

I tried to resist this feeling, fearing a stereotypical reaction to American orchestral sound, but there it is and others must judge for themselves. I wonder, though, if this wasn't also a reaction to the performance as well. One has the impression that the conductor is concerned to avoid any accusation of pastoral meandering in the work. The result is that, on the whole, the faster passages tend to work better than the rest. The most successful movement is the scherzo, at least as far as the gorgeous string passage just before the end which lacks the tenderness and yearning other conductors have found. The opening of the finale, also, is just right, the tempo perfectly judged and the music both smiling and slightly boisterous, a delightful effect. Later in the movement, however, the conductor seems unwilling to relax, and the louder, faster passages are forceful indeed, so that the Epilogue then seems like something tagged on, not at all the natural culmination of the piece, beautifully played though it is. There is a nervousness in the pulse at the opening of the symphony which creates a restless atmosphere at odds with the composer's perceived intentions. The middle section is rapid and strong but calm does not return with the opening music as we expect it to.

This is perhaps a valid view, as this music leads, after all, to the main climax of the movement. Whether it will convince Vaughan Williams enthusiasts is another question, which we might also ask in respect of some massive holding back at climactic points in the following passage. There are some strange changes of tempo and variations of pulse in the Romanza too, and the conductor's decision when the main theme appears for the second time to ask his unison string players to play *forte* (at least) when the marking is *pianissimo* seems perverse. Either way I don't hear the purity and devotion so

typical of Bunyan and Vaughan Williams here.

Few members will buy this disc for another reading of the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, though this one reveals a richness to the strings I didn't find in the symphony, and the reading is a convincing one which most members would be happy to own. Spano takes almost exactly the same time over the work as Barbirolli – and is therefore more spacious than many conductors – but returning to that classic reading reveals even more passion, and crucially, more mystery.

The performance is preceded by a verse of the original Tallis hymn, sung unaccompanied by the Atlanta Chamber Chorus who also feature in the *Serenade to Music*, a performance all but ruined for this listener by the unnatural spotlighting of the violin and vocal soloists, a problem already encountered, though less troublesome, in the symphony and the *Fantasia*. This problem, coupled with a shortage of true piano, renders much of the solo singing effortful and tiring to listen to. This is a *serenade* to music after all, but there is little here of the warm night conjured up by Matthew Best and his forces in the wonderful Hyperion recording and so beautifully evoked by the Samuel Palmer etching reproduced on the cover of the OUP score.

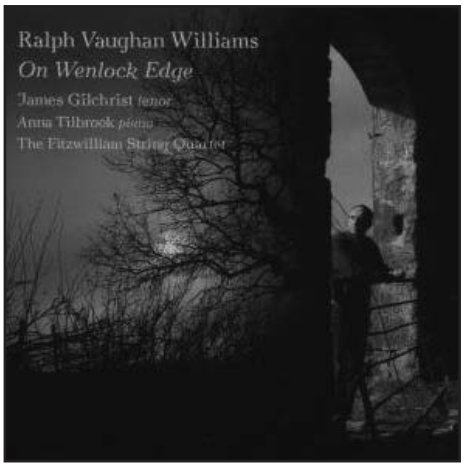
William Hedley

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *On Wenlock Edge*
WARLOCK: *The Curlew*
BLISS: *Elegiac Sonnet*
GURNEY: *Ludlow and Teme*

James Gilchrist, tenor; Anna Tilbrook, piano; Michael Cox, flute; Gareth Hulse, cor anglais; Fitzwilliam String Quartet
LINN CKD 296

This excellent disc gives us two English song cycles which are acknowledged masterpieces, coupled with two interesting works by Vaughan Williams' friends and pupils.

The most obvious rival in the two main works is Ian Partridge and the Music Group of London recorded in the early seventies and still available on EMI, so I used this version to make comparison with this new digital release. James Gilchrist, who was once a practising doctor has a wonderfully clear tenor voice, very well suited to this repertoire, excellent diction, full of poignant emotion throughout. His interpretation of *On Wenlock Edge* is poetic, maybe not as warm and rounded as Partridge who has a deeper voice. I found his voice strained at times in those great moments of anguish in *Is my team ploughing?*



However at the emotional centre of this cycle, *Bredon Hill,* he and the Fitzwilliam quartet can't be faulted. The warm vistas and distant church bells of the Shropshire landscape are beautifully evoked, preparing us for that almost unbearable sense of loss in a frozen Christmas that culminates in *Oh, noisy bells, be dumb; I hear you, I will come.* I think in this crucial song Gilchrist is superior to Partridge who suffers from an inferior and more recessed recording. In the final song *Clun*, the clear diction and superior recording also give a much better sense of space and repose, so crucial to the ending of this sublime work. Of course it is not just up to the tenor, the string quartet and pianist are vital. The Fitzwilliams do full justice to the amazing atmospherics of this score, perhaps just a bit aggressive at times, not so "hoveringly pastoral" as other versions. Anna Tilbrook brings a suitably Ravelian quality to the piano part when required. So for me, because of the superb digital recording and despite a few minor reservations this new recording of *On Wenlock Edge* is the best I have heard.

I have known, admired and been disturbed by Peter Warlock's *The Curlew* since first hearing Ian Partridge's version which dates from the mid 1970's. Until now, I have had no other comparators. It is a dark and complex work, setting four poems by W. B. Yeats for an unusual combination of flute, cor anglais, string quartet and tenor. The music is by turns lonely, windswept and haunted. *There is enough evil in the crying of wind*. The crucial role for cor anglais is played perfectly and when Gilchrist's crystal clear voice emerges the words melt into the listener's ear, releasing the power of this unique song cycle. The landscape that Yeats' curlew inhabits is certainly one I am glad to visit at a distance and this extraordinary performance makes it possible. I can't imagine a better version.

Ivor Gurney's Housman song cycle *Ludlow and Teme is* modelled on the earlier Vaughan Williams. Though perhaps lacking some of the sophistication and "French fever" of his mentor the simplicity suits the nostalgic mood of these poems. Wonderful singing here, you never need the texts to follow the wistful moods the words conjure up. The second song: *Far in a western brookland* (*… that bred me long ago*) is perhaps the most sublime track on the whole disc. This is English music at its best, exquisitely performed and, as presented here, it equals RVW.

Finally, the work by Arthur Bliss, *Elegiac Sonnet* which is a much later work, first performed in 1954 and this was the first time I have heard it. A collaboration between the composer and Cecil Day-Lewis and a warm and very attractive work which has an extensive piano introduction.

The liner notes to this disc are very informative and enhance its value. I think we might just have known Ravel would have played the piano part in the Paris premiere of *On Wenlock Edge* (was Vaughan Williams there?) But imagine being a fly on the wall when a friend of the poet played to him the first recording of *On Wenlock Edge*! The remarks he made of the composer and then those subsequently the composer made about the poet make entertaining reading. History has of course shown us that despite Housman's reservations these songs have stood the test of time.

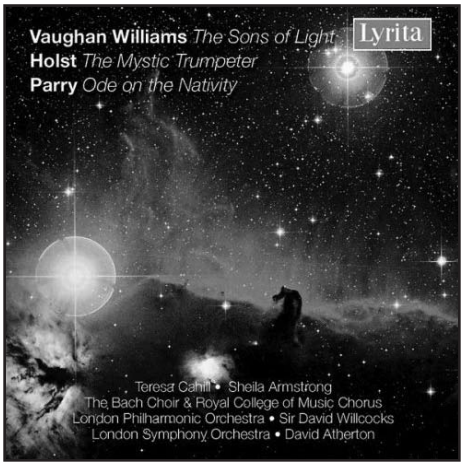
The Linn recording is faultlessly clear. I thoroughly enjoyed the whole disc and highly recommend it.

Robin Barber

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS:
The Sons of Light
PARRY: ***Ode on the Nativity***
HOLST: ***The Mystic Trumpeter***

Teresa Cahill, soprano (Parry); Shiela Armstrong, soprano (Holst); Bach Choir & Royal College of Music Chorus; London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir David Willcocks (Parry/Vaughan Williams); London Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Atherton (Holst)

LYRITA SRCD 270



To much rejoicing amongst lovers of twentieth-century British music, the rich back catalogue of the Lyrita label is becoming available on compact disc, much of it for the first time.

Dating from 1904, *The Mystic Trumpeter* is an early work, indeed as Imogen Holst's acompanying notes tell us, Gustav Holst's first large-scale work. It is a setting of words by Walt Whitman, an exuberant hymn in which the trumpeter becomes a metaphor for what is good and fine in the human condition. Holst mercifully did not stuff the music full of trumpet calls and fanfares – though there are a few – and the result is a work of great subtlety and passion, a passion more demonstrative than he chose to employ in his later music. Indeed, I wonder how many people would identify this as the work of Holst if the name of the composer were not already known. Members wanting this piece can also find it on a Naxos disc as a coupling for David Lloyd-Jones' superb performance of *The Planets* – a performance that also includes Colin Matthews' *Pluto*.

Claire Rutter is the soloist there, and she is very fine, but I marginally prefer the present performance which really is a "no holds barred" affair, with Shiela Armstrong in wonderful voice – a pleasure to hear that voice again after, I think, quite a few years – and the London Symphony Orchestra rising to the occasion under David Atherton.

Parry's *Ode on the Nativity* received its first performance on September 12 1912 at the Hereford Three Choirs Festival. Later that same day Festival audiences were treated to the first performance of another work on the Christmas theme, the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* of Ralph Vaughan Williams. (To celebrate the centenary of Parry's birth in 1948 Vaughan Williams composed his short motet *Prayer to the Father of Heaven*, dedicating it "...in memory of my master, HUBERT PARRY, not as an attempt palely to reflect his incomparable art, but in the hope that he would have found in this motet (to use his own words) 'something characteristic'")

The lilting, pastoral opening of Parry's work might lead one to expect a traditional Nativity piece, but William Dunbar's text is a poetic and lofty expression of joy at the birth of the Saviour, and Parry aims at least as high in his musical setting. I had never heard it before but can confidently recommend it. It is a magnificent work, twenty-five minutes long, in a single sweep, dramatic, serious and superbly written for the forces involved. The music is highly charged music, and the climax, which put me in mind of Handel, is little short of ecstatic. This is the only performance I know of it and with Sir David Willcocks in his element it cannot be faulted.

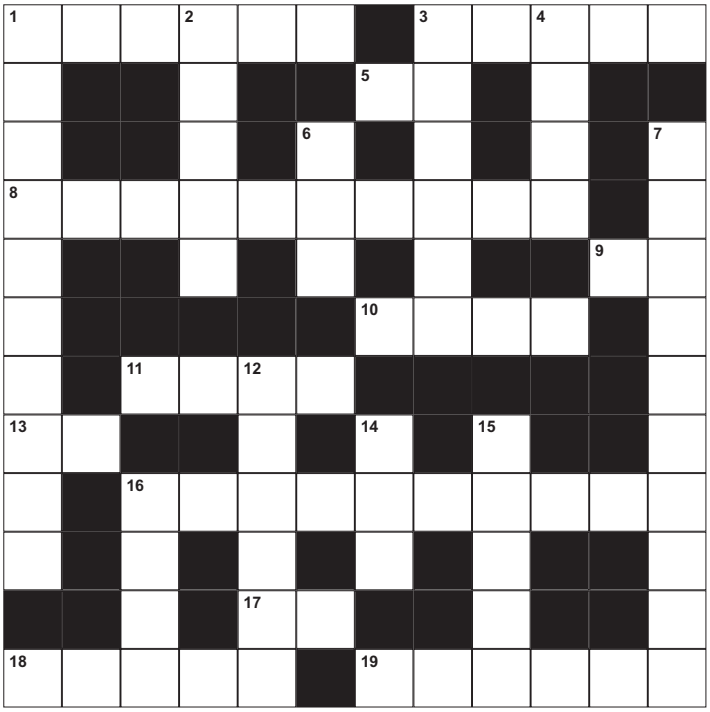
Vaughan Williams' own *The Sons of Light* was composed, like Malcolm Arnold's *The Return of Odysseus*, reviewed in the June 2006 issue, for the Schools Music Association of Great Britain. We learn from the title page of the vocal score that Boult conducted its first performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London, "on the occasion of the Second National Schools Music Festival" in June 1951.

Who, I wonder, was the honoured composer in 1950? In 1952? Any members who have information on this are invited to write! I first encountered the piece itself on a Naxos disc, coupled with the first ever recording of *Willow-Wood*, a disc made possible by financial support from RVW Ltd. and the Society and reviewed by Stephen Connock in the February 2006 issue of the Journal. Since then I have tried, believe me I have tried, but I just can't get on with it. Ursula Vaughan Williams' text is dense, serious and rich in imagery, but it is also abstruse, its message far from evident even when read, even less so when sung, and I wonder what the young people made of it, even in 1951 when – dare I say it? – more was expected of young people in respect of literary appreciation.

I find Vaughan Williams' music, apart from a few passages, undistinguished. He responds to the more dramatic passages, and those more easily lending themselves to musical illustration, with his customary skill, but melodic distinction is rare, and Vaughan Williams magic largely absent. I should add that holding this view places me at odds with distinguished scholars such as Stephen Connock (in his review) and Michael Kennedy (in his book on the Works) so perhaps I am suffering from a blind spot. The performance is stunningly good, with both chorus and orchestra marginally more fervent than in the Naxos performance, though there really is nothing in it, as both are excellent. (Incidentally, both performances deviate in several details from my old vocal score, with a few bars cut here and a few notes altered there.) If you only buy the Lyrita disc you won't be able to get to know *Willow-Wood*, which would be both a pity and, for Society members, a grievous sin. But if you don't buy the present disc you will be missing out on the wonderful piece by Vaughan Williams' master. Enough said, I think.

William Hedley

RVW Crossword No. 26 *by Michael Gainsford*



Across

1 & 3 RVW's composer friend (1901 - 1956) (6,5)
5 4th of sol-fa scale (2)
8 The other folk song found in the *Fantasia on Greensleeves* (6,4)
9 '-- sad thought' (2)
10 'The ---- of France' (*Hodie*) (4)
11 Concerto of 1954 (4)
13 Harold Wilson's favourite sauce (1,1)
16 Composed in 1932 (10)
17 Addressing the sunflower (Ten Blake Songs) (2)
18 & 19 One of the arrangers for piano of *The Running Set* (5,6)

Down

1 Prince's attendant in *The Poisoned Kiss* (10)
2 Gabriel in carol from Hereford (5)
3 Let us praise these men in Hymn 432 of *Songs of Praise* (6)
4 Noiseless in *House of Life* (4)
6 Tudor composer sounds like neckwear (3)
7 Sings 'He that is down' in *Pilgrim's Progress* (10)
12 Leader of the Morris Troupe (3,3)
14 Description of the little Island in 1949 (3)
15 Second of *Four Last Songs* (5)
16 There's an ancient one in the Shove songs (4)

Answers Page 5

Next Edition: February 2008
RVW and the International Scene
Deadline for contributions
December 16 2007

Call for Papers

The June 2008 edition will concentrate on *Flos Campi*

Deadline for contributions
March 16 2008