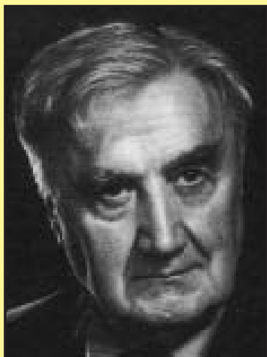

Journal of the
RVW
Society

No.41 Feb 2008

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Let us Now Praise a Famous Man

Astonishingly, 2008 marks fifty years since the death of Ralph Vaughan Williams. As with the celebrations in 1972, this anniversary presents a welcome opportunity to re-assess the man and his music. Early indications show that events in the year will not disappoint.

Symphony Cycle and Pilgrim

Pride of place goes to the Philharmonia Orchestra, under Richard Hickox, who are performing all the symphonies in London's Royal Festival Hall. The key dates are as follows:

22 May	Seventh and *A Sea Symphony*
31 May	Eighth and *A London Symphony*
2 November	Symphonies 9, 6 and 5
6 November	Fourth and *A Pastoral Symphony* (with *Dona Nobis Pacem)*

The Philharmonia are also putting on two performances, semi-staged, of *The Pilgrim's Progress* at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on 20 and 22 June. Opportunities to see this glorious work are rare so all members should try and get to London for one of these performances!

RVW Society Events

The Society has designated 12 October 2008 as the *International Day of Vaughan Williams*. We are delighted that Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has supported this day by encouraging all churches in the worldwide Anglican Communion to sing at least one Vaughan Williams hymn that day. The event is called *Valiant Voices* and a leaflet describing the project will be circulated to all churches in the Spring.

The RVW Society is also organising, with the Elgar Society, a celebration at the British Library, in London, called *Let Beauty Awake*. This investigates Vaughan Williams' response to poetry and excellent speakers have been commissioned to lead the sessions. The symposium is on 22-23 November.

On 7 August, at the Three Choirs Festival, the Society will be presenting Sir David Willcocks with our third *International Medal of Honour*. The concert includes *Dona Nobis Pacem*. No one deserves this honour better than Sir David Willcocks.

Kissing Her Hair

Albion Records will also be leading the commemorations with the release of our second CD, *Kissing her hair,* on 18 February. We are then recording an *a cappella* disc featuring the Joyful Company of Singers under Peter Broadbent. We are planning a CD of archive material and this will be issued in August 2008, to mark the actual date of the composer's death. We believe this CD will be of great and lasting interest to members.

More dates for your diary: page 8

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From the Editor

I make no apologies for publishing the photograph above. It's only the second time my picture has appeared in the Journal, and it will the last for a long time. It was taken at the Society's Annual General Meeting in October 2004, at the Royal College of Music where I was myself a student in the early 1970s. It was not the only time I met Ursula Vaughan Williams, but it was the only time she engaged me in close conversation, during which the photograph was taken. She chatted away as if she had known me for years, touching on many subjects and many people. It didn't matter that I didn't participate much, nor that I didn't know many of the figures she was evoking. My conversation with Ursula that day will always remain a treasured memory, but there are many, many of you whose contact with her goes back so much further, and is so much more complete, than my own. I invite all those who wish to share their memories of Ursula to write them down and send them to the Journal. I hope you will all write in, but I can't promise to publish every piece as to do so, I think, would take up the whole Journal. But the theme of the October 2008 Journal, one year after her death, will be Ursula Vaughan Williams Remembered.

As to the current issue, the subject of Vaughan Williams and the International Scene seems not to have engendered much enthusiasm amongst members. This is perhaps not surprising in respect of those members already living on the sceptred isle, but I'd hoped for more from overseas. Defining Englishness in music is such a dangerous game. How can it be that Ravel and Debussy both sound so typically French when each sounds so different from the other? Does the music of the current Master of the Queen's Music sound any less English than that of Vaughan Williams? And if so, why? I live in France and it seems that the music of Vaughan Williams is almost never performed to French audiences by French musicians (though even as I write I hear of a recent recital of Vaughan Williams songs in Paris). Yet as members know, I have had the pleasure myself, as a choral conductor, of performing Vaughan Williams – if all goes to plan my choir will be singing the *Five Mystical Songs* in June of this anniversary year – and singers and audiences have invariably loved these pieces. And yet we think of this music as typically English, music which, almost by definition, doesn't travel. Do some of us not even prefer it that way?

The forthcoming Journal, June 2008, will concentrate on one of Vaughan Williams' least English-sounding works, as well as one of his most mysterious, *Flos Campi*. I hope members will rise to the challenge of this extraordinary piece. As far as the idea of a "themed" Journal in general is concerned, I'm pleasantly surprised when older subjects reappear. Several contributors to this edition have made reference to the closing bars of the Ninth Symphony, our theme last June. Since Beethoven, there is a certain weight attached to any composer's ninth symphony, to the point that Mahler was superstitious about allocating that number to a symphonic work. Vaughan Williams' Ninth is seen by many as one of the finer embodiments of his "visionary" nature. Different contributors have evoked those final bars to vindicate different theories, which I suppose is as clear a sign as any that music can support multiple interpretations. More than one member, rather disturbed I think by the darkness of the portrait of the composer which emerges from Tony Palmer's recent film – which has generated, incidentally, more correspondence than almost any other subject since I began editing the Journal – point out that the symphony actually dies away on a long-held chord of E major, leading to suggestions that the work is fundamentally optimistic. I find this too easy: one cannot set aside the effect, frankly weird, of those saxophones as easily as that. Andrew Burn, in a CD liner note, writes that the effect "is like staring into the vast awesome unknown, even beyond life itself." It is well put. Thank goodness for visionary artists. They help those of us who would willingly contemplate such matters were we bright enough, or brave enough, to do so.

William Hedley

Ursula Vaughan Williams: The Echo of Imagination

Ursula Vaughan Williams died on 23 October 2007 aged 96. Stephen Connock pays tribute.

Ursula, with Stephen Connock and Richard Hickox

Friends of Ursula Vaughan Williams were doubly blessed. First, we enjoyed her vitality, warmth and wonderful sense of humour. Second, we had access to the world of Ralph Vaughan Williams – to his life and music and with an insight unique to Ursula.

Ursula Wood was born in Malta in 1911, the daughter of an Army Officer. Typically, she was relocated many times – she told me it was as many as twenty household moves – before she settled at finishing school in Brussels. Here she could at least visit the opera, theatres and art galleries. She wrote her first poems in 1927 and continued an interest in poetry until her death.

Her childhood was often lonely, whilst her relationship with her mother was never close. She preferred the company of her grandmothers. She married Michael Wood in 1933, another Army professional whom she had met at Porton in 1930. He was tall and good-looking, but quiet – too shy for Ursula as she came to realise. Michael liked nothing more than to paint, becoming an accomplished water-colourist.

Ursula Wood joined the Old Vic Company in 1932, starting rehearsals in August. As she said, it was an interesting season with Peggy Ashcroft, Roger Livesey, Alastair Sim and Anthony Quayle in the company. She would visit the ballet. As she put it in *Paradise Remembered*: "One night I went to the Vic when the ballet was a new one and saw *Job*. Normally I didn't notice music, being interested in what was happening on the stage, but *Job*…absolutely bowled me over".

Ursula was to meet Vaughan Williams in 1938 to discuss a possible collaboration for a new ballet. So began a relationship that would last twenty years, until Ralph's death in 1958. Without doubt, Ursula was the right person at the right time for Ralph. She brought to him a renewed zest for life. She also introduced him to poetry, including Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat* which he loved. Ralph, for his part, introduced Ursula into a musical world where she could attend concerts and parties afterwards.

Michael's death in 1942 brought Ralph and Ursula even closer. Following Adeline's death in 1951, they married entering into a "blissful phase" as Ursula put it to me. She provided fresh texts for Ralph's music, including *The Sons of Light*, their "Joint Cantata" in 1952 and the *Four Last Songs*, settings of Ursula's poems, in 1958. One of these songs, *Tired*, was very personal to them both.

During this period, Ursula continued to write poems and also produced four novels. Her work shows the influence of both W. B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy. She became an accomplished librettist with over 30 composers setting her words to music, including Finzi, Howells and Malcolm Williamson. As one composer put it: "There is a beauty to her words. It is very sensitive, she can capture moods and ideas in a few words or lines. Above all, the words are evocative and stimulate a musical response."

Following Ralph's death, Ursula worked tirelessly on musical causes. She became President of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. She served on the executive of the Musicians' Benevolent Fund and on the Committee of the Royal Academy of Music. She was deeply involved in the RVW Trust – stimulating new music and performances – and was very supportive of the RVW Society. She became our first President, in 1995. The Society was proud to publish Ursula's *Complete Poems* and her autobiography *Paradise Remembered*. No one else had made this effort on behalf of her writing and she was deeply grateful to the Society for our belief in her as a writer.

All Ursula's friends will miss her greatly, especially her sense of fun and her free spirit. As the conductor Igor Kennaway put it in a letter to Ursula of 1 February 1993:

What draws all who know and love you is the echo of your imagination and your heart – always aware of so many levels of existence. I think that the free spirits which dance around you are such precious gifts of friendship that I shall store and treasure them forever.

We will never forget her.

From over the Pond:

Ralph Vaughan Williams as seen by American Music Critics

Paul Ingram

Honesty. How should we define it, trust it, know Job from his tempters in our lives? For Lynn Bailey, recent first acquaintance with a piece of music by Ralph Vaughan Williams helped point the way: "The Sixth Symphony is one of the towering masterpieces of 20th-century British music... I was literally bowled over by its stark emotional power and, more importantly, its complete HONESTY." Lynn is a music critic, and she writes for the long-established American magazine *Fanfare,* whose contributors are encouraged to be honest (and eloquent) by editor Joel Fleger. Tired of reading equivocal reviews in the music press, Fleger started his own journal, to tell it like it is (about artists, recordings and music), and otherwise not to tell it at all. Published every two months, the book-length magazine offers hundreds of reviews and interviews which display a general lack of cosiness with music industry preconceptions. *Fanfare* is the work of a scarily distinguished list of contributors, mainly from North America. I'm English, but for some years, I've been lucky enough (and sometimes scared, too) to join them in the critical front line.

When I saw that the RVW Society Journal was planning an issue devoted to international views of Vaughan Williams, I thought I'd canvass the experiences and opinions of my *Fanfare* colleagues, and present them here, in the hope the results might be of some interest to readers, and maybe provoke further discussion. I asked all the journalists the same three questions (Your favourite Vaughan Williams piece? Your first encounter with his music? Your take on his reputation and place in American musical life?) and I received many detailed responses, right away. I encouraged them to pull no punches, and apologise for quoting them out of context in this article.

In all honesty, it's the contradictions that stand out in my fellow critics' views, as in the music. Lynn Bailey again: "The problem I had with Vaughan Williams' music, up until I heard the Sixth Symphony, was that it was very pleasant music, well crafted but what I would call relaxing, cushy music. His aesthetic seemed to be more externally motivated, to me, prior to the Sixth Symphony." For some, there is an unbridgeable gap between the perceived "Pastoral" Vaughan Williams and his more forthright styles. The Fourth and Sixth symphonies were well received in the USA from the start of course, and some might wish he'd written more in that vein. Jim North makes a good example: "As a British composer, this American's view is that VW is a far cry from Britten, but he's the next best thing. Copland might make an across-the-pond comparison: a few strong, difficult works, a lot of local color, highly admired by the locals, but no genuine masterpieces and quite a bit of ho-hum." And the honest reason for this? "Much of VW sounds too 'English' for me. Does that term mean anything to an Englishman? If not, I'd be hard put to explain it. For example, I am bored by most of Elgar, excepting *Enigma*, but I have no trouble with Britten." The author of *National Music* can still, in 2008, seem too British to cross the pond intact. But there is an opposing stream of opinion. This from Tom Godell who, like several *Fanfare* contributors (and thousands of Americans), owes his first experience of Vaughan Williams to playing the *English Folk Songs Suite* in school or college bands: "I still love the *Folk Songs Suite*. I am enraptured every time I hear *The Lark Ascending*. The Fifth Symphony is one of the most beautiful pieces ever composed. I think his operas *Sir John in Love, Riders to the Sea* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* are three of the very greatest 20th-century operas. In fact, I'd probably rank *Sir John* as the greatest opera based on Falstaff (with apologies to Verdi)." We'll come back to the English/Pastoral "problem," but for a high proportion of the journalists I polled, in the vast North American continent, their introduction to Vaughan Williams came through recordings and broadcasts. Paul Snook was of their number: "I believe I first became aware of VW while in college when the final minutes of the lovely Prelude to *The 49th Paralle*l were used as closing music by a local radio program called "Music Until Midnight" over a legendary (in the US) pop music station WNEW. It took me years to track down this shellac London/Decca set." For Peter Rabinowitz, searching his early memories brought back thoughts of a joint English/American project, the Mercury-produced LP of the Barbirolli/Hallé performance of the Eighth Symphony. It was issued in the UK on Pye (later on Dutton and EMI) and in the US on a Mercury "Living Presence" record. "I do have a feeling that the first LP of his music that I bought for myself was the Mercury LP of the Eighth Symphony. That was probably in 1964 or so (I was in college at the time); I bought it for the VW, so I must have known him well enough to have been eager to hear what this symphony sounded like. It was, significantly, a more important purchase for its collateral effect: it was my introduction to Bax, who has remained a passion ever since."

For others, Ralph Vaughan Williams meant singing hymns in the Episcopal tradition, or, for Alan Swanson, singing the *Mass* in early church experience: "Since then I have myself been a lay clerk and sung the *Mass* countless times. And when one thinks that the *Mass* came in 1920-21, it's as if he'd vowed to fight the Continental erosion of traditional harmony. There's a reason Britten studied with Bridge and not Bridge's English contemporaries - there's salt in Bridge."

So there's the Vaughan Williams versus Benjamin Britten contest, once again. It's an interesting surprise to hear of the British composers being seen in competition in this way. Several colleagues took a view on this, and Patrick Rutter put a date on the outbreak of hostilities: "I would say that, prior to his eclipse by Britten beginning in the 1960s, popularly speaking at least, Vaughan Williams was for many Americans the quintessential twentieth-century British composer." For Arthur Lintgen, it's a phoney war: "I think the critical acclaim of Britten compared to RVW is an exercise in intellectual and critical snobbery reacting to the accessibility and likeability of RVW's music." Alan Swanson makes a detailed case for the complexities of the nature of "Englishness" being another contributing factor to the possible decline of Vaughan Williams' reputation Stateside, at least in some quarters: "Almost everything we identify today as 'English' music or the 'English' sound comes not earlier than VW and

stands in imitation of him. That's his legacy: to have created the 'English' sound. But it is not at all clear to me that he actually understood what was 'English' in music other than that it happened to be produced in England by him or his disciples. Is Elgar 'English' in his sound? I don't hear it, not even in *Pomp and Circumstance*. I think VW is historically important because he invented and sold an English school of composition that had a good run. That the school was a dead-end he perhaps began to understand: I think the *Partita* shows something else lurking in the background, for instance." Swanson draws an analogy between the experience of American composers in the last century, and the career of Vaughan Williams: " ...just as American students of Nadia Boulanger before and after the War returned home and overran the competition, stopping composers such as Roy Harris, Roger Sessions, and William Schuman from getting performances at the venues that counted then (NY), so VW and his epigones monopolised the podia. Yes, he and they were excellent craftsmen - no embarrassments among them - but they exercised an enormous drag on English composition." For this writer, Vaughan Williams was not a progressive influence: "In short, I hear his music as a rear-guard action against new movements in music."

Patrick Rucker identifies another aid to Vaughan Williams' initial penetration of the American market: "Analogous to Hindemith's tenure at Yale, VW's teaching in the US almost certainly enhanced his reputation here." Yet it was the *Pastoral* Symphony, of course, which led to Vaughan Williams' being invited to the USA in the 1920s, and to his approving encounter with skyscrapers (if not with chicken salad). All the more surprising then (or not, given the "English" title of the French-tinged Third) that no journalist mentioned this symphony as their preferred cup of RVW tea. A couple of my colleagues mention the Third respectfully, but it's interesting too to see that the work is also not even mentioned in Tony Palmer's epic film about the composer, *O Thou Transcendent,* which does illustrate and/or discusses each of the other eight symphonies.

The *Tallis Fantasia* gets the highest rating as a favourite piece among the Americans, with four votes, followed by the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies, with three votes each. The First, Second, Fifth, and Seventh symphonies tie with two votes, alongside *Flos Campi* and the *Serenade to Music*. Other preferred works are the Eighth and Ninth, *Job* and the Concerto for Two Pianos, all of which receive one vote as top of one critic's Vaughan Williams charts. Several writers mention early favourable reactions to the *Lark*. They record mostly positive impressions of the operas, when finally encountered on record, or in the flesh. Walter Simmons, distinguished author of *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo-Romantic Composers*, and a renowned authority on American music, goes further: "It is very hard for me to select one favorite RVW piece. If I were forced to do so, I might pick *Flos Campi*. But competing for that distinction would be the Symphonies 4, 6, and 9, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. I consider *Hodie* to be THE greatest of all Christmas pieces. But there is almost no RVW that I dislike."

Each symphony is someone's favourite Vaughan Williams piece, then, except for the *Pastoral*, which happens to be my own favourite piece of music by anyone! So it goes. For James Reel, a Vaughan Williams fan, the explanation for this or that prejudice is down to ignorance or neglect, and not acumen: "I'm not sure that my high opinion of RVW is widely shared here, more because people aren't deeply familiar with his music than because of any antipathy. Certainly he was a finer composer than the currently ballyhooed Elgar. He was a master of atmosphere, yet did not allow atmosphere to substitute for attention to structure and thematic profile (a problem with, for example, Delius and Bax)." This status issue is addressed most clearly by Peter Rabinowitz: "If we remove the category of super-composers (Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Chopin, and a handful of others), the next group down is the simply "great" composers: Stravinsky, Scriabin, Elgar, Shostakovich. Vaughan Williams is surely in that group for me." Others place Vaughan Williams on a slightly lower second tier, while the eminent scholar J. F. Weber is more abstract: " I think his stature will endure. His competence shows through his works, but that doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement of genius."

As for the future, George Chien sums up the worries of perhaps a majority of music lovers in this century: "It's hard to predict whether VW will still be played 100 years from now, because it's hard to predict whether any of the current classical repertoire will survive. From the balcony of a concert hall, one can be dazzled by the glint reflecting off the silver hair of the patrons." Selling Ralph Vaughan Williams to the young might be the subject of a useful future study. Meanwhile, a recognisable picture of the composer is beginning to develop in the darkroom of this continuing series of exchanges with American musicians and musicologists. As always, the comments tell us maybe as much about the culture the commentators' grew up with as about the matter in hand. Americans, like Brits or Russians or anyone else, define themselves when talking of foreign issues. The USA possesses a huge musical heritage, hundreds of composers, many of them neglected, and countless performing musicians of all standards and levels of aspiration. The country sings, and it often sings Vaughan Williams. Clearly, at band level, it also plays him. Several conductors from overseas have brought Vaughan Williams to America: Walter, Koussevitsky, and Stokowski among them, while Ormandy, Bernstein and Louis Lane played his music a generation or two before the boom that led to several recorded symphonic cycles, and a change of fortune (exemplified by the Society's existence) which still needs reinforcement, to stick. The RVW/USA history is rich, but different. Views of his music either side of the pond reflect the shades of opinion each country holds on the other. I hope the creative dialogue continues, mediated by the music, which belongs to everyone.

No American critic I spoke with lacked affection for at least one Vaughan Williams work. A last, thoughtful word on the composer, though, from Walter Simmons, exemplifying the spirit of American independence of thought, as well as nationhood: "I consider him to be a major figure on the level of Ernest Bloch. I hold VW and Bloch as the equal of their more highly-touted contemporaries Stravinsky, Bartok, and Schoenberg. I think that each of them attempted to redefine music for the 20th century. Personally, I find the visions charted by Bloch and VW to be more profoundly rewarding than those charted by the other three, but they are both indefensibly relegated to the pile of 'minor figures.'" It's a personal view, but an honest one, like Vaughan Williams' comments on his own Fourth Symphony. I'd welcome the responses of Society members to these issues, in the interests of continuing understanding and debate. I hope the comments recorded here offer one kind of honest snapshot of how Ralph Vaughan Williams is seen right now, in 2008.

With sincere thanks to Peter Rabinowitz, Tom Godell, Jim North, James Reel, James Miller, Michael Ullman, Lynn Bailey, Steven Ritter, Phil Scott, Paul Snook, George Chien, Patrick Rucker, Arthur Lintgen, Adrian Corleonis, Alan Swanson, Walter Simmons, Henry Fogel, J. F. Weber, and to Joel Fleger, indefatigable editor of Fanfare magazine (www.fanfaremag.com; fanfaremag@aol.com).

PERFORMANCES in SYDNEY – an impressive archive from

Fred Blanks

Having passed many of my eight-two years in two professional capacities – as scientist and as music critic/writer/lecturer – I have used a statistical turn of mind to list all music heard in performances which I have attended , around 11,500 events since the 1940s, alphabetically and chronologically. The result (unfortunately not computerised because it was begun long before computers) listed, at the end of 2006, some 23,547 different works by 3,286 different composers in 74,605 performances.

Here are listed all Vaughan Williams' pieces actually heard by me in Sydney since the mid-1940s. (I heard Vaughan Williams conduct his own music in the UK while living there in the 1950s, but only Sydney performances are shown below.) The pieces are listed very concisely, but I hope recognisably, to save space. Pieces heard completely, or in part, are listed under one heading. There may be some errors, for which I apologise.

The Wasps: 1948, 1954, 1955, 1959, 1960, 1967, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1981, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1990
Sir John In Love (including *Fantasia on "Greensleeves"*): 1948, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1965, 1966, 1969, 1970 (complete opera), 1972, 1973, 1976, 1977, 1983, 1986, 1998, 2001, 2005.
Job: 1952
*49th Paralle*l (film music): 2007
Riders To The Sea: 1953, 1983
The Pilgrim's Progress: 1959, 1967, 1968, 1972
Norfolk Rhapsody No. 1: 1950, 1952
Tallis Fantasia: 26 times 1946 – 2006
The Lark Ascending: 8 times 1968 – 2004
English Folksongs Suite: 1953, 1978 (twice), 1980, 1988, 1992
Flos Campi: 1953, 1955, 1968, 1977
Concerto Accademico: 2000
Symphony No.1: 1947, 1955, 1995, 1997
No.2: 1954, 1960, 1969, 1985, 1989, 1994
No.3: 1950 (twice), 1986
No.4: 1951, 1954, 1961, 1971, 1974, 1980, 1986
No.5: 1947, 1956, 1963, 1967, 1972, 1993, 1996
No.6: 1949, 1950, 1954, 1960, 1969, 1976, 2000
No.7: 1953 (twice), 1969, 2000, 2007
No.8: 1956
No.9: 1958
Suite for Viola: 1956, 1970
Serenade To Music: 10 times 1951 – 1999
Dives & Lazarus: 7 times 1964 – 1974
Variations for Brass Band: 1972
Flourish for Wind Band: 1984
Oboe Concerto: 1960, 1985
Tuba Concerto: 1955, 1968, 1972, 1991
Toccata Marziale: 1984
Concerto Grosso for Strings: 1996
Toward The Unknown Region: 1998
Te Deum: 1972, 1986, 2002
Five Mystical Songs: 1961, 1962, 1997
Four Hymns for Tenor: 1981, 1989
Lord Thou Hast Been Our Refuge: 1968
O How Amiable: 1968, 1984
Mass in G Minor: 13 times 1952 – 2001
Sancta Civitas: 1955
Benedicite: 1952
Festival Te Deum: 1957, 1986
Dona Nobis Pacem: 11 times 1952 – 2006
Five Tudor Portraits: 1986, 1994, 2006
Magnificat: 1972, 1983, 1986, 1992
For All The Saints: 1988
A Song of Thanksgiving: 1955
Valiant For Truth: 1988
Souls of the Righteous: 1955
O Taste and See: 1968, 1970, 1992
Hodie: 1957, 1972
Fantasia on Christmas Carols: 1965, 1986, 1987, 1992, 2001
The House of Life (all or part): 14 times 1952 – 2003
On Wenlock Edge: 7 times 1951 – 2007
Songs of Travel (all or part): 17 times 1961 – 2004
Five English Folksongs (all or part): 13 times 1963 – 2005
Three Shakespeare Songs: 11 times 1955 – 2001
Orpheus With His Lute: 1980, 1986, 1991
Along The Field: 1957, 2002
Ten Songs of William Blake: 1960, 1977, 1988, 1989, 1994
Three Elizabethan Partsongs: 1996, 2005
Four Poems for Voice and Piano: 1986, 1988, 1996
Three Choral Hymns for Leith Hill: 2003
Three Vocalises for Soprano and Clarinet: 1997, 2000
Fantasy Quintet: 1961, 1962, 2003
Romance for Lionel Tertis: 2000, 2002
Piano Quintet in C Minor: 2006
String Quartet A Minor: 1952
Sonata Violin & Piano: 1959
6 Studies in English Folksong: 1982
3 Preludes on Welsh Hymn Tunes: 1949, 1950.

There are also twenty-three individual songs and a few short instrumental pieces. To list them individually would make this list even more cumbersome than it already is. By and large, Vaughan Williams is reasonably well represented in Sydney performances, though there has been a definite shrinkage in the 21st century.

Hopefully the 2008 Sydney programs will observe the anniversary. Meanwhile, I remain a member of the International Vaughan Williams Society.

Vaughan Williams Abroad:

Sir Roger Norrington's View

One of the letters to appear in the June 2005 issue of the Journal was from Sir Roger Norrington. He wrote as follows:

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

Here's a brief account:

***Symphony No. 1 -** Two performances in Stuttgart, one in Cologne. A new CD in the offing.*
***Symphony No. 2 -** Two performances in Leipzig, four in Philadelphia, three in Stuttgart, three in Los Angeles.*

***Symphony No. 3 -** Four performances in Stuttgart, one in Lucerne, one in Vienna, two in Leipzig, two in Amsterdam, one in Cologne, one in Dortmund (and one at the Proms of course with Stuttgart three years ago).*
***Symphony No. 4 -** Two performances in Stuttgart, two in Leipzig.*
***Symphony No. 5 -** Three performances in Stuttgart, two in Leipzig, two in Boston, three in San Francisco*
***Symphony No. 6 -** Two performances in Stuttgart, two in Leipzig, one in Tokyo, one in Miyazaki, one in Berlin, one in Leverkusen.*
Tallis Fantasia. *Three performances in Berlin and two in Salzburg (Berlin Philharmonic).*
***Future plans -** as many symphonies as possible with Berlin and Vienna in the coming years.*

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

Sir Roger Norrington

At the time of writing Sir Roger is working in Japan, after several days in Stuttgart. Such is the life of a professional conductor! Whilst he was in Stuttgart, however, he was kind enough to find a few minutes to talk to me about Vaughan Williams and the International Scene, at least as far as his own experiences allowed. The first thing to say is that the rhythm of Vaughan Williams performances outlined above has been kept up in the time which has passed since his letter appeared. He concentrates on the symphonies, those works being the easiest to fit into the programme of a symphony orchestra, but other works have also featured, including the Concerto for Two Pianos, and the Tuba Concerto is to be given in Germany soon. The *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis*, as we read in his letter, has already been given by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. I've written elsewhere in the Journal of a certain suspicion that some of us – Brits – are more than a little content that our music seems so well to reflect our national characteristics, even if we are at a loss to define them, that it does not travel well. Yet who would not look forward to hearing the Berlin strings in the *Tallis Fantasia*! Even more fascinating is the fact that, as Sir Roger explained to me, Vaughan Williams' early works would have been first given without vibrato, which is to say, the composer imagined them this way. The players of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam were rather surprised, even shocked, when Sir Roger announced that they were to play the *Tallis Fantasia* without vibrato. So what happened? "They got used to it," was his laconic reply. Sir Roger has personal memories of Vaughan Williams, having performed under his direction as a young man. There were also family connections. The booklets accompanying his – sadly incomplete – cycle of symphony recordings on Decca are prefaced by a touching introduction written by the conductor which ends with the words "He was the greatest man I am ever likely to meet." There seems little doubt that, apart from his admiration for the music itself, Sir Roger is engaged in something akin to a personal crusade on the composer's behalf. Inevitably most of Sir Roger's overseas Vaughan Williams performances have been in Germany, though others have indeed taken place. "I don't conduct much in France, but I do recall one performance where I spoke to the audience beforehand, about Ralph's French connections, Ravel, his experiences as an *ambulancier* and so on." He spoke also, and amusingly, of a performance of the *Sea Symphony* in Milan with an Italian chorus. "Interesting to hear them trying to get round Whitman's words…it sounded a bit like Chinese!" But wherever the performances have taken place – and one need look no further than his letter above to see how widely travelled the music is – the reception , from musicians, public and even critics alike, has always been positive. I pressed Sir Roger on this. Had there never been a negative reaction? "None that I can recall, " he replied. The reaction of the German critics cited above is much more the norm, as was another, who said "It seems inconceivable that music as fine as this is unknown in Germany." The first six symphonies have all been given in Stuttgart now, and everything is recorded there. Perhaps we might hope, therefore, that his recorded Vaughan Williams cycle will one day be completed. Sir Roger's reply to this suggestion was, shall we say, cautious. I, for one, am still hoping: I find each of his readings amongst the finest available, more especially those of the third and fifth symphonies.

Sir Roger is a strong supporter of the theory that the Sixth is indeed concerned with war. The scherzo, for instance, with its extraordinary saxophone solo, he sees as "an air raid, and the Americans are involved." And as for the finale, the aftermath of a nuclear explosion seems so right as to be inevitable. Why was Vaughan Williams so opposed to the idea of meaning in his works? Was it a kind of embarrassment, even? "Oh quite possibly. It's so British, isn't it, not to want to say too much." As for the finale of the Sixth "Ralph could quote Prospero as much as he liked, but the nuclear idea works so much better." Quite the most striking and poignant story of Vaughan Williams overseas concerned a performance of the Sixth Symphony in Japan. After the performance Sir Roger was signing autographs and next in line was a Japanese gentleman who could not control his tears. With difficulty he managed to explain. "I come from Hiroshima," he said. "Thank you for playing this piece in Japan."

William Hedley

Anniversary Year - Dates for your Diary

By Stephen Connock

Many events are still being planned for the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Ralph Vaughan Williams in 2008. The following are confirmed dates of major events:

18 February - Second Albion Records disc is released
19 February - *Job* at Royal Festival Hall, London
09 March - *St Matthew Passion* at Dorking Halls
27 March - *Pilgrim's Progress* at Sydney Opera
01 April - Fifth Symphony at Cadogan Hall, London
10 April - *Toward the Unknown Region* at Dorking Halls
12 April - *Five Mystical Songs* and *Serenade to Music* at Dorking Halls
11 May - *Riders to the Sea* at Brighton Festival
13 May - *An Oxford Elegy* at Queen Elizabeth Hall, London
17 May - VW Study Day at University of Leicester
18 May - VW Day at Bedford Corn Exchange
21 May - Symphonies 8 and 2 at the Corn Exchange, Bedford
22 May - Symphonies 7 and 1 at Royal Festival Hall, London
23 May - *A Sea Symphony* at Corn Exchange, Bedford
31 May - VW Study Day at British Library, London
31 May - Symphonies 8 and 2 at Royal Festival Hall, London
20 & 22 June - *Pilgrim's Progress* at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London
July – Sept. - Proms in Albert Hall, London (No information currently available)
05 July - *Pilgrim's Journey* at Salisbury Cathedral
07 August - *Dona Nobis Pacem* at Worcester Cathedral
05 October - AGM at Royal College of Music, featuring Roderick Williams and Iain Burnside
12 October - International Day of Vaughan Williams
02 November - Symphonies 9, 6 and 5. Royal Festival Hall, London (15.00 start)
06 November - Symphonies 3, 4 and *Dona Nobis Pacem*
14 November - International Conference at City University, New York.
22 & 23 Nov - Study Weekend at British Library, London

Considerable effort is going into planning other events, including productions of *Riders to the Sea* in London, *The Poisoned Kiss* and *Hugh the Drover*. More details in the June Journal.

EM MARSHALL introduces the THE ENGLISH MUSIC FESTIVAL, OXFORDSHIRE, 23 – 27 MAY 2008

This year sees a major celebration of Britain's musical heritage, in the heart of rural England. The inaugural English Music Festival took place in October in 2006 to tremendous acclaim. The opening concert by the BBC Concert Orchestra, conducted by David Lloyd Jones, featured Vaughan Williams' *Norfolk Rhapsody* and the first professional concert performance of Holst's *Walt Whitman* overture, and was broadcast on Radio 3. The highlight of the 2006 EMF was a deeply moving performance of Vaughan Williams' *An Oxford Elegy*, narrated by the Oscar-winning actor Jeremy Irons, with conductor Hilary Davan Wetton.

The second Festival will be held in Oxfordshire between May 23 and 27 2008. The mediaeval abbey at Dorchester-on-Thames will once again host the EMF's main evening concerts, while other events will be held at Radley College, All Saints Church Sutton Courtenay, and in the magnificent chapel at Keble College, Oxford University. Fourteen concerts and recitals, spread over five days, will enable audiences to experience some of the most exquisite English music from across the centuries.

Opening with a major concert by the BBC Concert Orchestra, the 2008 Festival will include many overlooked pieces. Although the focus will be on the early twentieth century, works performed will nonetheless range from early music through to the present day, providing a broad picture of the extraordinary diversity of Britain's musical heritage. Among the works by Vaughan Williams which will be heard at this year's Festival are the *Concerto Accademico* (to be performed by Vox Musica on Saturday May 24), the *Charterhouse Suite* May 25, the Amaretti Orchestra) and his two String Quartets (performed by the Carducci Quartet on Monday 26th May).

Tickets for the Festival go on sale in March. In the meantime, please check the EMF website, www.englishmusicfestival.org.uk for updates, or contact the EMF Managing & Artistic Director, Em Marshall, on 0203 274 1054 or 07808 473889, email em.marshall@btinternet.com. The EMF has a thriving Friends scheme, and members are entitled to a wide range of membership benefits including discounted tickets and priority booking.

IAN JONES lets us know about an important event from CUMBRIA CHORAL INITIATIVE

Cumbria Choral Initiative, which was founded nine years ago, recognises the satisfaction to be gained from singing, as well as its therapeutic and regenerative aspects, and endeavours to enhance and consolidate these by reaching out, especially to young people, to any who have not experienced the joys of choral singing and also to re-vitalise and re-energise those people already involved. CCI believes that choral singing is a vital part of our cultural heritage and is central to the lives of rural communities.

In addition to regular "Choral Days", workshops and other events too numerous to list here, CCI's achievements so far include, in March 2000, a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, never previously performed in Cumbria; Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony*, performed in July 2002 to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee; and, in November 2005, a Remembrance Weekend performance before a hugely appreciative capacity audience, of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, typically – for CCI – drawing soloists, instrumentalists and chorus members from schools and communities all across the Northwest of England.

All our projects are funded by grants, sponsorships, subscriptions, audience revenue and specific money-raising efforts, in particular the highly successful 'Come and Sing' events in Cartmel Priory.

CCI's next project is a weekend Festival of English music, this time to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of Ralph Vaughan Williams, one of England's greatest composers who was himself convinced of the value of community music making. CCI's event will take place in July 2008 and, as usual, will feature local singers and instrumentalists performing in Kendal and Cartmel. The Festival will begin on Friday July 11 with a choral concert in Cartmel Priory given by the Pro Nobis Singers, one of the most respected local choirs, and run through to Sunday afternoon with a recital of English song in the Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal. This recital will be given by John Lofthouse, a native of Levens village who is now building a career as a solo singer, and Nicholas Hurndall Smith whose parental home is in Sedbergh and who regularly takes time off from a busy professional career to sing in Cumbria. The main Festival Concert will feature the New Millennium Chorus for which membership is open to all singers who wish to take part. It is confidently anticipated that the two choral works to be performed, Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* will have very wide appeal to young singers as well as adults. CCI will continue its policy of keeping ticket prices as low as possible and will thus ensure that audiences will have every opportunity to enjoy a wide variety of music throughout the weekend. Other planned events include a guided walk round the old town of Kendal, lectures on the music of Vaughan Williams, a buffet lunch and a farewell tea. The project typifies CCI's commitment to encouraging amateur singers and instrumentalists, young and old, to gain concert experience working alongside the best professionals and to promoting events in an innovative and attractive way. It is anticipated that audiences will be drawn from the whole of Cumbria and beyond and it is hoped that upwards of 1500 people could benefit from this event.

And finally, RHIAN DAVIES talks about Ralph Vaughan Williams and GREGYNOG

Gregynog Hall, five miles north-west of Newtown in mid Wales, can claim a unique heritage in British music, having been visited by a succession of distinguished composers including Edward Elgar (1924), Gustav Holst (1931 and 1933), Ralph Vaughan Williams (1932), William Mathias (1954) and Benjamin Britten (1972). The Hall's connections with Holst and Vaughan Williams were forged by the pioneer Welsh folksinger and collector Dora Herbert-Jones (1890-1974) following her appointment as personal secretary to the owners of Gregynog, the Misses Gwendoline and Margaret Davies, in 1927. After hearing the English Singers perform Vaughan Williams' choral arrangements of English folksongs during a concert at Gregynog that same year, Gwendoline Davies determined to secure a similar group of Welsh folksongs for her in-house choir of estate workers to perform. Dora approached the composer via Adrian Boult, but he declined the invitation due to pressure of work on *Job* and referred the commission to Holst instead. Following a visit by Dora to St. Paul's School in 1930, Holst completed a dozen Welsh folksong arrangements and conducted the Choir in several of these during his first visit to Gregynog in 1931.

Connections between Mrs Herbert-Jones and Vaughan Williams had persisted meantime. The composer chaired a lecture which Dora gave before the English Folk Dance and Song Society and invited her to sing to him in Dorking in 1931. As he wrote in *Heirs and Rebels*:

Mrs Herbert Jones spent the aft. with us the other day - & we both liked her enormously. She just sat in a chair after lunch & sang & talked and told us her whole life history. I've been invited to Gregynnogg (?) – & am ½ inclined to go.

A programme printed by Gregynog's private press confirms that Vaughan Williams did indeed take part in a miscellaneous concert of vocal and instrumental music at the Hall on 11 April 1932. Evelyn Cooke and Henry Walford Davies performed *The Lark Ascending* while the composer directed the Gregynog Choir and soprano soloist Elsie Suddaby in his *Benedicite*. The following is taken from a letter written in April 1932 by Gwendoline Davies to Thomas Jones:

On Monday Sir Walford arrived & his family; also Dr Vaughan Williams (the composer). We really had a very wonderful concert especially the II Part – even Sir Walford was quite enthusiastic. Elsie Suddaby was wonderful & seemed to inspire the whole choir…[She] wrote afterwards: "Those few days will stand out in my memory as some of the happiest & most thrilling in my life. I never enjoyed a concert more." Dr [Adrian] Boult writes: "I think of that wonderful time at Gregynog, & that amazing performance in particular. It was such a joy that Vaughan Williams came & was so happy as indeed anyone is with you!"

Many other Vaughan Williams works would feature during the annual Gregynog Festivals from 1933, including lesser-known scores such as *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*. But a surprising recent discovery has been that the composer did actually complete two Welsh folksong arrangements for the Gregynog Choir after all – *Can mlynedd i nawr* ("A hundred years hence") and *Tros y môr* ("Over the sea") – even if the Choir never actually performed them. We shall be rectifying this by including world première performances of both arrangements by Tenebrae as part of our 2008 Festival.

This year's Festival is special because we are celebrating our 75th anniversary. Programmes are still being finalised, but there will certainly be several works to commemorate Vaughan Williams' anniversary year too. In addition to the premiers of the Welsh folksong arrangements already mentioned we are planning performances of *On Wenlock Edge and Five Variants of "Dives and Lazarus"*. There will be lectures related to Vaughan Williams too, and all this in the context of a particularly rich overall programme. The Festival begin on June 13 and runs until June 22, and Society members wanting more details are invited to consult the Festival website www.gwylgregynogfestival.org or telephone 01686 625007.

Ralph Vaughan Williams:
Composer, Teacher and Evangelist

By Simon Heffer

You have all, I am sure, not only heard the name of Ralph Vaughan Williams – he is probably your most famous Old Carthusian, famous throughout the world wherever music is heard – but have also, I am sure, heard some of his music. My purpose here today is to illuminate him, and it, for you. It is a task to which I hope I am equal. Unlike many of you, I have no conspicuous musical talent. I certainly cannot write music. I have, though, written about it: not least a small book on Vaughan Williams himself. I was moved to do that because of the inspirational effect his works have had on me since I was about your age. He said something to me, you see, not just about being musical, but about being English. Long before I knew that he had talked about a concept called "national music", I knew that the music he and others who followed him wrote could only have been written by Englishmen, and could only represent the English landscape and English culture. Even as a small boy, when I first became aware of his works, I was clear that he was speaking to me in a language that was as distinctly a part of the culture of my country and its people as the English tongue itself, or the hammerbeam roof of an English country church. And he also said something to me about the place that music can play in someone's life as a recreation and as a means of understanding feeling. I write for a living, but I am always humbled by the thought that a short piece of music can convey ideas, feelings and impressions that whole books, let alone articles or essays, could not begin to transmit. It would be grievously wrong to Vaughan Williams, however, to suggest that his music conveys simply a feeling of Englishness: it does far more besides that. But it is as of its place and of its time as much as a novel by Hardy is about Dorset in the 1870s, or a poem by Philip Larkin is of a grim provincial England in the 1950s or 1960s. And, as with both those writers, Vaughan Williams' art says something about his times that casts a new light upon them, because they help reveal what an intelligent and sensitve person living in those times actually thought about them.

So I shall talk about the great man's music, and how his art as a composer developed. But there are two other aspects to him that fascinate me. The first is his role as a teacher. Vaughan Williams did not teach because, like his friend Gustav Holst, he needed the money. He taught like his master Sir Charles Hubert Parry, because he had a vocation. I shall discuss that in more detail in a moment. And both as a teacher and as a public figure he evangelised for music because – and this is another part of that vocation - he knew its civilising power. He had experienced its ability to enlighten and to communicate feeling: and he wanted others to experience this too. It was all about opening what he called "the magic casements".

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in 1872, the son of a clergyman. His father died when he was still small and he was brought up by his mother and aunts a few miles from here, at Leith Hill. It might seem trite to observe that the majesty of the countryside in those Surrey uplands is from time to time an obvious influence on so much of his music, right throughout his long life - he lived, after all, until 1958. However, it is clearly true. Just as his older contemporary Elgar was heavily affected by the countryside around Worcester and Malvern, so plainly did the beauty and serenity of the country around Dorking in the late 19th century impact upon Vaughan Williams. He may not have been conscious of it at the time: but when he set out to find and develop an individual voice as a composer, it came to the fore in him. It was certainly a love and understanding of the countryside that helped impel him to learn more about its distinct musical culture: just as composers in Eastern Europe in the late 19th century, in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire, were collecting and using their own local folk music as part of the inspiration for their compositions. Vaughan Williams was from the landed gentry and was descended from some of the formidable intellectual dynasties of Victorian England, the Wedgwoods and the Darwins. Music as a livelihood had always been the province of the talented lower middle classes: it was still in the 1890s considered mildly shocking that someone as silver-spooned as Vaughan Williams should want a career in this area, even though Parry – himself the son of a formidably wealthy Gloucestershire squire – had had blazed the trail nearly 20 years earlier. Parry had helped found the Royal College of Music and it was there that Vaughan Williams went to learn his profession of composer, straight after Charterhouse and before Cambridge. Parry was profoundly influenced, as most British musicians of the time were, by the German masters. The title of one of his works - Elegy for Brahms - says it all. Elgar had drunk of the same spring, and Vaughan Williams himself fell under the spell: he writes, as a young man, of his delirium at hearing the operas of Wagner, and throughout his life he was a committed interpreter and lover of Bach. But his love of German music showed him how a specific culture can and should have a specific voice: it did not provoke him to try to copy it, or to embody Germanicism in his own compositions. It sent him off in search of what he came to call his own 'national music': and when he found it, it was that for which he evangelised for the rest of his long life.

Parry once famously injuncted Vaughan Williams to go out and write choral music "like an Englishman and a democrat". That phrase too is telling. Parry wanted the people, many of them still then largely uneducated, to understand, enjoy and benefit from the spiritual enrichment brought by serious music. He wanted his pupils to go out and write music in which the people - whom Parry elsewhere called "we singing English" - could participate. But Vaughan Williams also felt that if only music could come from the soil of England, and have some genetic link with music the supposedly unmusical English had been used to making in their ordinary lives, then the people would connect with it all the more readily and powerfully. And that is not least why, at the end of 1903, he went off to the Eastern Counties with his notebook, and started to collect folk-songs.

These songs had been part of the entertainment rural people made before the coming of mass culture. It was spontaneous music-making. "They made what they liked", Vaughan Williams

said many years later, "and they liked what they made." Such music had a local provenance and, because of the difficulties in communications before the coming of the railways and tarmacadamed roads, the songs often stayed local. Vaughan Williams went to a gathering of elderly people one afternoon in a village called Ingrave in Essex, only 20 miles from London but then in the depths of the countryside. There an old man called Mr. Potiphar sang him a folksong from his youth called *Bushes and Briars*. It was the first one Vaughan Williams collected.

In the next two or three years Vaughan Williams tramped through villages all over England, but especially - because it seemed to be such fertile soil - in East Anglia. He had a strong urge, and a commendable one, to write down these songs before they died out with their singers. Luckily he was not alone in this endeavour – the musicologist Cecil Sharp devoted a whole career to shoring up this vital part of our culture, and Holst collected some too - and before long whole volumes of these ancient melodies had been committed to manuscript. They are now perhaps best known in the many settings Benjamin Britten made of them in the 1940s and 1950s: an interesting homage to our traditional music by the one genuine genius our music has produced in the last century, given his usual radical disdain for such an idiom.

For Vaughan Williams, folksong was a launch-pad rather than an end in itself. The modal nature of much of this old English music – harking back to a time before the the conventional keys in which music is now written – informed much of his own composition, quite directly in the decade or so before the Great War, less so, but still occasionally apparent, as he became older. He used some of the folk tunes for one of his great projects, editing in 1906 *The English Hymnal* - the famous melody for *O Little Town of Bethlehem* was a Sussex folk-tune. He also orchestrated and expanded some of the tunes to tremendous effect. A melancholy and wistfulness of a folk-song from King's Lynn, Norfolk, *The Captain's Apprentice,* is typical of so much of England's folk music, and listening to the *Norfolk Rhapsody No. 1* we can hear how naturally this idiom was adapted by a composer seeking to put an English musical voice into orchestral composition.

Folksong inspired Vaughan Williams to express himself with great distinctiveness in those years before the Great War. While occasionally he borrowed, he mainly used the idiom as a starting point for further exploration. The tradition of singing is fully exploited, of course, in his first symphony, the *Sea Symphony*, which he wrote between 1906 and 1910. Although the words are American – by the poet Walt Whitman, whose now rather ridiculous-sounding verse was a huge favourite with Vaughan Williams's generation – the singing is very much of the English choral tradition stimulated by Parry, with none of the continental exoticism that permeates Elgar's work in the genre. Compare "Praise to the Holiest" from Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* to the opening of Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony, for example. That is the English voice for you, as Vaughan Williams heard it: robust, unadorned, English and definitely democratic. His love of choral music was to be not the least part of his evangelising mission. It was by participating in the making of music, he felt, that its civilising process could best be conducted among the English people. When he conducted amateur choirs – as he did each year at the Dorking Halls in Surrey, taking them through the Bach Passions – he was fulfilling not just his desire to spread the word of music, but also to teach and improve people's understanding of, and ability to participate in, a musical work. He understood the importance of the modern, and now rather debased, cult of "inclusiveness" long before anyone else did.

The uniquely English voice that emerged in his earliest successful compositions was one that made him quite distinct from his fellow composers, of whom Elgar was, in the period just before the Great War, the foremost. He immersed himself not just in folksong, but in early music, notably that of Thomas Tallis. This was a genre with which the teutonic-minded Elgar had no connection, and which therefore had no influence upon him. Vaughan Williams modernised this late mediaevalism, but it is still very much mediaeval, and very much English. In the *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis*, for example, the mode of 16th-century musical writing is swept up with the conscious, idealised romanticism of Edwardian England.

In all he sought to do before the Great War, Vaughan Williams was making a connection with England's musical past. He was joining together two parts of a chain sundered by a couple of centuries. It is as if he felt that until he had affirmed the individuality and the continuity of England's musical voice in this way, and re-established it in the minds of his audience, he could not necessarily expect them to comprehend his own voice. In 1912 he wrote an important essay, to which I would unhesitatingly refer any of you interested in making a more detailed study of his life, work and motivations. Entitled *Who wants the English composer?* it makes a powerful argument for the role of music in our apparently unmusical society, and exemplifies what one critic has accurately called Vaughan Williams' own "social mission" as a composer. He was moving towards an idea of that quality that, in another essay published in 1934, he would at last term a "national music". And was resolute in affirming that folksong was not a cause of a national music, but a manifestation of it: an integral part of the art as he, as an English composer, would practise it. Certainly, in the initial phase of his life as a composer up to the Great War, the means by which he conducted his evangelism of music to the British people began with the rehabilitated medium of folksong. The coming of the war, the interruption this forced upon his creative life, and the influence on Vaughan Williams of the slaughter he witnessed, inevitably changed his musical direction. The first version of his second symphony, the *London*, premiered in 1914, still shows its local influences: the cry of a lavender-seller in the second movement, for example, and the attempt to depict revels on Hampstead Heath in the third. But the first movement is almost Elgarian in its sweep, much more like some of the work of that composer than anything written hitherto by Vaughan Williams. Perhaps he was becoming more conformist. The revised version of the work, published in 1920, shows the impact of the war upon the composer. It is a far shorter work, and the revised fourth movement evokes the misery of the preceding years. It is an altogether more mature piece, and introduces us to a composer not so overtly influenced by landscape and pastorality, but more affected by his experience of the increasingly ugly world around him.

Viewed in solely compositional terms, Vaughan Williams' career in the ten or twelve years after the Great War seems to take on a somewhat different emphasis. This is partly explained by the fact that these were years in which he was concentrating heavily on his teaching commitments at the Royal College of Music – a new generation of composers would owe much to him, and they are perhaps the most tangible legacy of his vocation as a teacher: Gordon Jacob, Grace Williams and Elizabeth Maconchy being the three best known who learned from him. But there also seems to have been a shaking of his certainties as a result of his experiences during the war. Despite being above the age for call-up when hostilities commenced he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, and witnessed at first hand the carnage on the Western Front. His

life as a composer temporarily came to an end: but he organised musical recreations for the troops, first informally, and then, as the Army's director of music (a post to which he was not, peculiarly, appointed until the Armistice), formally. This gave him great pleasure and fulfilment, and explains in part the zeal with which he took up his responsibilities at the RCM in 1920. His role as evangelist also took on a new dimension in the 20s: he ran the Bach Choir for seven years, and chaired the Handel Society. His role with his pupils extended far beyond just showing them how to become composers: he would help secure performances of their work, act as their publicist and agent – unpaid, of course – and also go to great lengths to help advance the careers of those with whom he had a professional association but had not taught formally. The most notable of these was Gerald Finzi, whose own music, while clearly distinct in its voice and idiom from that of Vaughan Williams, owes almost everything to it. While the early 1920s were not barren compositionally, they did seem to find the composer producing fewer, larger-scale works. He was still revising his opera *Hugh the Drover*, written mostly before the war but not realised until more than five years after it. Its idiom is entirely folksong, and in many ways it is the apotheosis of that stage in Vaughan Williams' compositional development.

There was, however, about to be a dramatic change, heard clearly when we compare passages from *Hugh* with the composer's next major work, the *Pastoral Symphony*. Pastoral yes, but this is a form of pastorality set in the context of the Great War; not the fields and hedgerows of England, with its jolly rustics cavorting with each other, but the mud and barbed wire of Flanders and the Somme. The next major work after that, *Sancta Civitas*, reveals a similar darkness that speaks loudly of a confrontation with reality: it is palpably within the tradition of English sacred music that Vaughan Williams had refined in the generation after Elgar, but it is a tradition that is changing. The tone of sadness apparent in *Sancta Civitas* turns to anger and even violence and despair over the decade or so from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. Most of his works of that period reveal a voice far in tone from the image of the pastoral composer characterised by his early devotion to folksong, and caricatured by some of his younger contemporaries as being, in the words of one of them, "Vaughan Williams rolling over and over in a ploughed field on a muddy day". His music for the ballet *Job* – which, because of his dislike of ballet he called "a masque for dancing" – certainly has moments of rare beauty in it, but also a darkness at times that seems to have grown out of some unfinished business with *Sancta Civitas*.

I suspect this was not just the effects, traumatic though they were, of the war that were still flavouring what the composer wrote: that was a dozen years in the past by the time he wrote *Job*. I suspect it was all part of his widening awareness of the influences around him; not merely a world hit by economic depression for which the promises made in the aftermath of the Great War had not been kept, but also what he, ironically, was learning from his pupils and their contemporaries. At this time in his compositional life, it seems almost that each new work is more radical than its predecessor. In 1933 he writes a piano concerto that shocks and in some cases distresses, because of its nakedly percussive style – Rachmaninov, don't forget, is still alive and well and living in America. The concerto is deemed so difficult to play that it falls out of the repertoire; even the composer believes it might be too hard, and agrees, some years later, to its being arranged for two pianists – a very unsatisfactory sound to the ear, because it sounds even heavier and louder than it did for one. Happily, in the last 25 years, it has been recorded on two or three occasions by virtuoso pianists who prove that the composer's first instincts were right, and that the pianists of the 1930s manifestly weren't as good as some of their successors today.

Because Vaughan Williams had such a productive old age – six of his nine symphonies were premiered after his sixty-second birthday – we forget that he was actually already comparatively old when his tone and technique were undergoing such great developments: he was fifty-nine when *Job* was first performed in 1931. It can only be the mark of a good teacher that he occasionally learns from his pupils and from his colleagues: and in his music at this time Vaughan Williams was showing himself admirably susceptible to the sort of work being written not just by much younger men like Walton and Britten, nor just by his pupils or men he had influenced like Gordon Jacob or Patrick Hadley, but even by his greatest friend Gustav Holst. If you listen carefully to *Job* you will, I feel sure, see it was a work that could hardly have been written without *The Planets*, and in parts it seems to echo a near-contemporaneous work of Holst's, his Prelude and Scherzo *Hammersmith*. Holst is crucial to Vaughan Williams' story, not least because Vaughan Williams recognised his friend's superior skills as an orchestrator, and would send his works to him for criticism before they were published. No doubt in many ways this was helpful; despite having taken lessons in the late 1890s from Max Bruch, and some more than a decade later from the peerless Maurice Ravel – who could with a chamber orchestra create an effect of an ensemble several times the size – Vaughan Williams' orchestration continued to sound thick in texture and was often devoid of a lightness that he himself craved. Holst steered him, by his own admission, away from numerous pitfalls in this regard: but it sometimes seems that the development of Vaughan Williams' own technique might have been handicapped by an over-reliance on Holst. Vaughan Williams was a naturally modest man, but may even have been genuinely overshadowed in his own mind by the occasional genius of his friend. Holst was not just better at writing music in technical terms: he was also a spectacular innovator. Perhaps the conscious way in which Vaughan Williams insulated himself from European influences when writing music restricted his development: there was a limit to what could be done with English folksong as an example. Holst, by contrast, has not just blended in European influences to his unmistakably English idiom: there are Indian, Japanese and Algerian ones too. This wide pool of inspiration helped make *The Planets*, for example, sound years, if not decades, ahead of its time, and helps explain why it sailed into the international repertoire years before any work of Vaughan Williams' did. Holst's death at the depressingly early age of fifty-nine was an undoubted personal blow to Vaughan Williams: but it may not have been a professional one. He was now on his own: or, to use a different metaphor, he no longer had his revising chamber. Far from plunging him into caution or a diminution of self-confidence, it instead helped him to strike out even more boldly. And there is no clearer exhibition of this than his Fourth Symphony, which was unleashed in 1935, just a year after Holst died.

Various explanations were given for this remarkable and disturbing work. Those close to the composer said he read a paragraph in the Times about the dangers to world peace presented by the rise of Nazism, and that that had set him off. Others alluded to the growing influence of atonal composers – though if that were the case Vaughan Williams gave them short shrift in the rest of his career. I think it is the natural evolution of the spirit of darkness that had permeated many of his works over the preceding decade, and the natural development of a personal idiom that was now free-standing. Vaughan Williams had at last

jumped into the compositional deep end, and had swum. The composer himself famously said of it: "I don't know whether I like it, but it's what I meant."

Oddly enough, after the explosion of the Fourth Symphony, he seems with that out of the way to have set himself on a more serene course. True, in the cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*, first performed in 1936 and an open appeal for peace at a time of growing international crisis, there are pained cries of anguish at the prospect of more carnage and destruction – with the Second World War just three years away, it was a horribly prescient work. But it is also a piece that ends with a great sense of uplift and optimism. It leads naturally into other contemporary works, whether the exuberance of the *Five Tudor Portraits*, the plushness of the *Serenade to Music*, and the mature, reflective beauty of the *Five Variants of "Dives and Lazarus"*. This last piece was first heard on the very eve of war, and was a return in a most sophisticated sense to the folksong roots from which Vaughan Williams had come. This revisitation of pastorality reaches its apotheosis in the Fifth symphony of 1943, a work influenced by Vaughan Williams' lifelong obsession with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and as unwarlike a piece as can be imagined. Yet at this time there seem to be two Vaughan Williamses. Prompted by the war, the evangelising side of his character stands out clearly again. He showed it in several ways. He eagerly accepted invitations to write film music, chiefly for propaganda films. It was a medium to which he took naturally and to which his naturally chromatic style of writing was peculiarly well suited. His own strong identification with Englishness and its strong moral values was just right for films like *49th Parallel*, or *A Flemish Farm*, in which justice and decency were in the end seen to triumph over the vicious doctrines of Nazism. But this was also a time in which he sought to take the message of music to the people as a means of raising morale and assisting national unity. He was closely involved with the foundation and work of the embryo body out of which grew the Arts Council. He helped encourage public concerts to entertain troops and factory workers, and helped encourage amateur music making too. When the war was won it was naturally considered to be his place to write the *Thanksgiving for Victory*.

Although he had rejected the offer to be Master of the King's Music – and a knighthood too – he was now unquestionably our senior composer, the figurehead of the profession, but by no means just an ornament. As such, he became for a large section of the public their spokesman, when a view had to be delivered by musical means. In 1948 the great film-maker Humphrey Jennings was asked by the Central Office of Information to make a morale-boosting film at a time when Britain was still down on its luck after the war, and when it seemed the victory would be made hollow by economic decline and constant food shortages. In the short film four Englishmen are asked to give their views on the country; and the fourth, and the man who dominates the film, is Vaughan Williams. Responding to the tune of *Dives and Lazarus*, the composer says he has known it all his life, and indicates that it is part of the soul, and of the rich cultural heritage, of all of us. It is, he says, the "groundwork" on which all subsequent music in these islands was made. But, referring back to the second world war, he speaks of the part that music played in the "great upheaval of national consciousness and emotion" that was caused by the event. He argues that that feeling was why concert halls were full during the war and why classical music became so important to people: and he praises the music-makers, from the great symphony orchestras down to the family gathered around the piano in their own homes, for furthering the feeling, and enriching society. Yet these noble words spoken in a short film are not, of course, the ultimate representation by Vaughan Williams of his own feelings on this subject. When he conducted the first performance of his almost celestial Fifth symphony in the Albert Hall in 1943, aged nearly 71, the critics argued that it was a summing-up of his life and art. He had returned, with great care and intricacy, to the idiom of his earliest musical writings; it seemed that whatever had provoked the angry, dark music of the 1930s was now well and truly out of the composer's system. That was why the work I regard as his unquestioned masterpiece – the Symphony No 6 in E Minor, first heard also in the Albert Hall in April 1948, came as such a shock to the contemporary audience. Again, this is Vaughan Williams as the musical spokesman of his people. It is not art for art's sake: it is a necessary expression of the futility of war, of the darkness and violence and destruction of the darkest, most violent and most destructive conflict in the world's history. After the serenity of the Fifth, the opening bars of this new symphony came, to those hearing them for the first time, as the most appalling shock. There is nothing like this in anything Vaughan Williams had written before. He had composed violent music in the Fourth, but never of this degree of articulacy or fluidity. There is at times a sardonic, cynical tone within it that suggests a final exhaustion of patience with the world, a disgust at the idiocy of politicians and dictators and what they have inflicted on their peoples. In its range and depth, in the mastery of its orchestration – at last – this is a work like no other in Vaughan Williams's canon. I mean only to praise him by saying that it is the sort of work Holst might have written had he still been alive. It is as if, under severe provocation, Vaughan Williams has at last been liberated to exercise every facet of his skill, and can at last properly represent in music his deepest and most powerful of feelings. When, eighteen months before the performance, he had asked the work's dedicatee, the pianist Michael Mullinar, to play it through at his home in Dorking to an invited group of friends, many of them had been rendered speechless by the experience. At least one – a refugee from Hitler's Europe – was so overcome by emotion that he had to leave without being able to articulate his farewells. It is no wonder the piece commanded a hundred public performances within two years of its debut, a feat not registered since Elgar's first symphony, and unthinkable for a work today, when composers have far less connection with the souls of their audience. Yet although it is a piece precisely of its time – more so, again, than anything else he ever composed – it remains anchored in what Vaughan Williams called "the ground work". When the violence and aggression of the first movement subsides, we have this interlude as an end to it: a long melody in E major, the only music in the whole symphony in a major key, and the indication by the composer of the values that remain constant for him, and for his "national music", however under threat he and they might have been placed.

You can tell from the closing chords that there is more trouble ahead, and from that moment on there are shades only of unrelenting darkness. The second movement seems to be a depiction of the Blitz, with the same triplet motif repeated 93 times, with increasing force, like bomb after bomb dropping. The third seems to give the key to one of the driving inspirations of the symphony – a solo jazz tenor saxophone in a diabolical scherzo possibly being a tribute to the bandleader Les "Snakehips" Johnson and his band, all of whom were killed in 1941 when the Cafe de Paris in London's West End took a direct hit during the Blitz. The last movement is in many ways the most astonishing; eleven or twelve minutes of unrelieved *pianissimo*, interpreted at the time as a depiction of a world after the nuclear holocaust: Vaughan Williams was writing this work exactly at the time of the

first atomic bombs. It seems to me a good interpretation, though the composer was furious when critics described what he had written as a "war symphony". In 1956 he quoted to his friend Michael Kennedy instead some lines from *The Tempest* – "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded by a sleep" – but he fooled few people. It is a work that could never have been written without the experience of the suffering of war, and it seems entirely spontaneous in that respect. When Malcolm Sargent took the work to Buenos Aires in 1949, and was asked at a press conference whether that city, having not suffered during the war, would be able to understand the work, Sargent replied that any city that couldn't understand Vaughan Williams' Sixth "deserves to be bombed": which, I think, also makes my point.

So, by the last decade of this composer's life, we see he has done the opposite of what old people are supposed to do: he had become less set in his ways. The "ground work" of folksong is ever present: but he has soaked up new experiences and stimuli wherever possible to expand his range and broaden his tone. He first went to America in the 1920s, at the height of the jazz age: and although he was rude about jazz, the style infected his own writings: it is there in the Piano Concerto, in *Job*, in the Sixth symphony, and in another contemporaneous work – the *Partita for Double Stringed Orchestra*, which was first heard just weeks after the Sixth, and which includes a sinuous intermezzo entitled "Homage to Henry Hall". Hall was at that time the conductor of the BBC's Dance Orchestra, and a figure every bit as legendary in his way as Vaughan Williams himself. And in the compositions of his last years Vaughan Williams was ever more experimental with the orchestra. The total *pianissimo* of the last movement of the Sixth gives a strong hint of this. In his next symphony, the *Sinfonia Antartica* – the basis of which was the stunning music he wrote for the Ealing film *Scott of the Antarctic* – we have a wind machine. In the Eighth, the first movement is composed of variations on a single theme; the second is for wind instruments only, the third for strings, and the fourth includes music for what Vaughan Williams calls "every phone and spiel known to the composer". And the haunting and brilliant Ninth symphony, first performed just weeks before his death in 1958, includes a passage for flugelhorn. The 1950s also saw a concerto for harmonica, and a sublime one for tuba. Even in his mid-80s the composer was striving for new inspirations and new experiences. Vaughan Williams died on 26 August 1958, hours before he was due to attend a recording in Walthamstow Town Hall of his Ninth symphony. It was a strangely appropriate juxtaposition: these closing bars of the work are almost like an ebbing away of life, but not without a fight, and with grandeur and pride. They also depict perfectly the magisterial, but sensitive, power of a composer after a lifetime of experience, sure in his own voice to the very end.
His passing was marked with all the honour and dignity that might be accorded to a man with as much right as any other to be accorded the title of Britain's greatest composer. Yet he had been passing out of fashion in the years immediately before his death, being seen, for all his attempts at innovation, to be a man whose basic idiom was still rooted in the period before the war. This was not merely an era in which the radicalism of Benjamin Britten set the tone for what was expected in the high art of music: it was also a time when the high art of music came under threat as never before from a mass movement of popular music, whose origins were in the deep south of America and personified, at the very moment of Vaughan Williams' death, by Elvis Presley. Vaughan Williams had always been rather puzzled by popular music – for all his occasional borrowings from it – as he also was by atonal classical composition. On one of his visits to America, when he would take great and perpetual delight in meeting young music students and hearing their compositions, he once notably said to a young supplicant: "And if a tune should ever occur to you, my boy, never be afraid to write it down." So it was no wonder that this dislocation should have started even before his death: and he was for some years after it pigeonholed into the chocolate-box, safe, undemanding school of composition that was for a while regarded as almost middlebrow: a school that I hope I have shown, during this lecture, was one to which he absolutely did not belong. The celebration of his centenary in 1972 seemed to open up a new, posthumous chapter in the public's regard for him: and now, as we come into sight of the half-centenary of his death next August, the sheer quality and genius of his work is denied only by curmudgeons, and is in huge demand by radio audiences, concert halls and the CD-buying public. I would venture to suggest that this is not least because what Vaughan Williams had to say is timeless in its appeal. It is also an appeal which, even though designed by an Englishman for the English, has now safely and popularly travelled around the world. In that way, though he may have stopped composing, he still teaches, and he still evangelises. He remains for all time a great Carthusian, a great Englishman, but above all a great musician. I am honoured to have been asked to come here today and share with you my own perspective on the magnificent and lasting achievement of his life and work.

This was the Sir Robert Birley Memorial Lecture, Charterhouse School, and was given on 10 October 2007. It has been slightly adapted for publication in the Journal.

STEPHEN CONNOCK TO RETIRE AFTER 14 YEARS

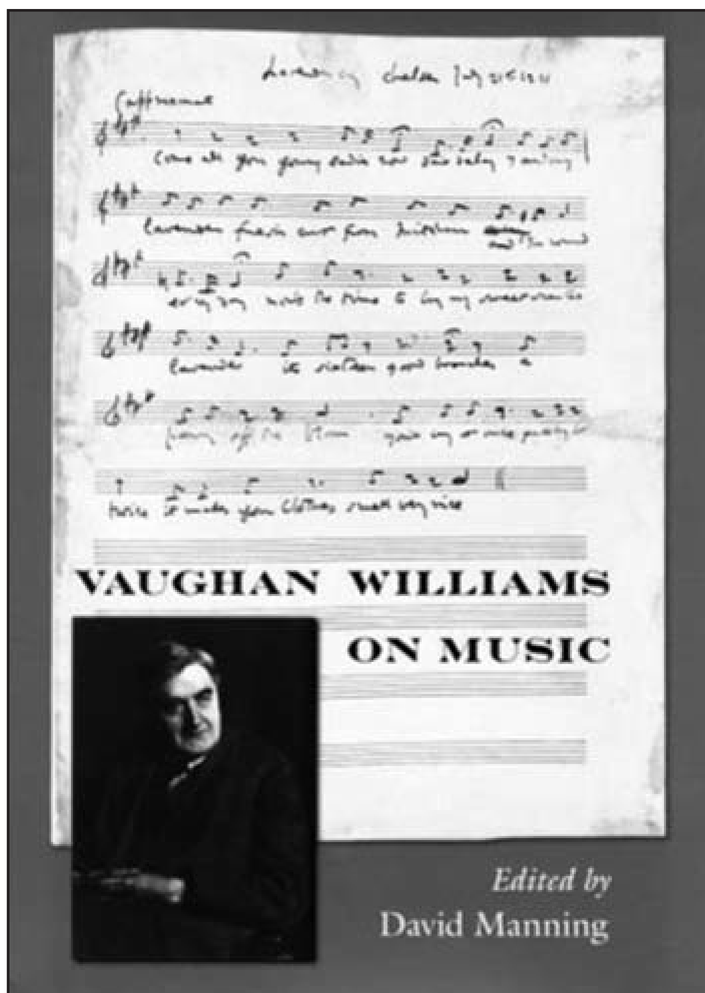
Stephen Connock confirmed to the Trustees on Saturday 5 January 2008 that he would step down as Chairman of the Society at the AGM on 5 October 2008. Stephen told the Journal his reasoning:

Having founded the Society, with Robin Barber and John Bishop, in 1994 and been Chairman ever since, I feel that 14 years is long enough for one person to be in this vital role. I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved as a Society. We are heading for 1,000 members, have launched Albion Records and Albion Books and have commissioned a remarkable range of recordings – of which The Poisoned Kiss *represents for me the finest. My successor will inherit a Society in excellent financial shape with a dedicated group of Trustees and Regional Chairmen.*

Stephen will remain closely associated with the Society and will continue as Chairman of both Albion Records and Albion Books for the foreseeable future. Cynthia Cooper, who as Stephen's PA since 1994, has been an invaluable support to the Society, will also retire in October 2008.

EXPLORING VAUGHAN WILLIAMS' WRITINGS

By David Manning



In the June 2007 issue of the Journal Society members were invited to write in and let us know if they were engaged in Vaughan Williams research. David Manning did so. Having completed a doctoral thesis on the composer's musical language at Cardiff University in 2004 he has now edited Vaughan Williams on Music*, a collection of the composer's prose, published in October 2007 by Oxford University Press. David Manning introduces his book here.*

Ralph Vaughan Williams frequently expressed his views about musical topics in public. The composer spoke to audiences through lectures, and later BBC broadcasts, and wrote programme notes, numerous articles for musical journals, and three books. As his reputation grew, opportunities to address musical topics continued to emerge. One such invitation – to give the Mary Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, in autumn 1932 – played a particularly important part in the development of Vaughan Williams' reputation. The six talks were then revised by the composer into nine short chapters and published by Oxford University Press under the title *National Music* in early 1935.

The book enjoyed some success during Vaughan Williams' lifetime and was regarded as an expression of the composer's core beliefs. Although it grew out of a single lecture series, *National Music* contained ideas that Vaughan Williams had held for a considerable period. "Those lectures are only what I have been spouting for the last 20 years", he wrote, in a letter to Imogen Holst, and the book itself lends weight to this idea. Some passages can be traced directly to the article "Who wants the English Composer?" published in 1912. For example, Vaughan Williams writes in both sources that "the composer must not shut himself up and think about art; he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community." Likewise, the call to create a sense of "musical citizenship" is repeated.[1]

Vaughan Williams retains a commitment to other broad themes: folk-song is of course described as a fundamental source of musical inspiration, and he repeatedly urges composers to remain true to themselves, always remembering that art is a form of self-expression.

This core of firmly held, inter-related beliefs was revisited in the composer's later books, *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony with Writings on Other Musical Subjects* (1953) and *The Making of Music* (1955). The Beethoven essay is an example of how Vaughan Williams engaged deeply with the core repertoire of the classical and romantic periods. It is not in a conventional sense a piece of scholarly writing, but it is absolutely concerned with the details of the music, frequently focusing on a particular turn of phrase, or technique of scoring. Although some passages of the essay are highly idiosyncratic, there are sections where Vaughan Williams successfully leads the reader into the composer's workshop, and sets about describing the tools of the trade. In some ways the shorter pieces that follow the Beethoven essay are even more revealing. Vaughan Williams fully sets out his idea that cultural nationalism and political internationalism are complementary ideas. And, in a revised essay first published in 1920, the composer gives perhaps his clearest definition of music's aesthetic purpose:

Crossword Solutions:

Across: 1. ***Poisoned kiss*****, 6.** ***Rest*****, 8. Eel, 9. Avian, 10. On, 11. Bee, 14. Light 15. Youth, 16. Ant 17. To, 18. Round, 19. Den, 21. Noon, 23. England arise!**

Down: 2. OM, 3. ***Dreamland*****, 4. Ice, 5.** ***Silent Noon*****, 6.** ***Rhosymedre*****, 7. Eve, 9. Aethiopia, 12. Egg, 13. Buy!, 16. Ann, 20. Nag, 22. La**

may we take it that the object of an art is to obtain a partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and human faculties – of that, in fact, which is spiritual?...The human, visible, audible and intelligible media which artists (of all kinds) use, are symbols not of other visible and audible things but of what lies beyond sense and knowledge. [2]

The other essays include tributes to Holst and Stanford, appreciations of Bach, and the composer's chapter of musical autobiography, first published in Hubert Foss's study of the composer. Interpreting the latter is a topic in its own right, and one which sadly lies beyond the scope of this article: while the autobiographical chapter is valuable for the information it reveals about the composer's musical education and pre-1914 experiences, it is also marred by some odd self-deprecating comments about Vaughan Williams' own skills in orchestration, which are contradicted by his considerable knowledge, experience and impressive successes as an orchestral composer.

The last book shares an obvious characteristic with the first, as it too is based on a lecture series given in the United States. Once again, Vaughan Williams is writing about the fundamentals of music. Here is the work of a seasoned campaigner, revisiting the ideas that underpinned a lifetime of musical achievement.

After Vaughan Williams' death, his three books were combined to form *National Music and Other Essays*. With this collection, first published in 1963, Ursula Vaughan Williams (who provided a preface) and Oxford University Press paid a handsome tribute to the composer. The volume's success is illustrated by its publication history: it was reissued in 1972; in 1987 an expanded second edition was published including eleven additional pieces (and a foreword by Michael Kennedy); finally the second edition was reissued as a Clarendon Paperback in 1996.

The items added to the second edition, like the shorter essays from the Beethoven book, reveal a different side of Vaughan Williams' writing style. In the lecture-based books, Vaughan Williams focuses on broad issues about music, and elaborates principles that can guide composers, listeners and performers. Vaughan Williams discusses the role of nationalism in music, but does so in "universal" terms, making sure that his conclusions, based primarily upon a life spent in English musical circles, will resonate with an American audience. The shorter articles from the second edition focus on specific people and topics. The tone is more relaxed and friendly, and the ideas discussed in general terms elsewhere are applied to individual composers. Most chapters focus on a musician Vaughan Williams knew and admired, such as Butterworth, Bax, Sibelius and Henry Wood.

After reading these additions to the second edition I started to wonder what else Vaughan Williams had written. Were the rest merely occasional and ephemeral pieces? Peter Starbuck's bibliography of Vaughan Williams writings, reprinted in an abridged form in Michael Kennedy's *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, was the obvious place to turn. Some pieces not included in *National Music and Other Essays* were easily accessible: 'Who wants the English Composer?' was reprinted in Foss's book on Vaughan Williams; an essay titled 'English Folk-Songs' was circulated in a revised form as an appendix to Percy Young's study of the composer; *Heirs and Rebels* gave a flavour of Vaughan Williams' early writings, by providing a selection of short extracts and full article reprints.[3]

Yet there were still numerous journal articles and other items listed in Starbuck's bibliography that rarely feature in discussions of the composer and his work. I set about collecting together copies of these writings, and they have now been published in a new book by Oxford University Press under the title *Vaughan Williams on Music*.

In total the book includes 102 items by the composer, none of which is reprinted from *National Music and Other Essays*. The individual items are grouped into six themed sections and then run chronologically under each of those headings. The largest sections are on the topics of "Musical Life and English Music" and "Folk Song"; there is a section each for articles on British and continental composers; and the programme notes comprise the final two sections: the first of these is on Vaughan Williams' own music, and the second discusses music by other composers. Such wide-ranging material cannot be neatly summarised, although the book's introduction highlights a few points of interest in each section. Rather than repeat that material here, the last section of this article focuses on the composer's early writings, first published between 1897 and 1914, paying particular attention to the discussion of music by continental composers. Some points of comparison will be drawn with the writings in *National Music and Other Essays*, revealing one of the ways in which the new collection complements that well-known and widely available volume.

The composer's early writings are probably his least well-known, despite the selectively reprinted items that appeared nearly fifty years ago in *Heirs and Rebels*. In fact the earliest article, "The Romantic Movement and Its Results" (1897), laid unknown for nearly a century. The long-forgotten journal in which it appeared, *The Musician*, ran for less than a year and it is notable that the composer seems not to have drawn it to the attention of Ursula Vaughan Williams or Michael Kennedy when they began to prepare their books on the composer during the 1950s. Either Vaughan Williams simply forgot about it, or decided not to mention it.

The article provides a window on Vaughan Williams' developing beliefs about music and history. The composer quickly declares that musical history is subject to the law of evolution, and presents the romantic legacy from Schubert and Weber, through Schumann and Berlioz, to Wagner and Brahms, as the inheritance of contemporary composers. Such a view was uncontroversial: the application of the evolutionary model to music had been recently demonstrated by Parry in *The Evolution of the Art of Music* (London: 1896; an expanded version of *The Art of Music* (London: 1893)); at the same time Brahms and Wagner continued to dominate concert programmes, while also influencing the new compositions of many composers in Britain during the 1890s. The idea that Brahms and Wagner, through their contrasting achievements in the concert hall and opera house, brought an end to a coherent romantic movement clearly begged a significant question for Vaughan Williams and his peers: if, "the romantic school has lived its life and done its work, and has died an honourable death", then what comes next?

The familiar answer, a turn to indigenous sources of musical inspiration, principally folk-song, is basically correct, but it did not come immediately for Vaughan Williams. He wrote about music in terms of nationalism in his second article, "A School of English Music", but appears to reject folk-song as a basis for original works by English composers. To use folk-song in this way would be "to borrow one's scheme of national music from abroad". English composers did not "spring from the peasantry"

and so it would be surely "doubtful if any good result will follow the extremely artificial course of setting before a composer music which is entirely foreign to his temperament ..... A musician who wishes to say anything worth saying must first of all express himself – in fact, his music must be the natural utterance of his own natural emotions…The national English style must be modelled on the personal style of English musicians."

Already one of the key themes of *National Music* – self-expression – is clearly delineated, yet the suitability of folk-song for achieving this aim is explicitly rejected, at least for English composers. The exact development of Vaughan Williams' ideas about folk-song in this period is difficult to recuperate, but it is certainly the case that he was extolling the virtues of folk-song in the autumn of 1902 during lectures, the same year in which the passages quoted above were published.[4]

"A School of English Music" signals that the composer resisted folk-song as a basis for national music for a period of time in the early 1900s, a view quite contrary to the beliefs set out much later in *National Music* and elsewhere.

The 1902 doubts did not last long, however, as Vaughan Williams collected his first folk-song in the following year. Much of the rest of the decade was dedicated to recovering English music of the past and making it available for twentieth-century audiences, whether it be collecting and publishing folk-songs, editing Purcell, or two years spent editing the *English Hymnal*. These activities can be presented as part of an "inward" turn towards national music that occurred in Britain during the first few years of the twentieth century. Yet that is only part of the story, because Vaughan Williams was also somehow finding time to think and write about that legacy of European romanticism.

Vaughan Williams was far from alone in feeling the influence of Wagner in particular. The responses, as found in original musical compositions, were strikingly different: Wagner's presence can be detected in numerous Elgarian harmonies, melodies and textures, and is felt keenly in the case of composers such as Granville Bantock (the large-scale work *Omar Kháyyám*, for instance), while Vaughan Williams' "Wagnerisms" are more marginal, including a few early songs, especially "Love-Sight" and "Death in Love" from *The House of Life*. However, Vaughan Williams drew more deeply from Wagner than stylistic comparisons suggest. A long essay by Vaughan Williams discusses "The Words of Wagner's Music Dramas", focussing on a number of specific musical and textual examples to provide analytical insights. At the end of the discussion, he returns to the big picture and Wagner's own concept of "musical drama". This is not music with words, or words with music, but music and words inseparably bonded in a complete and distinct artistic creation.

Vaughan Williams is careful to define this Wagnerian ideal of the "musical drama" or *Gesamkunstwerk*. He was more sceptical when it came to another genre also concerned with the relationship of music and meaning, the symphonic poem. In 1897 he denounces the composers of such works as "laggards" who attempt to hide their ignorance of music and poetry in a high-sounding genre. The issue is forced to the surface again in 1903, as Vaughan Williams reviews the first performance of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*. He seems uncomfortable about the attachment of a "programme", criticising the provision of movement titles and asserting that we, the listeners, "can appraise and applaud" Strauss's new work "with our minds free of all unmusical considerations." And yet, several literary allusions follow, as Vaughan Williams tells us that one passage reminds him of Pope in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and he associates another with a quotation from Rossetti's *The House of Life*. The final charge – implied, but not actually stated, and tempered by some words of praise – is that the work lacks substance, perhaps of a moral or spiritual kind: "there is no doubt that *Ein Heldenleben* is new, wonderful, astonishing – but does it *satisfy* us? That is the question."

In conclusion, Vaughan Williams' attitude to the symphonic (or tone-) poem appears confused. This can be put in a more positive, and revealing way: the composer was attracted to, fascinated by, the relationship of words and music. Vaughan Williams did not describe it in this way, but is it not the case that music and language in their complex relationship produce a creative tension from which the composer could not escape? However much he denounced the idea that music needs to be associated with specific textual ideas, he could not resist generating his own specific textual associations with, and more general verbal responses to, Strauss's music.

It is, surprisingly, Brahms who prompts Vaughan Williams to comment upon the symphonic poem genre for a third time, in an article published in 1910 in the *Music Student*. Vaughan Williams finds that classical forms provide entirely suitable structures for some of Brahms' greatest musical accomplishments. However, there are many cases where Brahms seems to lean too heavily on classical form so that it becomes merely a set of conventions providing a less congenial framework to support romantic musical ideas. The finale of the First Symphony is given as an example where classical form has become a hindrance: "a definite 'second subject' of an uninspired and rather trivial nature spoils a moving and dramatic symphonic poem dealing with tremendous issues in which the whole fate of the universe seems to be involved."

This reference to the symphonic poem is discussed in the following paragraphs, leading Vaughan Williams to accept the association of specific ideas with a piece of music as a viable strategy:

The true symphonic poem aims at bringing the transcendental imaginings of the composer into touch with human beings by connecting them with some story, some human character or some phenomenon of nature…The true symphonic poem does not try to take the place of words or sights. The extraneous idea, the "programme", is simply a common ground where the composer can meet the hearer before they start together on the voyage to unknown regions whither he is taking them.

In making this argument Vaughan Williams does not become a cheer-leader for leading exponents of the genre: Strauss's tone poems are noted for their "gigantic architectural schemes which only require to be filled out with adequate musical ideas such as Brahms alone, perhaps, could have given them." The imaginary ideal becomes some combination of Brahms and Strauss, featuring formal inventiveness but eschewing the "shock-factor" orchestral effects and harmonic devices of Strauss (and for that matter, Debussy), which challenged audiences and some conservative critics in Britain during the first decade of the twentieth century.

In the articles from 1897, 1903 and 1910, Vaughan Williams gradually softens his resistance to the symphonic poem, during a period when his own musical language was developing rapidly. He also shifts from writing orchestral works with fairly abstract

titles, such as "Serenade", to using more specific titles, such as *In the Fen Country* and *Norfolk Rhapsody*. It is notable that *A Sea Symphony* takes up the idea of basing a work on "some phenomenon of nature". Although the inclusion of a chorus makes it a very different work from a symphonic poem, the sea is used as an entity that plays strongly in the human imagination through which transcendental visions are invoked. The Brahms article also offers an insight into Vaughan Williams' developing thought about music and meaning shortly before he composed *A London Symphony*. Vaughan Williams considered writing a symphonic poem on the subject of London, and his thoughts about the genre expressed in the article on Brahms make that suggestion a lot more plausible than it otherwise might seem.[5]

The idea of London as a starting point for composer and audience to meet before starting on a voyage to unknown regions is, of course, enacted by the work's epilogue, associated by the composer with a description of voyaging out to sea which closes H.G. Wells' *Tono-Bungay*. But the programme notes on *A London Symphony* show that even this work did not resolve the composer's troubled relationship with the idea of musical meaning: Vaughan Williams writes that "the music is intended to be self-expressive, and must stand or fall as 'absolute' music."[6]

Vaughan Williams' published articles on the music of European composers from the period 1897 to 1914 reveal a different side to his musical thought from that found in *National Music*. The earlier articles are written by a composer who is developing his own distinctive musical language, and discovering a new kind of inspiration from indigenous musical materials. Yet he does not turn his back on continental musical developments; he listens deeply and studies scores at length, to learn about the musical techniques of these other composers. And of course, he visits Germany and France for composition lessons. It can be argued that these pieces are consistent with the position stated in *National Music*: the composer is learning compositional techniques from abroad, while his own music draws on national sources of inspiration. But I think the tone and spirit of these enterprises is quite different. In his general discussions Vaughan Williams is openly hostile towards engaging with "foreign" music too deeply. This hostility is not confined to later writings. The 1912 polemic provides an example:

We must be our own tailors, we must cut for ourselves, try on for ourselves, and finally wear our own home-made garments, which, even if they are homely and home-spun, will at all event fit our bodies and keep them warm; otherwise, if we pick about among great ideas of foreign composers and try to cover our own nakedness with them, we are in danger of being the musical counterparts of the savage clothed in nothing but a top-hat and a string of beads.[7]

As noted above, the tone of such a passage is hostile towards foreign sources of inspiration. The reader is warned against imitation of foreign models, but the point is not nuanced by praising, for example, Strauss's structures or Brahms's gift for melody. Vaughan Williams' rhetoric encourages other composers to take an inward turn while he continues to be inspired and influenced by music from home and abroad. In *National Music*, the advice to composers is this:

First, then, see your direction clear and then by all means go to Paris, or Berlin, or Peking if you like and study and learn everything that will help you to carry out that purpose.[8]

But is this orderly sequence really the only way? In the early articles for musical magazines Vaughan Williams seems rather drawn to the spirit and aesthetic aims of some leading European romantic composers, as well as their compositional devices. After reading *National Music*, it would be reasonable to assume Vaughan Williams was a composer who drew his fundamental inspiration almost entirely from home, always seeking that which he shares with his fellow citizens. But his earlier writings suggest a different attitude, one of artistic and intellectual curiosity that could quite easily lead across geographical boundaries.

To understand Vaughan Williams more fully, it is necessary to recognise that there is some difference between what the composer wrote about music in general terms, and the way he interacted with individual works. The articles about the music of continental composers engage with "foreign" repertoire more deeply, exploring the formal and expressive aims that Vaughan Williams shares with other European romantics.

The discussion above shows only one way in which Vaughan Williams' lesser-known writings can illuminate our understanding of his work. I hope that the many other topics addressed by the composer in *Vaughan Williams on Music* will also be of interest to members, even though it has not been possible to give them due attention in this article. Topics include his personal involvement in the folk song revival, his later appreciations of British and continental contemporaries (mainly from the last decade of his life), the polemics on cultural politics (from the state of national music in the 1930s to funding of the BBC in the 1950s), and his programme notes on a wide range of repertoire, including his own music. Reading this composer's writings, especially as he was actively involved in such a diverse range of activities, allows us to understand more about the man, and his cultural and political environment. Ultimately this can take us back to his music, to listen again with renewed interest as we continue exploring his life and work.

Notes

1. The quotations are found in 'Who Wants the English Composer?', Royal College of Music Magazine, 9/1 (1912), 11-15, reprinted in Vaughan Williams on Music, edited by David Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 39-42 at 41-42; the quotations also appear in 'Should Music be National?', Chapter 1 of National Music (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), reprinted in National Music and Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1-11 at 10.

2 'The Letter and the Spirit', Music & Letters, 1/2 (1920), 87-93 at 88, reprinted in National Music and Other Essays, 121-8 at 122.

3 'A Musical Autobiography' in Hubert Foss, Vaughan Williams: A Study (London: Harrap, 1950), 18-38; 'English Folk Songs' in Percy M. Young, Vaughan Williams (London: Dennis Dobson, 1953); Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, Heirs and Rebels: letters written to each other and occasional writings on music, edited by Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) .

4 Alain Frogley, 'Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in Vaughan Williams Studies, 1-22 at 11-12.

5 'A Musical Autobiography' in National Music and Other Essays, 177-94 at 193.

6 Programme note for performance of A London Symphony (1920), reprinted in Michael Kennedy, A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71-2 and in Vaughan Williams on Music, 339-40 at 339.

7 'Who wants the English Composer?' in Vaughan Williams on Music, 39-42 at 41.

8 'Should Music be National?' in *National Music*, reprinted in *National Music and Other Essays*, 1-11 at 11.

Analysis Without Fear

(A Response to Jeffery Aldridge)

By Eric Seddon

I was interested to read, in the June issue of the Journal, Jeffrey Aldridge's response to some of my recent work. His short piece brings up many important topics, worthy of expansion and clarification, to which the present note can only serve as a brief overview.

First, I am in agreement with a great deal of what Mr. Aldridge presents. His discussion of symbolism is, on the whole, from a sensible perspective, and there is little to disagree with superficially. It occurs to me, however, that in the interest of fairness, I ought to explain myself in greater detail regarding a citation I made of his work – specifically regarding the false parallel between Vaughan Williams' setting of Christian texts and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. There are many reasons why this is a problematic comparison, though they have little to do with his argument pertaining to symbolism proper – they are rather historical and cultural. As I mentioned in my latest article, Christian poets, philosophers, and artists of all kinds have traditionally appropriated pagan myths for Christian allegorical purposes. The most cursory reading of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, or Spenser is enough to establish this. Important to our current dispute is that they did this long after the extinction of the old pagan religions.

Thus, when Shakespeare wrote "You seem to me as Dian in her orb"[1], there was no active cult of Diana in Europe; the reference was therefore purely symbolic (if we use "symbolic" here to mean something like "metaphorical" as opposed to "real" or "factual") and could have been experienced in no other way by his audience – there would never have been even the slightest question on the matter. The same cannot be said of Christianity or the use of Christian symbols in our own (or Vaughan Williams') age, for Christianity remains a continuously living tradition. Moreover, the history of Christianity is filled with debates as to the value and proper appropriation of the classical inheritance. St. Augustine, Tertullian, the reformers of the sixteenth century, C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien in the twentieth – all of these and countless others have contributed a rich discussion in theology, philosophy, literature and elsewhere as to the proper integration of this intellectual inheritance with a Christian worldview. A discussion of comparable depth and intensity concerning the use of Christian symbolism by secular atheists or agnostics had not occurred by Vaughan Williams' day, nor has such a discussion really progressed much to the present.

All of this is complicated by Mr. Aldridge's choice of Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex, the libretto of which was not taken directly from Sophocles, nor even from a translation proper, but was a recasting by Stravinsky's contemporary, Jean Cocteau – and in the middle of the composer's "neo-classic" phase. So there are two further problems: first, that this is not an actual classical text, and, more importantly, that there has never existed a parallel "neo-Christian" movement in the arts – such a delineation would be nonsensical, as Christianity hasn't disappeared, and therefore has no need of a "neo" to aesthetically reintroduce it. In retrospect, I regret not having been this specific in my original argument, but my article was already quite lengthy and I was compelled to cut more than I would have wished – the delicate balance between clarity and brevity pushed at times to a lamentable bias toward the latter. As it is, I have only just grazed the surface of the problem with this brief explanation.

Later in his response, Mr. Aldridge questions my suggestion that scholarship has been dominated by a secular materialist perspective. He seems to think that I was leveling specific charges at himself and/or other particular Vaughan Williams scholars at this point. I would clarify that in the passage he references, I was discussing the prevalent zeitgeist in musicology – not points and quotations of specific Vaughan Williams scholars. As such, it was a discussion of the ideological backdrop that contemporary scholars tend to work in, consciously or unconsciously. This, too, was intended to frame the following portion of my argument concerning 'radical subjectivism' as the a priori position for much scholarship. To support the basis of these assertions, I offer the following: no discipline is without bias, and each era tends to have a dominant, consensus bias among scholars. The current bias in musicology is, in my opinion, dominantly secular and materialist. I think this opinion can be justified by the wave of scholarship over the last two generations at least, not excluding work in Vaughan Williams studies.

For a practical application of this, one should read through all of the major books published on Vaughan Williams, beginning perhaps with Hubert Foss's study of 1950[2], while paying particular attention to the interpretive bias of each scholar – especially when interpreting the religious texts chosen by the composer, which form such a large proportion of his major works. One will find that a healthy diversity exists in the books of the 1950s – Foss, Percy M. Young[3], Simona Packenham[4], and Frank Howes[5] all approaching analysis and/or interpretation from refreshingly different perspectives.

One may find penetrating asides of a psychological or cultural nature by Howes, valuable enthusiastic appraisals by Packenham, moments of acute theological insight from Young. This diversity continues until the mid 1960s, by which point more books had been published, including James Day's first version[6], A. E. F. Dickinson's volume[7], and, of course, the work of the two official chroniclers of Mrs. Vaughan Williams[8] and Michael Kennedy[9]. Significantly, after the last two books, nearly all scholarly activity stopped for multiple decades, and since then there has been considerably less diversity of opinion or approach, philosophically or theologically speaking, to the symbolism of the works (though I believe this is changing, and will continue to do so). To analyze this chronology of scholarship properly would take a detailed article in itself, but short of this, I offer a counter-challenge to Mr. Aldridge: if he really disagrees with my assessment, let him produce evidence of books or significant

papers on Vaughan Williams from over the last three decades that convincingly demonstrate scholarship from a perspective incongruent with or challenging to secular materialism. If he cannot, I think he should grant my point, which is that this dominant bias exists. That my work has stirred even half of the reaction it has is perhaps indicative of how entrenched and debilitating the bias has been.

As to the validity of what I have termed the "Cross Icon" or the "Sign of the Cross" in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Mr. Aldridge seems confused by my statement that the icon in question is a "perfect aural representation of the Cross." A simple exercise will clarify my meaning here, which is, in truth, both aural and visual: write the pitches Do-Re-Sol-Do without stems, in order. If one shifts Sol beneath Re (a necessary adjustment for the temporal aspect of melodic shape) you will see the four points of a Cross. That this appears with text for the first time when Pilgrim receives the sign of the cross on his forehead seems to me more than coincidence. This type of aural/visual motive is not extraordinary: Wagner practiced it, as did Liszt, as did Debussy in *Pelleas*. Of the utmost significance is that Vaughan Williams himself noted such a Cross theme in Bach, writing as early as 1902 that "Bach expresses the poignancy of 'Let him be crucified,' in the *cross-shaped subject which he uses*" [emphasis added].[10] I think it would be willfully naïve to suggest that, having admired something so much in Bach, Vaughan Williams would discount the use of such a technique himself. Thus it is not surprising that, in The Pilgrim's Progress, we find him doing something similar.

As for Mr. Aldridge's question as to whether I believe Britten's works ought to be reconsidered with theological analysis as well, it is difficult to gauge tone. As with his earlier "bells and smells" comment regarding Anglo-Catholicism, it is difficult to discern whether he writes with an edge of dismissive contempt or with sincerity. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, I answer simply why not? Why not apply theological analysis to the works of Britten, and any other composer who uses Christian texts, for that matter? If Maynard Solomon can apply Freud anachronistically to Beethoven and Mozart and be lauded for his formidable results, why shouldn't the type of theological analysis of texts that I have engaged in be permitted, especially when the texts used by the composer are themselves direct quotations from Christian sources, and their expressions derived from the inheritance of a Christian culture? Is Christian theological analysis really so threatening that it must be opposed *on principle*, without a hearing, even in this self-proclaimed era of diversity? Or can Christian perspectives be admitted seriously, judged on their own merits, without the whips and scorns of the more closed-minded and bigoted? For indeed only fear or bigotry would stand in the way of such potentially fruitful work.

Mr. Aldridge concludes by saying that his problems with *The Pilgrim's Progress* were not theological, but dramatic. This was, for me, the most bewildering statement in his piece, as the point of my article was, all along, that the drama is in the theology – that those who separate the two will inevitably find it non-dramatic or problematic, because, in denying the unifying theological component which is indispensable to the work, they miss the point of the opera itself. When Mr. Aldridge receives his recording of this remarkable masterpiece, and truly delves into it, I hope he will keep an open mind to this. If so, I further hope that he will find my method justified, and his own experience of the opera enhanced.

In conclusion, I must protest Mr. Aldridge's subtle suggestion that I have willfully misinterpreted other scholars. On the contrary, I have always sought to meet in open, honest disagreement those with whom I differ. In short, I am innocent of his charge, and would ask him to refrain, in the future, from what I consider to be a serious insinuation concerning the honesty of my work. In doing so I appeal not to his talents as a scholar, but to his sense of fairness, which quality I do not doubt he possesses in abundance.

Notes

1 *Much Ado about Nothing* IV.i.56.

2 Foss, Hubert. *Ralph Vaughan Williams*: *a Study*. London: Harrap & Co. Ltd. (1950).

3 Young, Percy M. *Vaughan Williams*. London: Dennis Dobson Ltd. (1953)

4 Pakenham, Simona. *Ralph Vaughan Williams*: *a discovery of his music*.London: Macmillan & Co. (1957).

5 Howes, Frank. *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. London: Oxford University Press. (1954).

6 Day, James. *Vaughan Williams*. J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd. (1961).

7 Dickinson, A. E. F. Vaughan Williams. London: Faber & Faber. (1963).

8 Vaughan Williams, Ursula. R.V.W.: *A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. London: Oxford University Press. (1964).

9 Kennedy, Michael. *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. London: Oxford University Press. (1964).

10 Vaughan Williams, Ralph and Gustav Holst. Heirs and Rebels: *Letters written to each other and occasional writings on music*. Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst, editors. London: Oxford University Press. (1959). See page 32 for the discussion of Bach referenced above.

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Letters

We are always pleased to receive contributions for this page

A SATISFIED CUSTOMER

There are times when I wonder why I belong to the RVW Society! I am irritated by letters by people with no view other than their own. I am perplexed by articles from learned folk which pass totally over my head. I am annoyed by those people who claim to understand RVW's every thought and motivation. Then joy, I receive my copy of *The Sky Shall Be Our Roof* and realise that it is all worthwhile. If all that the RVW Society does is promote recordings such as this, then I am pleased to be a member. I have received such pleasure from this recording that I am willing to forgive the rest!

Clive Elgar,
Cromer, UK

THE NINTH

In his article "Some thoughts on the Ninth" (June 2007) Rob Furneaux invites Society members to disclose their mental pictures when listening to individual tunes or passages. I do not often have visual images when listening but since its first performance I cannot avoid associating the ending of the Ninth with pictures once seen on television of an atom bomb being exploded and the resulting dark cloud rising and filling the sky. In an earlier letter I think I indicated that the opening horns in the Fifth's first movement are for me inevitably associated with air raid sirens in the Second World War. However, the Fifth leaves me with a sense of confidence about the future of mankind whereas with the Ninth I am left with doubt.

Peter Bull,
London, U.K.

It was very interesting to read the extended articles concerning the Ninth Symphony in the June 2007 edition of the Journal. I was privileged to be present at the premier of this symphony on April 2 1958 where I saw RVW for the last time, accepting applause from his box in the Royal Festival Hall. The performance under Sir Malcolm Sargent with the Royal Philharmonic was strongly criticised for being under-rehearsed at that time, and I believe that we all left the building feeling somewhat perplexed by this new symphony, completely unaware of course that the composer would not be with us very much longer.

It was my good fortune to see the "Grand Old Man of British Music" on four separate occasions, the first time being when I took my grandfather to a Promenade Concert as a birthday present on July 29 1948. During the second half of the programme RVW took the baton and conducted a performance of his *Partita for Double String Orchestra*. This was followed appropriately enough by Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé Suite No. 2*. I seem to recall that the first half that night was made up of the Overture to *Euryanthe* by Weber, the *Sea Pictures* of Elgar sung by Gladys Ripley, and Rachmaninov's First Piano Concerto performed by Albert Ferber. We certainly got our money's worth in those days.

Much later I can recall him making a curtain call at Sadlers Wells Theatre following a performance of *Hugh the Drover*, and then on the occasion of his eightieth birthday came the Celebration Concert, the programme for which remains a treasured possession of mine. During the interval it was possible to observe RVW enjoying an animated conversation with fellow composer, Sir Arnold Bax, a remarkable moment for me.

Following Robin Barber's review it is interesting on referring to the *Classical Good CD Guide 2001* to note that the recording of the Ninth Symphony performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under Bryden Thomson had been selected as being the "one to have" especially so as it was coupled with the Piano Concerto performed by Howard Shelley. The reviewer felt that the tempo adopted by Thomson in the first movement of the symphony was the defining factor. Especially praised was "a sweep and momentum one may not have previously associated with this movement, yet the gain in terms of sheer concentration and symphonic stature is irrefutable".

It was, of course, the performance of that particular movement that disappointed Robin. Over the years and living with Thomson's reading myself, I have become accustomed to this approach. Quite clearly the Ninth offers a vast breadth of approach from both performers and listeners alike thus making this symphony one of the most fascinating of the last century. Incidentally, I note that the Chandos recording is also considered one of the best by the compilers of the *Penguin Record Guide* as well. How sad it is that we will never discover RVW's personal reaction to the various recordings under review. What has become a problem these days is the BBC's attitude to Vaughan Williams' music. As time goes on those who prepare the schedules on Radio Three seem to have taken the attitude that probably our finest composer represents little more that a minor figure in this country's musical life at the present time. Each week I eagerly scan the pages of the Radio Times in search of broadcasts of his works, but as time goes on I become more and more disillusioned. Sibelius, Nielsen, and Shostakovich would never be treated in a similar way in Helsinki, Copenhagen and St. Petersburg.

In recent months the Radio Three offering of RVW has trailed well behind that of Britten, Elgar, Holst and Walton. During the past six months his music has hardly been heard during daylight hours, and in November 2007 none of his music was scheduled during the main listening hours, although short works like *The Wasps* and the *Three Shakespeare Songs* have been broadcast while most of us are asleep. The American musicologist Harold C. Schonberg in his book published in 1970, *Lives of the Great Composers*, suggests that Vaughan Williams "may yet turn out to be hailed as the most important symphonist of the century". I believe that this would be a fair judgment, but in the present climate it looks unlikely. The failure of concert programmers and the BBC to promote his work continues to be as puzzling as it is unreasonable. Let's hope that the fiftieth anniversary of his passing will re-kindle the flame!

Meanwhile it seems as though Roger Norrington has achieved more success for RVW when touring with his Stuttgart orchestra than our leading conductors can manage to produce in our great composer's home land.

John Tebbit,
Slough, UK.

GUSTAV HOLST AND HIS WHITSUNTIDE SINGERS

Michael Goatcher has kindly drawn my attention to Mr. Day's very interesting article in your October issue. I may be able to fill in one or two gaps in his information regarding the Mass, as it affected Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers.

The festivals established at Thaxted I 1916 continued there for another two years, and elsewhere (with interruptions) right up to 1958. In 1918, it seems that the outspoken Vicar of Thaxted, Conrad Noel, went a step too far and offended the St Paul's Girls' School contingent, whose privileged backgrounds were essentially at odds with his socialist philosophy, perhaps forgetting the good work they were doing in the East End of London. Whatever the truth of the matter, when the festival resumed after the War they were held in the London area, beginning in 1920 at Dulwich College. It was there that the first completed portion of the Mass was performed as a Introit Kyrie at the 12pm Communion. It had been tried out from MS the day before in the chapel gallery by twelve singers with "Mr. Holst perched on the corner of the balustrade and Ralph Vaughan Williams on the organ seat". The first performance of the complete Mass by Holst's Singers took place in the 11am Communion on Whit Sunday, June 8 1924 at All Hallows-by-the-Tower, one hundred and fifty singers braving an Underground strike to get there. Unfortunately Holst was still suffering from the effects of falling from a conductor's rostrum in the previous year, so his successor Arnold Goldsbrough directed, albeit very competently. The Latin edition was evidently used, and the Gloria sung in the final position. Holst managed to join the congregation, and RVW made a speech of thanks after the service On the same day three of the *Five Mystical Songs*, the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* and two movements of the *Pastoral Symphony* were performed as part of the festival, as were other RVW works. (Dulcie Nutting's MS copies of the vocalise in the symphony, with the odd detail differing from the published score, are in the Morley archive – see the current British Music Society Journal). The following Saturday the Mass and other pieces were repeated in a Morley Students' Concert entirely devoted to the composer's music. This took place at King George's Hall, London WC1 because the College was in the middle of a move to its present site: the programme is reproduced in the 1973 Morley Scrap Album, still available at the College. The Mass featured again in 1925 and in 1928, now in Canterbury, with Holst in charge. On August 3 1931 Holst conducted a performance by his Singers during communion at Chichester Cathedral, the service being called "A Thanksgiving for a Holiday". He asked them to "either bring the English edition…or alter the Latin edition. This requires care, as besides writing in the new words, many notes have to be altered , and a few whole bars are different."

This letter may fittingly conclude with Harvey Grace's opinion: "With a recollection of the best choralism of every type heard in various parts of the country over a longish period, I place among the very finest the singing of the Vaughan Williams Mass at Chichester under Holst in 1931."

Alan Gibbs,
Twickenham, UK

THE DIVINE IN ART

The production of Tony Palmer's film *O Thou Transcendent* is a splendid event in English music, and its availability on DVD, on television and in cinemas will attract a great deal of fruitful attention in the fiftieth anniversary year of RVW's death. The Sunday Telegraph arts magazine carried on December 30 an article by our RVW scholar Michael Kennedy. "How could an atheist turned agnostic write so much religious music?" he asks, supplying his own answer, that RVW "recognised the immense role of the church and the Bible in people's lives and their association with music." I find this "cultural explanation" inadequate; for although our great composer's symphonies, which took him through dark and difficult places, clearly have a major place in his output, they are not the sole strand. The eminent Professor Wilfrid Mellers refers to the opera *The Pilgrim's Progress* as "literally the labour of a lifetime"; and Vaughan Williams made major use of "nowelling" in four substantial works, including the hour-long oratorio *Hodie* which he wrote at the age of eighty-two – shortly before composing his eight and ninth symphonies, the latter of which was seen by Kennedy as "a bleak and almost despairing threnody for the future of mankind".

I conclude that RVW was a "double man" (Mellers' description) whose pilgrim's progress entailed his "riding on two horses" (metaphorically, though he is the only composer whose photograph on a literal horse I have seen!) Kennedy's "threnody" comment falls foul of the description of the finale of the Ninth in the programme note of the Royal Festival Hall performance in December 1982, as "heaven-storming". I therefore prefer Mellers' understanding of the finale of the Ninth (which many listeners do not find "bleak") as two interpenetrating movements running side by side like a circus-rider's two steeds. The work ends with blazing major chords spaced by saxophone moans, and with sustained paradisal chords on the strings as the symphony fades into silence as do most of its fellows.

I conclude that Vaughan Williams did not, and would not, write religious music to honour the church. He lived for music as such, remarking in his last year that it will enable us to see "to the very essence of things…look through magic casements and see what lies beyond". Sibelius rightly held that "Music is on a higher plane than anything else in the world…it is brought to life by the Logos, the divine in art." It is an aural embodiment of the Word alongside the bodily "Word made flesh" in Jesus Christ; and the two are congruent.

Frank McManus,
Todmorden, UK.

O THOU TRANSCENDENT

O Thou Transcendent is not only one of the finest films, possibly *the* finest, on a major composer but a great documentary by any standards. Amid the technical brilliance (the wonderful photography, the, by turns, fascinating and horrifying archive footage and the superb editing) Tony Palmer deserves enormous credit for having nailed once and for all the out-dated and absurd notion that VW is "merely" a pastoral composer. What a powerful impression the extracts from the symphonies make when allied to the visual images.

I gather that there is almost as much material left as in the film itself and it is to be hoped that this might one day find its way into a "Special Edition". Palmer and Channel 5 together have done the composer whom we all revere a truly great service and the film will, I am sure, become a classic of its kind. It is only a pity that Ursula Vaughan Williams did not live to see its public release.

Michael Nelson
Leeds, UK

I got up unwontedly early on New Year's morning so as not to miss any of Tony Palmer's TV programme *O Thou Transcendent*. I must confess, therefore, to having been a little disappointed, especially after the massive puff it had received beforehand. It did not contain much material that would be new to most members of the RVW Society. However for those who know little of the composer's work beyond *The Lark Ascending* and the *Tallis Fantasia* it could encourage them to explore further. But how many of those will have been watching at 9am on New Year's Day? A graveyard slot indeed!

It was a serious omission that was there no reference at all to the *Pastoral Symphony*, which is a key work if one is considering RVW's war experiences. And in connection with his war service, no mention was made of his commission. Serving in this Royal Garrison Artillery (which used the largest guns in the army) could have been the cause of his later deafness. And why was it necessary to illustrate his WWI experiences with shots from other, much later conflicts? Such images also cropped up later in the programme and appeared to me to be completely redundant, unless the author was attempting to make a point which had no relation to RVW at all.

There was no mention, I recall, of the composer's Wedgwood ancestors, but much about Adeline's family, most of which information seemed of little importance in explaining how RVW developed as a composer.

For some reason whilst the *Norfolk Rhapsody* was playing we were treated to images of everywhere else in the British Isles but East Anglia, and a photograph of someone who seemed to be Arthur Vaughan Williams got introduced amongst those purporting to show Ralph as he was growing up.

The performances of the music were, in general, good, though why an orchestral version of *Linden Lea* with a lady singer was chosen, I fail to understand. This is a man's song – a very personal one at that – which is better sung solo or with pianoforte accompaniment. And I thought the rendition of *The Sky above the Roof* left a great deal to be desired. The person singing *Bushes and Briars* on the aged phonograph didn't sound like Charles Pottipher, unless he'd had the Farinelli treatment, that is.

We were promised a "sting in the tail". I am still wondering what it was. The main item of information of which I was unaware beforehand was the possibility that Ursula may have had a termination and that Vaughan Williams was the father. This could hardly be classed as a "sting". Indeed perhaps such a thing could have been expected and it does not serve to diminish my admiration for both of them. But that bit of information did not come at the end ("in the tail") of the programme. Perhaps what was meant was the theory that the composer lost what little faith he may have had towards the end of his life. If this was the "sting in the tail" it was of limited significance as far has his output was concerned, which was in full flow up to the day he died (and not all of his later works were pessimistic). Compare RVW with Elgar, a devout Roman Catholic who *did* admit to losing his faith in later years. The effect on Elgar was to dry up his inspiration completely.

Perhaps the "sting in the tail" story was to ensure that everyone watched to the end. If so the author need not have worried as far as I was concerned (although the interruptions by wretched adverts were more than trying). In spite of all the above, I found the programme very interesting, and the DVD is on order. We should also be grateful for Channel 5 making space amongst their usual dross for a serious programme of this length. But perhaps an indication of how far this channel is committed to cultural programmes was typified by the announcer who, after the programme, pronounced the composer's first name in a way that would have infuriated him (so we are told).

I await with great interest the BBC version due to be screened later in 2008.

Michael J Gainsford
Burbage, Leicestershire, UK

Tony Palmer's film certainly has the look of quality about it. And largely it's a quality product. Obviously thoroughly researched, the film carefully follows the life of VW from Down Ampney to his final resting place in Westminster Abbey. Production values are high throughout, with well chosen, often poignant, backdrops to the master's music. Shots of the Glenfinnon Viaduct and derelict engine houses on the Cornish Coast set the scene and give the film considerable atmosphere. Interviews are carefully interwoven with shots of various ensembles playing his music – always tastefully lit and sometimes almost in silhouette. I was a little disconcerted to see interviews with one or two personalities, Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys, for instance. I wasn't quite sure of the motive here. Was it to highlight the fact that pop "icons" listen to classical music too? Or was it that Mr. Palmer listened to *Desert Island Discs* when Mr. Tennant was interviewed and thought he'd put him in to add "colour"? If this was the case, I recall a while back Brian Blessed on *Desert Island Discs* choosing *Sinfonia Antartica* – now, he would have added colour if that was the motive.

The choice of musical content was well balanced. I was surprised however, that some pieces were not included. For me, the addition of *An Oxford Elegy*, the close of the Ninth Symphony and the opening of *Dona Nobis Pacem* would be essential to a thorough survey of VW's music. These could have been chosen rather than have two excerpts of the Fourth and *Job* – but I realise that we all have our favourites, and other reasons, either financial or production, may have precluded the addition of more works.

Aside from one or two unusual choices of interviewee and the puzzling omission of some of VW's "big numbers" – was the *Pastoral* left out or did I miss it? – the overall impression of the film was of a well-crafted and thought-provoking piece which left one with a warm glow at its close (especially following Ursula's intensely moving final words).

From the film-making point of view VW is a difficult man to "get a handle on". Being a man with no menacing skeletons in the cupboard, and very unlike others who were colourful to say the least, a life history of VW could in the hands of a lesser film maker be rather bland. I well remember the Ken Russell VW tribute on the South Bank Show some years back. His formula to prevent blandness was to include some strangely incongruous – yet effective – scenes; for instance himself and Ursula dancing in an ungainly fashion in a London nightclub to the strains of the Scherzo from the *London Symphony*!

Tony Palmer's "handle" seemed largely concerned with painting VW as a somewhat disenchanted and melancholy character who, especially towards the end of his life, permitted his personal disenchantment to bleed into his compositions. Well, I understand the argument; but wasn't Mr. Palmer confusing disenchantment and melancholy with profundity? Was not VW aiming for the heights in his music, not dredging the depths? Surely it is a foundation of classical music that you are required to write "pessimistic music" in order to be considered a serious composer. If VW had spent most of his time writing happy folk dance music and pretty songs, would he have had any chance of being considered a serious composer? By comparison, look at another English composer George Lloyd: he is undoubtedly not considered a top rank composer because he wrote too many pleasant tunes in his symphonies. Therefore I don't consider VW to be depressingly pessimistic at all; he was, conversely, striving for the profound, and in my opinion on many occasions got there. The film also made considerable play of VW being the

unshakable agnostic, and being in a downcast state of anguish about where he was bound after death. I'm not convinced. Surely he was "reaching for the stars" all his life. He may not have known the answers to the great mystery of life and death, but it did not preclude him from the search to find it. I tend to think that for all of his existence he was in some way "waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall" rather than floundering in search of something unobtainable.

So whereas I understand that Tony Palmer needed to put an "edge" on his documentary, I am not convinced that his conclusions were always accurately observed. They were not his words, but can it really be true that VW wrote the whole of the Fourth Symphony in such menacing tones because he was unhappy with his wife? I must say I'm not a believer here.

However, some reservations aside, I would certainly not wish to belittle Tony Palmer's overall achievement in making this film. I have no doubt that this is the pre-eminent attempt to portray the life of VW in film to date. Tony Palmer is to be congratulated for producing an invaluable document of considerable quality. My overall impression of the film is of its emotiveness and of the deep affection observed in the comments of contributor after contributor. We are left with the impression that VW was a truly great man – and I am sure that none of us would disagree with that.

Rob Furneaux,
Devon, UK

I ordered my copy of the Tony Palmer DVD as soon as it became available, and waited eagerly for it to arrive. When it finally came, I loaded it into my computer immediately. After a struggle to get out of the introductory loop which endlessly repeated the first few bars of the *Sea Symphony* – I'm now very familiar with those bars! – I was finally able, after much clicking of the mouse, to progress into the film. I was not disappointed. It was everything I had hoped for. How marvelous to get all that splendid testimony from those who were closest to RVW! How wonderful to hear those consistently excellent performances of his music! Palmer is to be congratulated for assembling all these elements to produce such a rounded portrait of the composer. Perhaps he lingers a little on the dark side, but his expressed intention is to move beyond the image of cuddly old "Uncle Ralph" and he has certainly achieved that purpose. However, the grim images of war in the trenches and so on are tempered by the light in other places and the obvious deep affection shown by all those who knew the composer. I found myself close to tears at several points, most notably at the noble image of Adrian Boult conducting the *Romanza* from the Fifth Symphony. Absolutely no histrionics. Surely, of all conductors, Boult remains the one most perfectly suited to perform Vaughan Williams' music.

I think Palmer also gets the disputed question of RVW's religious views exactly right. He sees him as a lifelong pilgrim who had looked into the abyss and preserved some hope but also plenty of doubt. The Archbishop of Canterbury, surely an authority on the subject, appears in the film to say: "Vaughan Williams wouldn't have thanked us for pretending he was an orthodox believer. He recognized that the English music tradition couldn't be understood without the Christian Church in it, and also that religious music articulated things that couldn't be understood anywhere else". I hope this will finally silence those who persist in seeing the composer as some sort of closet Christian, but I doubt it.

Nothing's perfect, and I have a few small gripes. Although the music is splendid, Palmer's choice of it to illustrate certain actions seems to me to have an unwelcome touch of Ken Russell, particularly in the more intimate scenes. I would have liked to have had fewer repeats, making way for music that wasn't included. Why wasn't the *Pastoral Symphony* used to accompany some of the war scenes? Why not also include the Piano Concerto, a much underrated work? Biggest gripe of all: the person chosen to speak RVW's own words had a rather smug intonation that is totally uncharacteristic of the man.

But having got those off my chest, this is truly something to treasure; a penetrating portrait of RVW the human being by those who knew and loved him, accompanied by some of the music that we love, that never fails to take us beyond ourselves. The best Christmas present I've ever received. Thank you, Tony Palmer.

Michael Farman
Palestine, Texas, USA

Rikky Rooksby kindly let me see an advance copy of his fascinating review, published in this issue. I understood many of the points that he was making, but did not entirely agree with him that the film over-emphasized VW's "dark" side and used inappropriate and even vulgar imagery with which to do so.

The film is an important and even wonderful document that will stand for ever as a resource and as a monument to VW himself and to just a few of those who knew him. What struck me at the end was that much of the film was about the religious debate that has batted through the Journal for the past couple of years. Because of the nature of some of the music, this is inevitable; there is no final conclusion to the debate (perhaps the Ninth Symphony encapsulates it) but there is no escaping it. If you want to understand the man you have to get to grips with his views on religion, on war, on women, on other composers. I think the carnage of the first world war was a massive influence on him, so I agreed with much that Palmer did along those lines, and am a bit more accepting of some of the imagery used in the film. But the film suggests a broader range of influences, and the possible impact of Adeline and Ursula on the fourth and fifth symphonies will fuel new debate for a long time to come. The film conveys a lot of the music (though I felt that the performance of the Fourth Symphony was not totally secure; did the players really understand it?) If you want to get the music across (and I think TP did) you have to find a way of illustrating it. We had the odd green field, but some images needed to be more challenging to get us through two and a half hours. The sea shots were splendid; my wife and I were not quite so convinced by the collapsing ice cliffs, but I am broadly supportive of the images of pain that he used, justified by the war experience.

The most extraordinary image in the entire piece was that tragic picture of VW and Adeline in old age, with pain etched into her face. Was the film really about love? Perhaps Ursula had the last word on that.

Rikky suggests that the task of VW's next biographer is to go beyond Tony Palmer's thesis; of course that's right. There is always more to say. Another film is in the making, and I look forward to seeing it in 2008. I am sure it will be different and, with luck, every bit as controversial.

John Francis
Treasurer, RVW Society

Concert Reviews

HUGH THE DROVER in YORK

On Friday 12 October, my wife and I travelled up from Kent to the York Theatre Royal to see *Hugh the Drover* for the first time. Of course I know the work from the Hyperion CD (though my fellow audience member Stephen Connock recommends the long-deleted Groves recording on EMI if you can track down an affordable used copy) but I had not mastered the intricacies of the plot – which happily proved to be not too intricate, perhaps justifying the complete absence of the usual synopsis from the programme.

York Opera is a community group, celebrating its fortieth birthday this year with this, their third production of *Hugh*. Ursula Vaughan Williams was its Patron, so this production really did mark the end of an era. Ursula was not well enough to attend this time, but had attended the two earlier productions. She is warmly remembered by the Opera Society's members.

York Opera mixes local enthusiasts in the chorus with professionals and semi-professionals in the orchestra and lead singing parts. The mix worked well, and a tremendously high standard of both playing and singing was maintained.

It is often said not to be over until the fat lady sings, but Vaughan Williams wrote to Harold Child, his librettist, that he hoped "to secure somebody tolerably good-looking and with a reasonably slim appearance" to play Mary. The utterly gorgeous Diane Peacock more than met the composer's most exacting requirements, and it was astonishing how such a slight figure could always deliver more when required – not just more volume, but more emotion, more passion – and, for me, opera is about passion. Ben Kerslake, playing Hugh, was clear, expressive, and every bit as tuneful and passionate. The two lovers carried the piece appropriately.

The chorus, ably conducted by Alasdair Jamieson, was excellent, and the lesser parts were carried off both musically and wittily. Special mention must be made of Ian Thomson-Smith playing John the Butcher, the villain of the piece. He played it as a serious villain, rather than the pantomime variety, and was so convincing that he took his final curtain call to boos and hissing that must have done a lot for his ego over four performances!

The opera is full of country yokels, suitably dressed (it is described as a "chorus opera", so a good one for this company) and we even had Morris dancers, complete with (clean) white handkerchiefs and a hobby horse. So anybody wanting to make the "cow looking over a gate" jibe will find the material they seek (and don't all write in: I know what Warlock said and I even think I know what he meant!) But the country setting works and the story is interesting – one useful test of a good opera. The music is Vaughan Williams in neither "pastoral" nor visionary mode, but another Vaughan Williams altogether: romantic, lyrical, beautiful, utterly beguiling. This is a production that could, and perhaps should, have been toured more widely.

At the end Clive Goodhead, the Showman, came on to remind us that it was the composer's birthday (also that of the Director, Clive Marshall) so he led the audience in three resounding cheers for 135 years of Ralph Vaughan Williams – what a finish!

As we left, everybody was asking the same question: "Why is this fabulous opera not performed more often?" Perhaps it's just snobbery: the major companies just won't touch it. The RVW Society has done much to promote Vaughan Williams' work over the years, but most major works now need little advocacy – just look at the multiplicity of recordings. Yet the "opera" breakthrough is still to come. I believe that there will come a time when these neglected operas will be performed in preference to many of the recent or contemporary works that now account for so much public funding. Every member of our Society needs to consider how they can play their part in promoting these insufficiently well-known masterpieces.

As for York Opera – three seasons of *Hugh the Drover* in forty years is a good score. Next: is it time for *The Poisoned Kiss*?

John Francis

LONDON in CAMBRIDGE

The opening concert of the Cambridge Philharmonic Society's 2007-8 season, at the West Road Concert Hall on 14 October, combined fun and substantial food for musical thought in exhilarating measure. The audience was large and enthusiastic, the playing confident and disciplined and the whole evening a marked artistic success.

Readers will know that Michael Kennedy has rightly described Vaughan Williams' *London Symphony*, which filled the first half of the programme, as his most "Mahlerian", implying that it aims at creating a whole musical universe of its own. It certainly demands virtuoso playing from the orchestra and a fine sense of balance, impressionistic texture and its overall structure from the conductor. It got all three in full measure from Tim Redmond and the Society's orchestra. Many of the Cambridge Philharmonic's players have enjoyed or are enjoying a full professional training, though only a modicum of them actually earn their living as professionals.

They played with an intensity, a fire and a sensitivity to Vaughan Williams' idiom that made it hard to believe that they were not a fully professional band. The tricky passages in the scherzo were nimbly and convincingly negotiated, the dynamic range was enormous and the expressive phrasing of the woodwind and strings in the slow movement moving and atmospheric. The hectic passages in the outer movements were effectively realised and Mr. Redmond emphasised the great cry of anguish at the opening of the finale by allowing only a minimal pause between it and the end of the scherzo. The poetic close to the finale was beautifully realised. A very musical friend who admitted he "wasn't really into Vaughan Williams" told me afterwards that the performance had quite made him revise his opinion.

"Follow that" was the unspoken order of the day. Which is

precisely what the brilliant young trumpeter Alison Balsom did. The name of Berndt Alois Zimmermann (1918-1970) is, I imagine, a name to drop amongst the cognoscenti rather than one familiar in most music-loving households. So it was fascinating to hear from Mr. Redmond (aided and abetted by a well-balanced small group of singers from the Phil's choir) how his short but powerful Trumpet Concerto, based on the spiritual *Nobody Knows de Trouble I See*, is constructed. They provided a helpful introduction to this concentrated and eclectic work.

For sheer purity of sound, precision of attack, clarity and variety of tone-colour, Ms Balsom must be right at the top among young solo trumpeters; and the watchful Mr. Redmond and the orchestra ensured that their contribution to the concerto too made a considerable impact. The audience responded with gusto and Ms Balsom was persuaded to add an encore piece.

Sir Thomas Beecham would hardly have described Zimmermann's concerto as a "lollipop". Shostakovich's Suite for Variety Orchestra – culled from the music that he composed for various Soviet films – which ended the concert, obligingly provided a whole bag-full of them. This was a most enjoyable evening as well as a musically stimulating one.

James Day

CELEBRITY RECITAL at the ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

After concluding the business at the Society's AGM on October 14 2007, the assembled company of Society trustees, officials and members were treated to a delightful song recital given by Juliette Pochin (mezzo-soprano) accompanied by Anne Bolt at the piano. This event had been eagerly anticipated by those present, as Juliette Pochin is one of the soloists on the CD of Vaughan Williams' songs, *The Sky Shall Be Our Roof*, recently released by Albion Records, and this was an opportunity to hear her sing live. The recital programme consisted of songs by various English composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams, of course, (including his settings of poems by Fredegond Shove), Peter Warlock, Roger Quilter, Herbert Howells, and Michael Head.

Ms. Pochin and Ms. Bolt delivered this varied programme with impressive artistry – at times with great gusto, at times with a moving sensitivity. The recital opened with two songs by Vaughan Williams: *Boy Johnny* and *Life is full of care* from *Hugh the Drover*. Later, Warlock's *The Fox* and Quilter's *Crimson Petal* were particularly memorable performances, and Howells' *King David* was delivered with delicate poignancy. A rousing rendition of Vaughan Williams' *If I were Queen* brought the recital to a fitting conclusion.

Finally, Stephen Connock, Chairman of the RVW Society, presented to each of the performers a large bouquet of flowers, and on behalf of the whole audience, expressed his appreciation for what had indeed been a most enjoyable performance.

Graeme Ramsay

RVW IN MALTA

The music of Vaughan Williams is not often heard in Malta, but there are a small number of devotees here, and, by their combined efforts, the occasional piece is performed. The wife of the British High Commissioner, Erica Archer, was formerly a member of the Royal Choral Society and the Artistic Director of the Malta National Orchestra, Emy Scicluna, was once a student at the Royal College of Music.

They came together to organise a concert in November to celebrate the anniversaries of Elgar's birth and Vaughan Williams' death, which also became a memorial for Ursula. The Royal Choral Society sang *Toward The Unknown Region* and *The Music Makers*, with an impressive mezzo-soprano from New Zealand, Wendy Dawn Thompson, and the Malta National Orchestra performed the Fifth Symphony, under the baton of Richard Cooke.

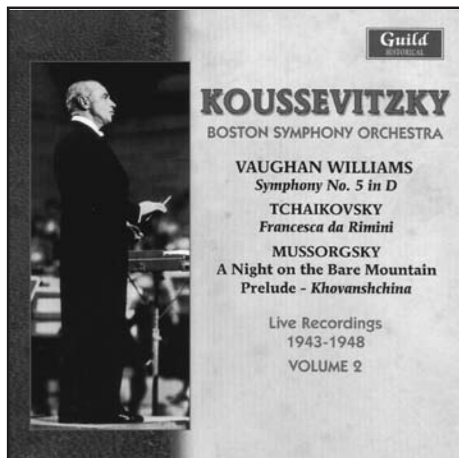
Malta is not well served with concert halls – the Royal Opera House was destroyed in WW2, and the ruins are still there, at the entrance to Valletta – so the Grand Masters Suite at the Hilton Hotel was the unlikely venue. The hall was a little over half full, and the acoustic was somewhat unflattering, but the audience was appreciative, and a further concert of Vaughan Williams' music next year is under discussion. Members will be welcome to attend!

The event was attended by Malta's Culture Minister, Francis Zammit Dimech (who confirmed that an increase in the orchestra's grant next year will lead to a substantial growth in the number of its players) and by your correspondent, whose efforts to promote Vaughan Williams in the Mediterranean will continue!

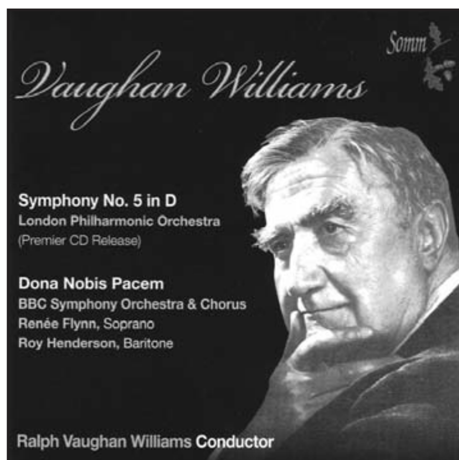
Simon Coombs

CD & DVD Reviews

VAUGHAN WILIAMS:
Symphony No. 5 in D
Two historic live recordings



Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky (1947) GUILD CHCD 2324



London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1952) SOMMMCD 071

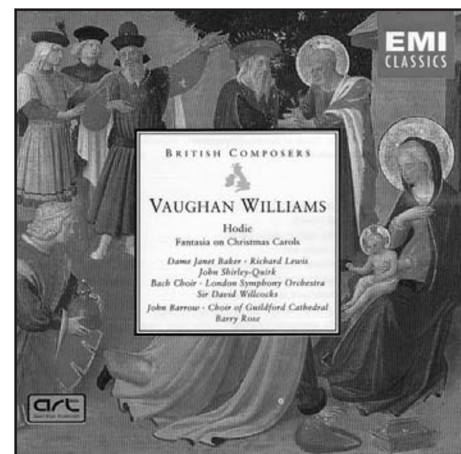
There was a time when I shunned all historic recordings of orchestral music believing that only modern digital techniques could give acceptable listening. I was wrong and these two CDs which came hot on the heels of one another prove a revelation in the appreciation of this beautiful symphony. The quality of recorded sound is the issue with any recording made over fifty years ago, particularly if, as is the case here, they were from live concerts. Indeed the composer's performance was taken "off air" from a live radio broadcast of the 1952 BBC Proms. The sound isn't perfect on either performance but the engineers have done a good job in reducing surface noise and you really can hear most of the detail quite clearly, audience intrusion is not significant and indeed adds to the atmosphere. When listening repeatedly the ear simply ignores some of the glitches and concentrates on the performance. And what great ones they are.

Koussevitzky was an advocate of modern English music and performed a number of the Vaughan Williams symphonies with the Boston Symphony orchestra. His Fifth is, on the whole, a well-paced interpretation and he clearly had a strong grasp of the architecture of the work. Fast tempi in the P*reludio* in comparison to the composer make for an energetic rather than radiant effect, the brass are little brash at times but the strings are faultless. The *scherzo* is wonderfully played and the tempi are just right, plenty of detail comes through, ultimately just lacking some of the element of mystery the composer brings. At just over thirty-five minutes in total, Koussevitzky takes a quickish approach in all movements save the Romanza, where the playing slows down a good deal and the timing is quite a bit longer than Vaughan Williams' own. There is a feeling of stillness at the opening, the important cor anglais and flute solos are beautifully played and those Boston strings rise to the occasion with passion in the climax of this great slow movement. Here Vaughan Williams takes a quicker approach, not lingering like some conductors (notably Haitink) in the music's beauties, yet the feeling of radiance and benediction comes through magically, the LPO playing superbly. In the last movement Koussevitzky takes a brisk pace but when it comes to that amazing ending he gets it just right, slowing things down so the ethereal strings can rise heavenwards, bringing a rapt completion to the great arch of this symphony. The recording from 1947 is forward and quite bright at times but doesn't really detract from the enjoyment of the music. When I listened for the first time to the composer's account it was in nervous anticipation, perhaps because Vaughan Williams was supposed not to be technically a good conductor and he was in his eightieth year, so I feared disappointment. The opening horn calls immediately dispelled anxiety: this is a radiant, warm and beautifully paced journey through his visionary symphony. A magisterial performance, the LPO were on fine form, I do not think I have ever heard a finer interpretation of the Fifth than this. The recording is warmer and less forward than the Boston one; you can hear the music clearly and the detail is impressive. It needs no further comment from me since the man on the podium clearly knew what he wanted. Both discs have additional music: on Somm it is a 1936 studio recording of the first broadcast of *Dona Nobis Pacem* conducted by the composer, whereas Koussevitzky has some well-known Russian orchestral pieces. In conclusion the composer's performance is indispensable, an absolute must for any lover of the Vaughan Williams' music, whereas Koussevitzky's is perhaps more for researchers and collectors of American Vaughan Williams performances. For those who are interested in such things I include a table of the timings of the movements of the symphony with Barbirolli's premiere recording from 1944 as a comparison.

Conductor	*Date*	*1st*	*2nd*	*3rd*	*4th*	*Time*
Barbirolli	*17/02/1944*	*11:18*	*4:20*	*11:16*	*9:10*	***36.04***
Koussevitzky	*04/03/1947*	*10.33*	*4:46*	*11:01*	*9:29*	***35.09***
RVW	*03/09/1952*	*11:58*	*5:04*	*10:13*	*10:02*	***37.17***

Robin Barber

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS*:*
Fantasia on Christmas Carols
Hodie (This Day)



Janice Watson, soprano; Peter Hoare, tenor; Stephen Gadd, baritone; Middle Chamber Choir of St. Catherine's School, Bramley; Guildford Choral Society; Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Hilary Davan Whetton NAXOS 8.570439

Vaughan Williams' great Christmas Cantata *Hodie* was first performed in Worcester Cathedral in September 1954. The composer conducted, a month short of his eighty-second birthday. The choir reportedly loved the work, but critical reception was generally lukewarm. I don't believe it is heard very often, and this seems to be only its third recording.

The score indicates a duration of fifty minutes, but it runs to an hour in this performance. There are sixteen sections, with roles for three soloists, full choir and orchestra, and narrative passages are sung by a chorus of trebles accompanied by the organ. The work opens with a huge burst of energy with the choral setting of "Hodie Christus natus est" and closes in similar fashion with words from Milton's *Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. In between is a veritable anthology of texts around the theme of Christmas, some of them drawn from the Bible and others from poetic sources. In Michael Kennedy's memorable phrase "Here Vaughan Williams has done for Christmas what Britten has done for Spring."

There are beautiful things in this work, to be sure. I have myself conducted one of the choruses on several occasions, both in England and in France, *The Blessed Son of God*, which appears separately published in the first (green) volume of the *Oxford Book of Carols*. The soprano solos, too, are both most beautiful, vintage Vaughan Williams, and the second, a setting of "Sweet was the song the Virgin sang" ends before we want it to. But there are many passages where the composer seems to be going through the motions, at least to this listener, and the charge that he said nothing new in the work does seem to have some substance. And I have always found disappointing the setting of Hardy's *The Oxen*, wistful and melancholy, to be sure, but rather lacking the intensity I had always hoped for, given my personal conviction that the poem comes very close to expressing the composer's own religious Credo. The work is wonderfully well written for the different forces, and though not easy must be a real pleasure to perform. The narrative passages are difficult to sing without seeming literal, a problem not totally avoided in this performance, well though the Middle Chamber Choir of St Catherine's School, Bramley, acquits itself. The Guildford Choral Society sings as well as we have come to expect from one of the finer amateur choirs in the United Kingdom, and the playing of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is quite simply superb. The performance is well-paced overall, proof that conductor Hilary Davan Wetton has full measure of the work. Given the equally excellent performance of the logically-coupled *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, not to mention the almost imperceptible dent it will make in the family budget, there seems no reason not to acquire this disc straight away. Seasoned Vaughan Williams collectors will, however, already have one of the earlier recordings of the work. For my money, there is little to choose between the new issue and Richard Hickox's excellent performance on Chandos. But when it comes to the EMI issue, recorded in 1965 under the direction of Sir David Willcocks, things are rather different.

It must be tiresome for singers of the present generation to be compared, so often, with those of earlier times. Janice Watson, Peter Hoare and Stephen Gadd are outstanding singers, and will disappoint no one. It is only in direct comparison that one feels obliged to say that Janet Baker, for example, on EMI, brings just that little bit extra meaning to the words, just that bit more intensity, not to mention the timbre of her incomparable and instantly recognisable voice. And Stephen Gadd, in the Fantasia, has to compete with Sir Thomas Allen, his voice at its most honeyed, communicating the essential joy of these songs in such a simple and direct way that would surely have gladdened the heart of the composer.

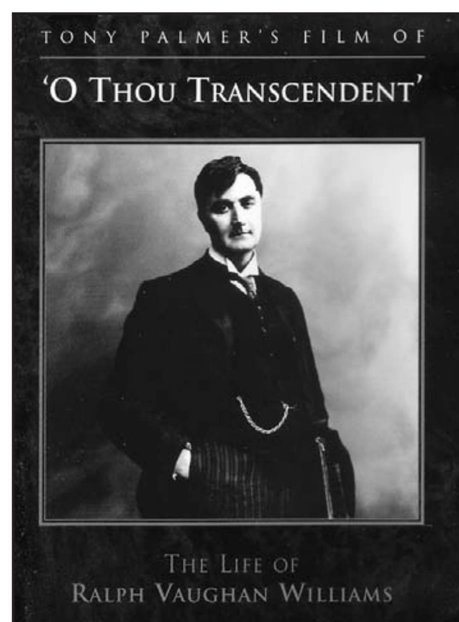
William Hedley

O THOU TRANSCENDENT

Tony Palmer's film about Vaughan Williams, *O Thou Transcendent*, was released in December 2007, just in advance of the anniversary year. A leaflet and order form for Society members was included with the last Journal. Here are two reviews of this most important issue.

"And I will not have him...to have all these ideas of him…he was really just right and he was a perfect man and a sweet man and a delicious man and I…love him."

In an unforgettably poignant moment, Palmer's film climaxes with an extraordinary eulogy from the 96 year-old



Ursula Vaughan Williams. Her emotional outpouring is not only a declaration of love for her husband, but an anguished and bitter expression of grief at the way he has been so misunderstood. Slowly, Vaughan Williams' reputation is being rebuilt. Outside Britain, Roger Norrington and Richard Hickox, amongst others, perform the symphonies to an increasingly appreciative audience, and yet his music is still too rarely heard abroad. Even in the country of his birth there are many who still see him simply as a cuddly folk song recycler, someone who embodies sentiment and nostalgia without thought for the more serious issues. It is precisely this unjust misrepresentation which Tony Palmer challenges in his new biographical film, *O Thou Transcendent*.

In print we have a surplus of riches. A biography to surpass those by Ursula Vaughan Williams and Michael Kennedy is unlikely. On film though, it's another story. The Omnibus production *A Portrait of an English Composer*, written and directed by Stanley Williamson in 1970, although compact and factual, now looks terribly out of date. The London Weekend Television production for The South Bank Show, *A Symphonic Portrait*, directed by Ken Russell in 1988, seems a self-indulgent parody. Both films run to approximately sixty minutes. Palmer's however, comes to a whopping two and half hours. A new and modern revaluation was certainly overdue but could Palmer's film add anything to our understanding of the composer, even allowing for the extra time he takes over it?

As the recipient of more than 40 international prizes, including numerous BAFTAs, EMMY nominations and awards and as the only person to have won the Prix Italia twice, Tony Palmer was hardly likely

to disappoint us with just another cosy Uncle Ralph story. Instead, he unwraps a more interesting idea. Yes, of a man who loved his country and its countryside, its history and religious tradition, but also of a man of tremendous courage, a visionary who was indelibly marked by his experience of war and whose outlook for mankind, if not fatal, was desperately bleak. From the outset Stephen Johnson, one of the major narrators, delivers a solemn and ominous warning: "Vaughan Williams is the most misunderstood of all twentieth-century composers. Complex and disturbing. A man who wrote some of the most unsettling music of our time." As he moves us further away from our comfort zone he seeks to explain reasons for the darkness and sadness in the music. Even *The Lark Ascending*, so beautifully played in the film by Nicola Benedetti, according to Stephen Johnson, points toward the "Unknown Region". "It is an elegy for the vanished idea of pastoral life", he declares. It contemplates "the worst. No answer, no reconciliation." And the *Tallis Fantasia*? More of the same. After all, he continues, the words begin "When, rising from the bed of death".

But "Can't a man just write a piece of music?" Vaughan Williams asked at the time of writing his Fourth Symphony.
In the Williamson film Michael Kennedy said that he found humour in the Fourth. It isn't entirely the grim affair we think. "It's bit like people who enjoy being in a bad temper!" Ursula, in the same film, goes further by saying it would have been recognised as a "self-portrait throughout his life, like Rembrandt. Vitality, control, strength, fun and wit." Much later in the Palmer film we are told by Jerrold Northrop Moore that Michael Kennedy, in a letter to him, thought of it as "rage against Adeline", Vaughan Williams' first wife. He goes on to say that Vaughan Williams was a "passionate man", implying a deep sense of frustration. His meaning becomes clear when we are reminded that for the most part of their 54-year marriage Adeline was crippled by arthritis.

But it is Johnson whose evaluation of the Fourth sets the tone for the rest of the film. His view is dark. For him it stands as "*dies irae*. The day of wrath. A courageous confrontation of the black nothingness with which 'our little sleep' might just be rounded." Whichever interpretation we care to give the Fourth, Tamas Vasary leaves us in no doubt as to Palmer's viewpoint nor indeed his own. Conducting the National Orchestra of Hungarian Radio, who play with devastating ferocity, he looks for all the world like Luther dashing salacious material against a pulpit. These and other specially filmed orchestral sequences give us a superb insight into the energy which drives the full symphonic cycle.

The National Youth Orchestra proudly conducted by Sian Edwards perform the Second, Sixth and Eighth symphonies. They play peerlessly, and their *Job – A Masque for Dancing*, soaring over images of Cambridge, is both thrilling and majestic. For the wonderful *Sea Symphony* sequence Palmer was told, officially by the BBC, that "no more than fifty, probably less" of the BBC Chorus would be willing to "give up their time". In fact, 186 turned up on a Saturday in Maida Vale Studios to make the recording in their free time. The only absent member was eight-months pregnant! We are never allowed to forget the core argument of the film and hence we return to the sadness and darker experience: Vaughan Williams' time in the ambulance service, his courage, his humility, the terrible sights he must have seen, his marriage, his doubts about the existence of God and how all this inevitably affected his music. "I've seen the fearfulest thing any person has seen." (*Riders to the Sea*). Michael Kennedy further endorses Palmer's view that Vaughan Williams wrote "some of the most unsettling music of our time". The Fourth Symphony: "Very angry... pessimistic, even bleak." The end of the Sixth? "…very bleak." "So is the Seventh." Opening of the Ninth? "Grim really." And about the Fifth symphony and his great melodic gift: ".....even when they are called a *Romanza* (Romance) they are often tinged with great sadness but that again makes you wonder why."

Understandably there are omissions. There is no time for the Piano Concerto, *Dona Nobis Pacem* or the *Serenade to Music*. Although the Leith Hill Festival is not forgotten, Vaughan Williams' reverence for Bach is not discussed, nor are contemporary influences on his music. Other than a brief reference to *Riders to the Sea* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* no mention of the operas is made. Let's not forget however that this film is a biography and few details are left out, even if sometimes they make us uncomfortable. Archive material is included such as Michael Tippett expressing remorse that as an arrogant young man he rejected Vaughan Williams but how he eventually realised the debt English music owed to him. A picture emerges of a man who was greatly loved and admired. Amazing it is, to see Roy Douglas still verbally combative at the age of 100. Christopher Finzi, Lady Barbirolli, Simona Pakenham, John Noble and David Willcocks offer insights. Other interviews reveal some unexpected admirers. The Archbishop of Canterbury talks about how the Church of England owes a debt of gratitude to Vaughan Williams. Mark Anthony Turnage reveals that his admiration for the composer was a well-kept secret when he was at the Royal College of Music where Vaughan Williams was such an unfashionable figure. An unlikely early fan, Sir Harrison Birtwistle surprisingly recounts an amusing story of when as a young man he visited the composer with his own imitation of a Vaughan Williams work. The American composer, John Adams talks about the mesmeric qualities of the *Tallis Fantasia*, which was the first classical piece of music he heard live. André Previn candidly tells us how he was smitten by the *London Symphony*.

Always visually and musically stunning, Tony Palmer's film is thought provoking, challenging and often uncomfortable. As those who knew him best paint a picture which is affectionate but also honest, we are given a fuller understanding of the human being. Palmer leaves us with a contemporary evaluation of the composer. Beyond any doubt, here is a man whose music is prophetic and a warning to a world still bent on making the same mistakes. As the film concludes we are confronted by the blackness of the Ninth Symphony conducted by Vasary. No comfort here. It's a vision of hell and we are shown what to expect.

"He was a see-er…a visionary." (Michael Kennedy)

The last word should be left to Johnson:

"He bestrode English music in the twentieth century like a colossus. Every aspect of musical life stood in his shadow, even if what he wrote was increasingly preoccupied with questions...of despair and death, even if those questions were there from the very beginning."

Tadeusz Kasa

"The 'happy' end becomes 'sentimental'; the open or tragic end becomes 'real'. It is often said that art movements do no more than reflect those of history. Our century is evidently violent, cruel, and all the rest: so what else should its arts be if not

black? But this suggests that the artist is incapable of any higher aspiration than that of presenting a mirror to the world around him." *(*John Fowles*, The Aristos)*

The release of Tony Palmer's film about Vaughan Williams is unquestionably a major event in the history of responses to the composer. I was lucky enough to be at the premiere, for which I have to thank Tony Palmer personally. This review is based on that single viewing. For those who know nothing or little of Vaughan Williams, *O Thou Transcendent* will expand their conception of the composer and his music. It may win him new listeners and raise his critical currency. For this much, we should thank the filmmaker. However, it does this at a cost. Pragmatically, some may think the cost worth it to broaden and elevate the reputation of Vaughan Williams' music. But *O Thou Transcendent* does not give us a full account of that greatness. Like an unexpectedly strong wine, it is going to befuddle a lot of critical heads.

Tony Palmer has admirably and resolutely set out to destroy the awful, enfeebling caricature of Vaughan Williams with which everyone connected with the Society is familiar: the benign old codger of English music, supplier of modal mellifluousness, the folk-song composer, the Edwardian who set a lark ascending and whose hymn tunes (edited or original) reverberated through the schools and churches of Britain, whose unsophisticated pastoral tunefulness and simple nostalgia makes him the *genius loci* of Classic FM. As I once heard a member of the Oxford Bach Choir exclaim with distaste, "Vaughan Williams? Oh no…too sweet!" It is surely also one of the aims of the RVW Society to attack this dreadful caricature. The problem is that in his film Tony Palmer has beaten this caricature to death by seizing as his weapon of polemic another stereotype: the tortured artist who most merits our attention and acclaim when gazing into the abyss of nihilism and despair. The film thus turns Vaughan Williams into an anguished Modernist, a musical equivalent of Samuel Beckett, to demonstrate he is worth our attention. It is a far more fashionable image than the folk-song composer. We like our artists dark and twisted. Our discussion of the arts has for decades been skewed by a false polarity in which the nihilistic, the pessimistic, the violent, tortured, cruel and harsh is regarded as "hard", serious and authentic; whereas that which is affirming, that which asserts meaning, optimism, beauty, and transcendence is viewed as "soft", pretty and superficial. In part a legacy of Modernism, this polarity is our critical orthodoxy, and *O Thou Transcendent* reinforces rather than challenges it, as it slides Vaughan Williams from one pole to the opposite. We have no public aesthetic for viewing the beautiful as profound on its own terms and as a revealer of meanings as significant as anything at the opposite pole in this dichotomy.

It is undeniable that Vaughan Williams' music contains much pain and longing, including (contrary to received prejudice) in the conventionally attractive works. No performance of the Fifth Symphony is worth its salt unless it does full justice to the sense of setting out on a journey in the first and fourth movements, the dangerously caustic glee of the second, and the anguished redemption of the slow movement. A conductor should say to the orchestra, as Elgar once prefaced a recording of *Land of Hope and Glory*, "Gentleman, play this as though you've never heard it before". The beauty and radiance must be discovered through the performance span, not taken as a given before it starts. The consequence of this polarity in the discussion of the arts is that when Vaughan Williams' music is put in this context his "darker" music – notably the fourth and sixth symphonies – heavily favoured in the film – has had a higher critical reputation than works like the Fifth. This judgement is demonstrated by the early performance history of the Sixth. Critics are prepared to take these works seriously because they conform to the demand that authentic, powerful art be grim. *This* Vaughan Williams can, it is implied, be grudgingly praised because these works might be stood next to some Shostakovich symphonies (on the grounds of *angst*, not musical similarities). Vaughan Williams is easier to praise when he is being "modern", and being "modern" equates with being dissonant.

There is no doubt that part of Vaughan Williams' greatness is that he was willing and musically able to look at the worst in experience and respond to it creatively. But he was also capable of expressing the opposite – and we have currently no adequate aesthetic vocabulary in common use for describing the greatness of *that* achievement. We have to get beyond the misguided idea that a cycle of symphonies is like a game of snap, in which the vision of one is trumped by the next, and that one in turn by the next (Hugh Ottoway's argument that the Fifth is "shattered" by the Sixth is false). We lack the language with which to do justice to the achievement of the Fifth and the Ninth. There are countless record reviews and sleeve notes declaring that the Fifth Symphony, the *Tallis Fantasia, The Lark Ascending* and others are "tranquil" or "serene" when they are nothing of the kind. If it were so we would not find them so powerful and moving. (If ever there was a piece in which the emotion is far in excess of the ostensible subject it is *The Lark Ascending*). The enraptured silence that follows the conclusion of the Fifth Symphony almost every time I hear it live is not generated by an audience who have just sat through a work of tranquillity. *O Thou Transcendent* does not give us enough of a sense of this side of Vaughan Williams partly because its focus is elsewhere and because it is a film dancing to the tune of the critical orthodoxies of its time. It wants to shock its target audience – what could be more (Arts) Establishment?

What of the positives? The film's interview clips are fascinating, there is delightful footage of Vaughan Williams himself (alas, all too little), some breath-taking scenery, and several almost Kubrickian sequences focusing on the roof of a cathedral as the arches wheel in slow motion like a vast stone mandala. The film has plenty of the music and sometimes music and image mutually enhance each other. Channel 5 are certainly to be commended for their support for the project and the BBC ought to be ashamed of themselves for turning it down. But something is clearly awry early on, following Stephen Johnston's confident ascribing to Vaughan Williams the assumptions of a modish pessimism. Where are the composer's own words to back this up? Watch and listen for the *non sequitur* in the script when a steam train crosses the countryside and a voice-over declares that Vaughan Williams knew and regretted the loss of such landscapes because of economic and social forces. Nothing objectionable about that, but this leads immediately as if by logical consequence to a statement that this somehow demonstrates the composer's feeling that there was no hope for us either and death ends all!

Soon, this undefined pessimism is spreading through the music like ink through blotting paper. The *Tallis Fantasia* is used as a soundtrack for World War I footage in violation of chronology, somehow anticipating the war's horrors. The film can't resist dragging in Symphony No. 6 at this point to ram the point home. The Fourth Symphony is pressed into service first as being "about" the First World War, and later about

Vaughan Williams' apparent anger against Adeline. The film's most questionable tactic (and I think frankly vulgar) is to juxtapose the music against uncontextualized footage of conflict. We get a stealth bomber and a variety of human suffering: a soldier burning, a child's body on a stretcher in the Middle East (repeated gratuitously), the grief of parents, and toward the end even emaciated African children whose pain is accompanied by an extract from the Ninth Symphony. This seems to me both crude and philosophically incoherent. The film gets itself into a terrible and emotive muddle over making these images symbolize ill-defined notions that life is suffering, that this is The Nature Of Things, that since human beings are cruel and vile to each other there obviously isn't a God, and this is what Vaughan Williams' music is "saying", and *because* it is telling us this it is great music. For a contrast of artistic method, note the sequence where Sir Adrian Boult conducts the *Romanza* from the Fifth Symphony. Boult's elegant, understated, unshowy, quiet but deeply felt command of the music has no need to over-emote or be sensationalistic. This is one of the film's greatest moments (and where is the rest of this performance?) The film's polemic also leads to selective interpretations of the music it chooses. How fair is it to assume that Vaughan Williams was taking Scott's plight as indicative of something inherent in the human condition? Why is Antarctica as a symbolic landscape more "real" than, say, Norfolk? We get the end of the first movement of the Ninth Symphony, in E minor. But the Ninth doesn't *end* in E minor, though it could easily have done so given the manner of the coda's approach to the culminating bars. Instead, Vaughan Williams gives us a thrice-repeated E major chord, each time surging and resisting the dissonant F and G triads the saxophones try to layer over it. He could have made that final chord an E minor as he did at the conclusion of the first movement, but he didn't. I do not say this permits us to jump to a simple consolation. But it *is* a positive gesture where he need not have made one, and it makes any attempt to nail down the Ninth as unremittingly bleak unsustainable. Those E major chords make the symphony – to borrow an image from D. H. Lawrence – get up and walk away, nail and all. We do Vaughan Williams an injustice if we attempt to make one side of his output his most "authentic" music and that akin in spirit to *Waiting for Godot* even if this makes him fashionable to like. Such a gambit may raise his critical reputation in the short term but it obscures the broader foundation of his greatness, which was to articulate in his music an opposing vision, even having evoked the "dark" aspects of the human condition. His work cannot be seen whole without an aesthetic which is able to properly celebrate this visionary aspect. The task of Vaughan Williams' next biographer will be to go beyond Tony Palmer's thesis, not merely reproduce it.

Rikky Rooksby

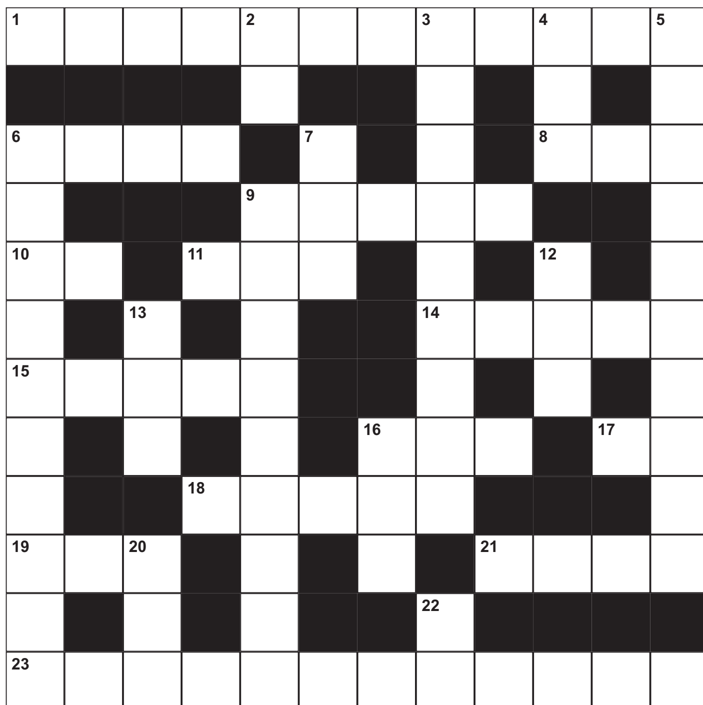
Appointment of Chairman

As announced on page 14, Stephen Connock is to step down as Chairman in October 2008. A Nominations Committee, consisting of John Francis, David Betts and Martin Murray, has been formed to appoint a new Chairman. John Francis told the Journal: *Stephen will be a hard act to follow but we fully respect his decision to retire after 14 years in this role. We will miss his vision and drive but it is good news that he will continue to run Albion Records and Albion Books. We are looking for a new Chairman with two main qualities. Firstly, the chairman must be knowledgeable and very enthusiastic about the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Secondly, the chosen individual should be action-centred with a managerial capability to get things done, worldwide. It is a wonderful opportunity to support and nurture, without ego or any personal agenda, the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams.*

Expressions of interest, without commitment, should be directed to: John Francis, Lindeyer Francis Ferguson, North House, 198, High Street, TONBRIDGE, Kent TN9 1BE. Tel. 01732 360200

John Francis adds:
Stephen and Cynthia have done so much together that we may need a number of volunteers to succeed them. In acknowledging this, it becomes clear that a new Chairman will inevitably bring a change of style. We will be seeking help with many of the Society's activities, but there is an immediate and urgent need for one or more volunteers to assist with storage and distribution of books and CDs. The prime requirement is that you need to live near a Post Office! An abundance of storage space would be helpful, but we can rent some space if your home is as cluttered as mine. Please contact me at the address shown above.

RVW Crossword No. 27 *by Michael Gainsford*



Across

1 The 'Romantic Extravaganza' of 1936 (8,4)
6 Setting of Christina Rossetti of 1902 (4)
8 Jellied in East London (3)
9 Pertaining to their love song of 1904 (5)
10 -- *Wenlock Edge* (2)
11 Domesticated relative of Aristophanes' insect? (3)
14 *The Sons of* ----- (5)
15 Accompanies love in no. 4 of *Songs of Travel* (5)
16 Another insect (3)
17 *Riders -- the Sea* (2)
18 '----- about in a ring-a' is III of *In Windsor Forest* (5)
19 Apollyon swears by his infernal one in *Pilgrim's Progress* (3)
21 Second part of 5 down (4)
23 National exhortation at start of hymn tune *Guildford* (7,5)

Down

2 RVW refused a knighthood, but accepted this (1,1)
3 Setting of Christina Rossetti of 1905 (9)
4 Lots of this in the subject of the seventh symphony (3)
5 Setting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti of 1903 (6,4)
6 Beautiful Welsh hymn tune prelude (10)
7 From far, from --- and morning (On Wenlock Edge) (3)
9 She's saluting the colours in the sketch done about 2008 (9)
12 One in the basket that appears in *Norfolk Rhapsody no. 1* (3)
13 First word uttered in Vanity Fair (3)
16 Mistress Page's daughter in *Sir John in Love* (3)
20 Rounded up by Hugh? (3)
22 Sixth of tonic sol-fa scale (2)

Answers Page 15

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