

Prelude

75
years

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MASTERWORKS #7:

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS & MENDELSSOHN

APRIL 12 - 14, 2019

"The art of music, above all arts, is the expression of the soul of the nation." - Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872 - 1958



Vaughan Williams Stamp

In 1972, England honored the composer Ralph (pronounced Rafe) Vaughan Williams with a British stamp, celebrating the 100th anniversary of his birth. To those familiar with England's adoration

of this composer, the honor came as no surprise. Alongside Henry Purcell, Vaughan Williams is considered among the greatest English composers that ever lived.ⁱ Famous for his symphonies, operas, chamber music and ballets, composed over a long career, the composer is also revered for his choral compositions, one of which is featured on this Masterworks performance. It is said that the power and expressiveness of his music embodied a new-found pride in the music of England.ⁱⁱ For years, German-born composers, such as Handel and Mendelssohn, who lived and worked in England, dominated the music identified with England. With native-born Vaughan Williams, England claimed its own musical voice.ⁱⁱⁱ

Born on October 12, 1872 in a small village in Gloucestershire, young Ralph lived a life of great privilege.^{iv} The famous English porcelain known as Wedgwood was the creation of Ralph's great-grandfather,



Vaughan Williams as a Child

Josiah Wedgwood.^v His paternal grandmother's brother was Charles Darwin, and his grandmother's explanation of evolution to young Ralph was: "The Bible tells us that God made the world in six days.

Great Uncle Charles thinks it took rather longer."^{vi} His father, Arthur, was an ordained vicar in the local church, who died when Ralph was just 3 years old.^{vii} Coping with that tragedy, the family moved to his grandfather's house in Surrey, and it was there that Ralph began his violin and piano studies.^{viii} Notwithstanding his father's profession, Ralph was a confirmed agnostic from childhood on, but religious and spiritual subjects inspired many of his works.^{ix} Despite his upbringing, Ralph never presumed he was entitled to the advantages of his privileged life. At age 41 when World War I began, Vaughan Williams was exempt from military service. Nevertheless, Ralph enlisted and served as a stretcher-bearer and medical orderly with an artillery unit, serving in France and Salonika (Greece).^x Prolonged exposure to gunfire during his service in the war began the process of hearing loss that ultimately caused him to suffer severe deafness in his later years.^{xi}

As a young man, Ralph studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music in London, alongside the great musicians, Leopold Stokowski and Gustav Holst, with whom he formed a lifelong bond of friendship.^{xii} For a

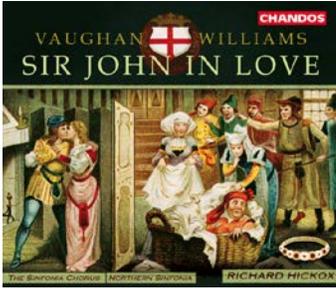


Young Vaughan Williams

short time, he studied in Berlin with composer Max Bruch.^{xiii} In 1907, at the age of 35, he moved to Paris for a year to study with Ravel.^{xiv} Despite his early and extensive training, Vaughan Williams was not a childhood prodigy. He was nearly 30 when he achieved recognition for his composition *Linden Lea*, and he was 38 when his Walt Whitman-inspired *Sea Symphony* (the first of his 9 symphonies) had its premiere.^{xv} A composer friend, George Butterworth,



remarked that it would be “hard to name any other first-rate composer who had found himself with such apparent difficulty.”^{xvi}



Sir John in Love

“Greensleeves”, which he incorporated into the Fantasia on “Greensleeves” from his 1928 opera *Sir John in Love*.^{xviii}

Raised with strong moral convictions and liberal principles, Vaughan Williams espoused democratic and egalitarian ideals. At a time when music was often associated with the privileged elite, Vaughan Williams insisted that music should be part of everyone’s daily life, regardless of a person’s class or upbringing.^{xix} His compassion for his fellow man was evident in the 1930’s, when Vaughan Williams joined a committee to help European refugees who had escaped the Nazis, providing the refugees with housing and general necessities, even going to far as to house refugees at his home in Surrey.^{xx} Modest, unassuming and suspicious of honors that might carry expectations, Vaughan Williams actually refused a knighthood, but, in 1935, he accepted the Order of Merit, an honor conferred upon him by King George V, the father of Queen Elizabeth.^{xxi}

Although formal in his manner and bearing, his wit was often self-deprecating. After a first rehearsal of his discordant and somewhat violent 4th Symphony with the BBC Symphony, he reportedly remarked, “I’m not sure I liked it, but it’s what I intended!”^{xxii}

Vaughan Williams’s long career continued until his death at 85. In June of 1943, at the age of 70, he conducted the London Philharmonic in the premiere of his 5th Symphony and while it was initially believed to be his ‘swan song,’ Vaughan Williams went on to enter a new period of experimental composition.^{xxiii} He was known for his unusual instrumentation, including a wordless soprano part (in his 3rd Symphony), a battery of gongs and bells (in his 8th Symphony) and a trio of saxophones

Vaughan Williams was an avid collector of the English folk music that had permeated his youth in the English countryside, and Ralph later drew inspiration from those musical memories.^{xvii} He rediscovered the now-famous melody

(in his 9th Symphony).^{xxiv} He was one of the few major composers to write a tuba concerto, a Romance for harmonica and a suite for a four-part recorder ensemble.^{xxv} He began composing his 7th Symphony at the age of 80 and his 9th Symphony at age 85.^{xxvi} Not only was Vaughan Williams composing well into his 80’s, but, in 1953, at the age of 80, he married his second wife, the poet Ursula Wood.^{xxvii} At the age of 85, the composer was set to supervise the first recording of his 9th Symphony, but, in August of 1958, he passed away the night before the recording sessions were to begin.^{xxviii} Sir Adrian Boult, the conductor on the project, continued as planned, announcing to the musicians that their performance was a memorial to this great composer.^{xxix}



Vaughn Williams Conducting

Join us!

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for **Vaughan Williams and Mendelssohn, April 12 - 14, 2019** and enjoy the breathtaking music of one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, beautifully paired with Mendelssohn’s Symphony No. 2.



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO'S Listening Guide, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

To hear Fantasia on "Greensleeves":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ak85S5KZoKE>

Vaughan Williams's *Dona Nobis Pacem* is performed by the Rainbow Mennonite Choir, with an introductory explanation of the music and its call for peace:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JH3Qm9zz9aU>

Mendelssohn Symphony No. 2, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Claudia Abbado:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4le3_x429No

And just a few more delicious tastes of the unique music of Vaughan Williams:

Hilary Hahn performs *The Lark Ascending*:

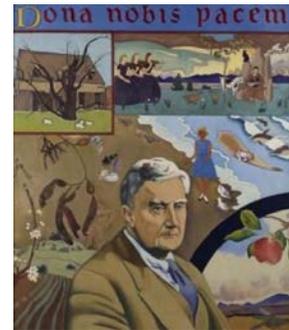
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOWN5fQnzGk>

For something wonderful and different, try Vaughan Williams's *Concerto in F minor for Bass Tuba*, featuring soloist Játik Clark:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GzEvWXN3zY>

And lastly, his *Suite for Pipes*, for four recorders of varying sizes:

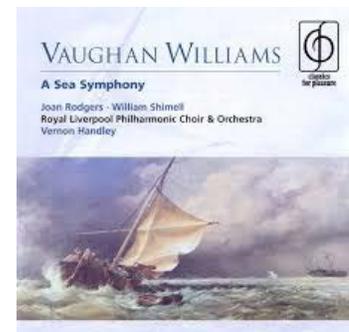
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iVRSoGt5j8>



Dona Nobis Pacem



Vaughan-Williams and Stokowski



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Casey's
Classics

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

The gentle beauty of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Greensleeves* makes a perfect concert opener for a spring night, and no one captures its delicate beauty better than Sir John Barbirolli and the Sinfonia of London (EMI/WARNER).

The same composer's visionary masterpiece, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, receives a passionate response from the late lamented Richard Hickox and the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with none other than Bryn Terfel as the baritone soloist (EMI/WARNER).

Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 2* almost never gets a live performance, so this performance by the Hartford Symphony will be a very special treat for our audiences. Among modern recordings, none is more sensitive, dramatic and beautiful than the recording which features the late Claudio Abbado conducting the London Symphony and Chorus (DG).



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