



Vaughan Williams, Ralph

(b Down Ampney, Glos., 12 Oct. 1872; d London, 26 Aug. 1958).

English composer. He was a leading figure in the so-called renaissance of English musical life—creative, executive, and musicological—which began in the last years of the 19th century coincident with Elgar's rise to fame.

1. The early years

Descended from Darwins and Wedgwoods, Vaughan Williams had a conventional upper-middle-class education in which music played a surprisingly prominent part. He played the violin in the Charterhouse school orchestra. He began to compose when he was six and continued until the day of his death. In 1890 he went, unconventionally, direct to the Royal College of Music as a composition pupil of Parry. In 1892 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, to read history and for the B.Mus. degree, continuing weekly lessons at the RCM and studying composition at Cambridge with Charles Wood. In 1895 he re-entered the RCM as a pupil of Stanford. During this briefer spell he formed a mutually enriching friendship with Gustav Holst. In 1897, after his marriage to Adeline Fisher, he went to Berlin, where he had lessons and encouragement from Bruch.

His compositions at the turn of the century were mainly chamber music (later withdrawn) and songs, including *Linden Lea* (1901). He edited the *Welcome Songs* for the Purcell Society, wrote articles for periodicals, and contributed to the second edition (1904) of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. In 1904 his *Songs of Travel*, settings of R. L. Stevenson, were sung in London. A significant event in 1902 was his introduction by Lucy Broadwood to the systematic collecting of folksongs; further impetus was given to this activity in December 1903 when he heard *Bushes and Briars* sung by an old shepherd in Essex. During the next nine years he collected tunes in Norfolk, Herefordshire, Surrey, and Sussex, publishing many of them in various arrangements. In 1904 he accepted an invitation to be music editor of a new hymnbook, *The English Hymnal* (1906).

2. The years of maturity

Vaughan Williams's principal work around the turn of the century was a short choral setting of Walt Whitman, *Toward the Unknown Region* (1905). Although this was a success at the 1907 Leeds Festival, he was dissatisfied with his compositions generally and went to Paris early in 1908 for three months' intensive study with Ravel. This released his creative energies. He rapidly produced the String Quartet no. 1 in G minor (1908), the Housman song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* for tenor, piano, and string quartet (of which Gervase Elwes gave the first performance in 1909), and incidental music for the 1909 Cambridge Greek Play, *The Wasps*. In the same year he completed a choral symphony on which he had been at work since 1903: as *A Sea Symphony* (also to a Whitman text) it had an enthusiastic reception at the 1910 Leeds Festival and established Vaughan Williams in the front rank of English composers. The *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* for strings (1910) eventually became one of his best-known works. It was followed by the *Five Mystical Songs* (1911) and *A London Symphony*, first performed in London in 1914. From 1910 to 1914 he was also at work on a ballad opera set in Napoleonic days, *Hugh the Drover*. This was completed in August 1914, whereupon it was shelved while its composer, though in his 42nd year, joined the army and spent most of the next four years in France.

In 1919 Vaughan Williams joined the staff of the RCM and in 1921 became conductor of the Bach Choir. His experience as a choral conductor dated chiefly from 1905, when he had become conductor of the Leith Hill Festival in Dorking, near his family home. His Bach performances, highly idiosyncratic but artistically compelling, were the festival's major attraction until 1958. From 1922 he produced ambitious and enterprising works in several genres. These included *A Pastoral Symphony* (1922), the Mass in G minor (1921), *Flos campi*, a suite for solo viola, small chorus, and orchestra (1925), the oratorio *Sancta civitas* (1926), and a Violin Concerto (1925). *Hugh the Drover* and the Falstaff opera *Sir John in Love* were

produced in London in 1924 and 1929 respectively; the 'masque for dancing' *Job* (based on William Blake's illustrations), was first performed as an orchestral work at Norwich in 1930 and reached the stage in London in 1931; the Piano Concerto was played by Harriet Cohen in London in 1933; and in 1935 his violent Fourth Symphony was introduced by Adrian Boult at a BBC concert in London. A few weeks later he was appointed to the Order of Merit.

3. The final years

The last 22 years of Vaughan Williams's life showed no diminution in his various musical activities. Five more symphonies followed (no. 5, 1943; no. 6, 1947; no. 7, *Sinfonia antartica*, 1952; no. 8, 1955; no. 9, 1957); he wrote his first film score in 1940, his Second String Quartet in 1942–4, completed an opera *The Pilgrim's Progress*, on which he had been working for many years (Covent Garden, 1951), and produced several choral works, notably *Hodie* (1954), and many smaller pieces. Vaughan Williams drew his inspiration from many sources—folksong and the English 16th-century school chief among them—and the influence of Ravel is frequently discernible. A lyrical melodic gift is at the heart of his work, but besides modality there is a gritty harmonic toughness, such as occurs in *Job* and the Fourth Symphony, which places him firmly in the 20th century. His nationalist creed was that a composer must reach his fellow countrymen before he can hope to reach a universal audience. His symphonies, choral works, and songs are the core of his output, but the operas, particularly *Riders to the Sea* (London, 1937), contain fine music which overcomes the dramatic problems they pose. The nobility, integrity, and visionary qualities of the man are reflected in his music.

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