



Ralph Vaughan Williams: *A Sea Symphony*

Text drawn from the poetry of Walt Whitman

I. A Song for all Seas, all Ships

Book XIII: Song of the Exposition

[from verse 8]

Behold, the sea itself,
And on its limitless, heaving breast, the ships;
See, where their white sails, bellying in the wind, speckle the green and blue,
See, the steamers coming and going, steaming in or out of port,
See, dusky and undulating, the long pennants of smoke.

Book XIX: Sea-Drift: Song for All Seas, All Ships

Today a rude brief recitative,
Of ships sailing the seas, each with its special flag or ship-signal,
Of unnamed heroes in the ships -- of waves spreading and spreading far as the eye can reach,
Of dashing spray, and the winds piping and blowing,
And out of these a chant for the sailors of all nations,
Fitful, like a surge.

Of sea-captains young or old, and the mates, and of all intrepid sailors,
Of the few, very choice, taciturn, whom fate can never surprise nor death dismay.
Pick'd sparingly without noise by thee old ocean, chosen by thee,
Thou sea that pickest and cullest the race in time, and unitest nations,
Suckled by thee, old husky nurse, embodying thee,
Indomitable, untamed as thee.

Flaunt out O sea your separate flags of nations!
Flaunt out visible as ever the various ship-signals!
But do you reserve especially for yourself and for the soul of man one flag above all the rest,
A spiritual woven signal for all nations, emblem of man elate above death,
Token of all brave captains and all intrepid sailors and mates,
And all that went down doing their duty,
Reminiscent of them, twined from all intrepid captains young or old,
A pennant universal, subtly waving all time, o'er all brave sailors,
All seas, all ships.

II. On the Beach at Night, Alone

Book XIX: Sea-Drift: On the Beach at Night Alone

On the beach at night alone,
As the old mother sways her to and fro singing her husky song,
As I watch the bright stars shining, I think a thought of the clef of the universes and of the future.

A vast similitude interlocks all,

All distances of place however wide,
All distances of time,

All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different,

All nations,

All identities that have existed or may exist

All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,

This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd,

And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them.

III. (Scherzo) The Waves

Book XIX: Sea-Drift: After the Sea-Ship

After the sea-ship, after the whistling winds,

After the white-gray sails taut to their spars and ropes,

Below, a myriad, myriad waves hastening, lifting up their necks,

Tending in ceaseless flow toward the track of the ship,

Waves of the ocean bubbling and gurgling, blithely prying,

Waves, undulating waves, liquid, uneven, emulous waves,

Toward that whirling current, laughing and buoyant, with curves,

Where the great vessel sailing and tacking displaced the surface,

Larger and smaller waves in the spread of the ocean yearnfully flowing,

The wake of the sea-ship after she passes, flashing and frolicsome under the sun,

A motley procession with many a fleck of foam and many fragments,

Following the stately and rapid ship, in the wake following.

IV. The Explorers

Book XXVI: Passage to India:

[from verse 5]

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,

Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,

Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,

Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless stars above,

Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,

With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention,

Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.

Down from the gardens of Asia descending radiating,

Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,

Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,

With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts,

With that sad incessant refrain, Wherefore unsatisfied soul? and Whither O mocking life?

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children?

Who Justify these restless explorations?

Who speak the secret of impassive earth?

Who bind it to us? what is this separate Nature so unnatural?

What is this earth to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb to answer ours, Cold earth, the place of graves.)

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains, and shall be carried out,

Perhaps even now the time has arrived.

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

[from verse 8]

O we can wait no longer,
We too take ship O soul,
Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,
Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, O soul,)
Caroling free, singing our song of God,
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,
Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking in the night,
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death, like waters flowing,
Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,
Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave me all over,
Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee.

O Thou transcendent,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them.

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,
Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;

[from verse 9]

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers -- haul out -- shake out every sail!

Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,

Sail forth -- steer for the deep waters only,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!