

## Programme Notes

The music of Vaughan Williams is automatically linked with the English culture and countryside, whether the listener is hearing his most popular work, *A lark ascending* or his arrangements of English Folk songs such as *Five folk Songs* and *Linden Lea* (based on a Dorset folk song) that form part of this evening's programme. But Vaughan Williams was far more than a pastoral dreamer - described by Elizabeth Lutyens, as 'a scribbler of cow pat music'. Much of his music is dark with a hint of threat behind the apparent tranquillity. He wrote nine symphonies, concerti, and numerous choral works. Bartók and Rachmaninov admired his work, Rachmaninov being moved to tears at the 1938 premiere of *Serenade to Music* (performed by RCS in 2006.)

That two such different composers were drawn to Vaughan Williams' music says a lot about its range and his own contradictory nature. He described himself as 'a determined atheist' yet a large part of his output was sacred music for the Church. In his research for the English Hymnal in 1904 he rediscovered music of the Elizabethan era, modes and plainsong, which he used to great effect. The motet, *O Clap your hands*, a setting of psalm 47, has a spirit of jubilation with its rhythmic vitality and rich use of the brass. He was a socialist who turned down a knighthood and refused to become Master of the King's Musick, but happily wrote music for two coronations. The *Festival Te Deum* based on traditional melodies was written for the coronation of George VI, while the stirring setting of the *Old Hundredth* and the exquisite motet, *O taste and see how gracious the Lord is* were written for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

Vaughan Williams' organ works are little known apart from *Rhosymedre* from his *Three Preludes founded on Welsh hymn tunes*. The *Prelude and Fugue in C minor* was originally written for orchestra in 1921 and dedicated to Henry Ley. It is performed this evening in his arrangement for the organ.

### Songs of Travel

The *Songs of Travel* cycle was first performed in 1904. Vaughan Williams was collecting folksongs at the time and the effect of these lovely traditional melodies is noticeable in several of the songs. The cycle is also important because it is part of the development from the Victorian parlour song to the English art-song. The poems are by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) who travelled the world during his short life.

The opening song *The Vagabond* has a persistent march-like rhythm and a triplet accompaniment illustrating the tread of the wanderer striding out to whatever life has in store for him. *Let Beauty awake*, with its images of dawn and dusk, has a radiant melodic line above a floating arpeggio accompaniment. The phrase, 'And the stars are bright in the west!' which links the verses and reappears in the coda is magical. *The roadside fire* glows with the ecstasy of newfound love.

*Youth and love* is the core of the cycle. It asks which is preferable: love and a settled life, or the freedom to wander? The accompaniment illustrates the tension with hints of the triplet figure from *The vagabond* and the opening phrase of *The roadside fire*. *In dreams* shows the dark side of Vaughan Williams' writing with an uneasy rhythm in the piano and ominous chromatic melody. Then all is serene as the traveller gazes with wonder at the vast brilliance of the night sky in *The infinite shining heavens*. In,

*Whither must I wander?* the poet looks back to his childhood and the security of his home and family.

A single chord opens *Bright is the ring of words*, whose strong melody includes the opening phrase of one of the composer's greatest hymn tunes, *Sine nomine*. The brief epilogue, with its touches of *The vagabond*, *Whither must I wander?* and *Bright is the ring of words*, sums up the cycle when the wanderer, now old, looks back on his life and forward to his final journey beyond the grave.

### **Five Mystical Songs**

In 1908 Vaughan Williams studied with Ravel in Paris, and shortly afterwards produced several major works: the song-cycle, *On Wenlock Edge*, *Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis* and, in 1911, the *Sea Symphony* and *Five Mystical Songs*. Vaughan Williams was inspired throughout his life by Anglican liturgy and music, the soaring architecture of its cathedrals, the English of the King James Bible and mysticism of the metaphysical poets. The '*Five mystical songs*' are settings of poems by the priest and poet George Herbert (1593–1633).

The baritone soloist is dominant in the first four songs, with the chorus providing a musical commentary on the text. The first song, *Easter* with its throbbing accompaniment and upward soaring melody reflects the poet's joy at the Resurrection. The theme of Easter continues in *I got me flowers* when the poet imagines himself rising early to welcome the risen Lord. The melody is simple with the third verse accompanied by the choir as he muses, 'Can there be any day but this?' and the choir responds confidently, 'There is but one and that one ever'.

In the third and most intimate song, *Love bade me welcome*, the poet reflects on his relationship with a loving God while the choir hums the plainsong melody, *O sacrum convivium*. The fourth song, *The Call*, is a simple setting for baritone solo. The poet's reflections are summed up in the final triumphant hymn of praise for the whole choir with a rushing accompaniment of pealing bells and trumpets – *Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King*.

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