

## **Programme notes for Brahms *Nänie*, Elgar *Sea Pictures*, Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony***

### **Nänie, Op.82**

**Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)**

Our concert begins with one of Brahms' more rarely performed compositions. The title is a German form of a Greek word "neniae", which is a funeral lament sung by relatives and friends. *Nänie* could be seen as a companion piece to the *Schicksalslied* which RCS performed in 2009. Both pieces show the struggle of mankind and imply that there is nothing after death. Brahms was an avowed agnostic; Dvorak said of him, "Such a great man, such a great soul, but he believes in nothing." The poem tells us that to "be an elegy in the mouth of the beloved" – a precious memory transmuted into song – is the most that mankind can hope for after death. The poem is by one of the greatest of the German Romantic poets, Friedrich Schiller, and was set by Brahms in 1881 in memory of his friend, the painter Anselm Feuerbach who had died the year before. Brahms had difficulty in finding a text: "They are not heathenish enough for me in the Bible. I have bought the Koran, but can find nothing there either". He then remembered Schiller's poem, whose classicism was apparently sufficiently "heathenish". The text was also appropriate as Feuerbach was particularly fond of subjects from classical mythology for his paintings.

The poet begins by stating that "Even beauty must die"; the beauty which moves both man and gods has no effect on Zeus. He then gives three examples of those who, despite all their efforts, were unable to keep those they loved from death – Orpheus, unable to bring Eurydice back from Hades because of his inability to control his doubts; Venus, unable to save the wounded Adonis after his savaging by a wild boar; Thetis, who tried to make her son Achilles immortal by bathing him in the River Styx, but who left the heel by which she held him unprotected, allowing him to be killed by Paris at the gates of Troy. The very gods and goddesses weep that beauty and perfection must die. To be remembered at all is glorious, as most descend unsung into Orcus (Hades).

The feel of the music is tender and consoling, though the middle section has a more stirring feel when the death of Achilles is told. Brahms tempers the stark fatalism of Schiller by repeating the line "Even to be an elegy in the mouth of the beloved is glorious", making it the concluding line of the piece. As in Shelley's *Ozymandias*, what remains after death is the art that the life has inspired. Brahms preferred to dwell on ideas of consolation, as he had done in the *German Requiem*. He conducted the premiere in Zürich and dedicated the score to Feuerbach's mother.

### **Sea Pictures, Op.37**

**Edward Elgar (1857–1934)**

In October 1898, the committee of the Norwich Festival requested a short choral work from Elgar for the following year's festival. During this period, however, Elgar was preoccupied with completing the *Enigma Variations*, which was to be premiered in the spring of 1899, and so put the commission to one side. In January 1899, the committee had a change of mind. They had engaged a young contralto of whom great things were predicted called Clara Butt, and now wanted a work which she could premiere. After the

premiere of the *Enigma Variations* in June 1899, Elgar got down in earnest to considering the Norwich commission. He decided on an orchestral song cycle based around the theme of the sea, and, with the help of his wife Alice, began choosing poems to set. As time was short, he made use of sketches which he had made as early as 1883 and adapted a song which had originally been called “Lute Song”, written and published in 1897. As this song had words by his wife, he was able to ask her to change them to fit the theme and it became “In Haven (Capri)”. Elgar, as usual, decided upon poems of a distinctly second-rate quality, including this one by his wife. It is difficult to know whether his choice of such verse indicated a genuine lack of literary taste or a belief that truly great poetry is rarely improved by the addition of music.

By the time of his first rehearsal with Butt on August 11<sup>th</sup>, the songs still had only piano accompaniment, but Elgar forged ahead and the final proofs of the orchestrated versions were ready by mid September. The premiere on October 5<sup>th</sup>, which Elgar conducted, was a great success. He wrote in a letter to friend, “The cycle went marvellously well and we were recalled four times – I think after that I got disgusted and lost count. She sang really well”. *The Times* reported that “Both singer and composer were recalled over and over... and the songs have undoubtedly been launched on a prosperous career”. A ludicrous myth has grown up over the years that at the first performance Clara Butt dressed up as a mermaid. This stems from an, I fear, wilful misreading of part of an account of the premiere written by Elgar’s host in Norwich, James Mottram, who actually wrote: “Clara Butt had a wonderful dress, the material of which, it was whispered, indicated appropriately the scales of a mermaid’s sinuous form”. Two days later, the cycle was performed at Saint James’s Hall in London (surprisingly, with Elgar playing the accompaniment on the piano), and on October 20<sup>th</sup> two of the songs were performed at a Command Performance before Queen Victoria at Balmoral.

The cycle takes us through life, from the peace and slumber of childhood, through love, to loss and, ultimately, eternity.

**1. Sea Slumber Song** (Roden Noël) – From the start of the cycle, Elgar sets up a feel of the sea with music that conveys the rise and fall of the waves and the bobbing of a ship. The sea is seen as a mother who lulls her child, the land, to sleep, but even in this first song the final words, where the ocean’s “shadowy might” bids us “leave woes, and wails, and sins. Goodnight” seems to prefigure death.

**2. In Haven (Capri)** (Alice Elgar) – To the lightest accompaniment, the singer tells how love can overcome the most elemental forces. “Capri” in the title is a reference to a holiday which Alice had taken there before she met Elgar.

**3. Sabbath Morning at Sea** (Elizabeth Barrett Browning) – This is the only text Elgar set in this cycle with any real literary quality. It is the cycle’s centre and has a grand emotional power. The narrator tells of her sadness at leaving her loved ones, (this is perhaps a metaphor for death) but she is gradually entranced by the majesty of the sea and sky. She sees in these elements the majesty of God and that He will help her to “look higher”, beyond her grief to her ultimate destiny with Him.

**4. Where Corals Lie** (Richard Garnett) – This is the most well known of the five songs. The singer is lured willingly away from mortal love to the “land where corals lie”, which is under the sea and, again, seems to be a metaphor for death.

**5. The Swimmer** (Adam Lindsay Gordon) – The sea here seems to be life itself, which the swimmer must negotiate. Sometimes it is violent, battering and wrecking man, but at others it is peaceful and love blossoms, when “God surely loved us a little then”. But ultimately man must battle through it with bravery and tenacity, riding the waves until he

reaches the place where “no light wearies and no love wanes”. The song has an added poignancy because Gordon, the Australian poet of the text, found himself unequal to the battle and committed suicide in 1870, aged 37.

## **A Sea Symphony**

**Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)**

Although Beethoven had famously introduced voices into the finale of his Ninth Symphony in 1824 and Mendelssohn had used voices in his 1840 Symphony-Cantata *Hymn of Praise* (which RCS performed in 2009), Vaughan Williams’ use of voices throughout and as an integral part of the texture was highly unusual in a symphony. There is certainly no English precedent for it, though by a strange coincidence Mahler was doing exactly the same thing at exactly the same time in his Eighth Symphony.

Vaughan Williams began sketching the symphony on 1903. Remarkably, given its assurance, it was not only his first symphony but his first large scale composition, although it began it as a series of songs for chorus and orchestra rather than an actual symphony. Vaughan Williams had been introduced to the poetry of the American poet Walt Whitman by his friend the philosopher Bertrand Russell when they were at Cambridge in the 1890s. The free verse form of *Leaves of Grass*, from which the texts are taken, allowed a free, rhapsodic approach which a more metrical verse form would have inhibited. Whitman was, like Brahms, a religious sceptic who at the same time accepted the value of all religions “I adopt each theory, myth, god, and demi-god, I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception” and his humanism appealed greatly to Vaughan Williams, who was, according to his wife Ursula, “a declared agnostic”. Vaughan Williams’ first completed extended composition, *Towards the Unknown Region* of 1907, was also a setting of Whitman.

The gestation period of the *Sea Symphony* was a long one, and in 1908 Vaughan Williams decided that he did not have the ability in orchestration to realise his vision fully. He therefore went to Paris to study with Ravel for three months, and the effects on the delicacy of his orchestration are apparent. The symphony was not completed until 1909 and was first performed at the Leeds Festival in October 1910, just a month after the first performance in Gloucester of another of Vaughan Williams’ early masterpieces, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. Like Elgar’s *Sea Pictures*, this symphony is a metaphorical, spiritual journey, not merely a series of postcards of sea views.

**1. Song for all Seas, all Ships** – The first movement begins with one of the most arresting openings in all of English music: a brass fanfare repeated by the chorus to the words “Behold the sea itself” with a wonderful modulation on the word “sea”, which is like the sun suddenly bursting from behind the clouds. The majesty and primal force of the sea are evoked in the first section of the movement. A new theme with the character of a sea shanty changes the mood and introduces the baritone soloist, but a repetition of the opening fanfare brings in the soprano soloist, who moves us into a more reflective section on the “soul of man” and a lament for those who have lost their lives at sea. The music moves towards a wonderful climax where the unity of mankind is shown to triumph over death before the movement subsides into calmness.

**2. On the beach at night alone** – This slow nocturne evokes most memorably the “oceanic” feeling. The baritone ruminates on the place of mankind in the “vast similitude”

of the universe. The chorus enters and the expression achieves greater intensity until replaced by a reflective calm.

**3. The waves** – This, the symphony's scherzo, portrays a ship ploughing its way through the varying faces of the sea.

**4. The Explorers** – The final movement begins with a magical unison setting of words which evoke the mysterious nature of the earth itself, swimming like a ship through space. This is the most metaphysical of the four movements, the soul being compared to a ship journeying across an uncharted ocean. In the final section, the anchor is weighed and the ship and soul set out on their serene voyage into the unknown. The ambivalent alternation of chords at the very end embodies the unknowable nature of the journey's end.

Paul Steinson  
Rochester Choral Society  
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