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A TRIBUTE TO RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

THE LAST year has witnessed the passing of two great contemporaries in the field of musical composition, but whereas Sibelius' death last December was a personal loss to his family and wide circle of friends and admirers, the death of Vaughan Williams last August brought to an end a still active, creative, and highly distinctive musical mind. Whereas Sibelius had published nothing for thirty years, his slightly younger contemporary, Vaughan Williams, was composing and writing on music to the last. His ninth symphony was published but a few months ago, and his "Tuba Concerto" received its first performance in New York in 1957. An open mind enabled him in 1940—at the age of 68—to tackle an entirely new branch of musical composition, film music, and found him successfully coping, over the years, with such diverse subjects as the documentary film "Coastal Command," and the dramas "49th Parallel," "The Loves of Joanna Godden," and "Scott of the Antarctic." His last works use, experimentally, a vibraphone and saxophones, and in 1952, recognizing great artistry in an unlikely quarter, he composed the "Romance for Harmonica and Orchestra", after hearing Larry Adler perform. His essential grasp of the capabilities, possibilities, and limitations of the instrument has been vouched for by Mr. Adler, and it showed at once a liberalism of approach, an aliveness that is refreshing in the face of the pale academicism of so many of his contemporaries.

In music, one is used to finding the greatest composers either without musical background or without systematic and academic training. Elgar received lessons in harmony from his father, who kept a small music shop in a country town, and whose musical experience was confined to some thirty years as village organist and choirmaster. These lessons and a term's lessons in violin from a London professor (before the money gave out) constituted almost all of Elgar's systematic tuition. But he left to the world that great masterpiece for soloists, chorus and orchestra, "The Dream of Gerontius" and an incomparable 'cello concerto. Elgar's contemporary (and Vaughan Williams' teacher) Sir Hubert Parry had every advantage of education musically and generally, and received his Bachelor

of Music whilst still a boy at Eton. But for all Parry's erudition and scholarship, all his musicology and fertility of invention, he has left to posterity only two hymn tunes, and that fine setting of Milton's "At a Solemn Musick"—the anthem "Blest Pair of Sirens"—which has been praised as "one of the few compositions Brahms didn't write but would surely have been proud to have written."

Countless other instances come to mind of the academically trained composer lacking just that fire, that originality, that freshness, that sets Handel above Arne, Chopin above Field, and Brahms above Parry. It is, therefore, the more surprising to find that Vaughan Williams received the most complete academic training possible in England.

Born in 1872 at Down Amprey in Gloucestershire, where his father was rector, he was sent to Charterhouse when he was fifteen, where he came under the musical influences of the music master, the Chapel, the music societies, and school orchestra, that characterise the English "Public" Schools. It was here that he received (on his own confession) one of the few words of encouragement he ever received in his whole life, when a sepulchral-voiced Mathematics master said to him, after the performance of a youthful trio, "Very good, Williams. You must go on." Three years at the Royal College of Music under those two great teachers, Sir Hubert Parry and Sir George Villiers Stanford, interrupted by three years at Trinity College, Cambridge, under Charles Wood, from which place he gathered a B.Mus. and M.A. (and later a Doctorate), took him on a tour of Europe, having lessons from Max Brusch in Berlin and Ravel in France. Vaughan Williams himself threw an interesting light on his studies with Ravel, who always composed at the piano. On finding that Vaughan Williams *had* no piano at his lodgings, Ravel exclaimed "Sans le piano on ne peut pas inventer des nouvelles harmonies!" Vaughan Williams thus described his experiences:

I came home (to England) with a bad attack of French fever and wrote a string quartet which caused a friend to say that I must have been having tea with Debussy . . . but I did *not* succumb to the temptation of writing a piece about a cemetery, and Ravel paid me the compliment of telling me that I was the only pupil who "n'écrit pas de ma musique." The fact is that I could not have written Ravel's music even if I had wanted to. I am quite incapable . . . of inventing his nouvelles harmonies. I sometimes wish that I could think of the strange chords of my old friend, Arnold Bax . . . but I feel content to provide good plain cooking and hope that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

It was shortly after his days at the R.C.M. and Cambridge that he became involved in the Folk Song revival—whose leading light was Cecil Sharp—and the Tudor revival. Even in his student days, he had irritated

Stanford with his predilection for flattened sevenths. Stanford had tried to prove to him (quite erroneously, as it turned out) that the flat leading note was pure theory and that all folk-music descended on the tonic, but Vaughan Williams had "felt in his bones that he was wrong," although it was only later, when he heard traditional singers, that he was able to prove the point to his own satisfaction. The particular modal flavour that was to form the very basis of his style, that was to make his style of composition peculiarly his and so instantly recognizable, met at first, then, considerable disapproval from his teachers—as did his other early noticeable quality of writing in blocks of sound as a result of his increasing tendency to compose at the piano. This latter must obviously have been acquired from Ravel, for nothing is more discouraged in academic circles than anything that savours of the short cut. It may well have been a revolt against an overdose of conformity to the laws of the organ-loft mentality that helped his departure. Whilst it is ends that count, not means, in composition, at the same time Vaughan Williams' habit of using the piano ("unashamedly") when composing has contrasted strangely with his abhorrence of the Beethoven idiom and his love of the Bach, for the piano is essentially a homophonic instrument and Vaughan Williams' style, like Bach's, essentially polyphonic. It has had the effect, however, of producing a type of polyphonic harmony that whilst not unique (Stravinsky has used it) is, at the same time, particularly associated with Vaughan Williams.

His knowledge and love of English folk-music led him (as it did with Sibelius) to write music which, whilst not actually quoting from a folk-song, has about it the very substance and spirit of folk-music. This "Englishry," which is such a marked feature of Vaughan Williams and Delius, is not just an addition, not just a flavouring, but an integral part of the whole. It is not the concrete or the steel inside it, but a component part of the concrete and steel. What Sir George Dyson said about Delius might just as well be said of Vaughan Williams: "It is difficult to tell where folk-song ends and Delius begins." Vaughan Williams had this in common with his great contemporary Sibelius, that he had assimilated and digested in those early formative years the music of his country folk, and it came from deep down inside him, having permeated his musical thought.

For two years, Vaughan Williams edited the English Hymnal. Whilst there was at first some difficulty over its acceptance generally in the Anglican Church because of the "Catholic" nature of some of its words, it has always been regarded by musicians as the best hymn-tune book in existence. Whilst for these two years, Vaughan Williams wrote

nothing large or instrumental, he was forced by the puerility of some of the tunes to write better ones, and the world is incomparably the better for such fine tunes as "Sine Nomine" ("For all the Saints"), "Down Ampney" ("Come down O love divine"), and "Magda" ("Saviour, again to Thy dear name"). Whilst he frequently wondered if he were wasting his time, as two years passed and he added nothing to the sum of musical invention, he spoke later of the great value of these "two years association with some of the best (as well as some of the worst) tunes in the world," and he regarded it as "a better musical education than any amount of sonatas and fugues."

This last statement provides an indication of the downright and forthright nature of his views on music and the teaching of music. Those who remember his lectures and talks will never forget the pungency of some of his comments, the pithiness of many of his criticisms, and the highly controversial nature of most of his pronouncements. But although he was merciless to an equal, and outspoken in all views pertaining to the performance of what he hated to hear described as "period music"—especially that of his favourite, J. S. Bach—he always had a word of encouragement for the young, and was never unkind in his criticisms of youthful compositions.

The writer will never forget his comment on hearing a recording of an African folk-tune arranged for piano and violin by a young—if not exactly youthful—composer: "Yes, it's very lovely, very lovely. Tell the young man [he said to the mutual friend who had played him the record], tell the young man to leave off the last chord. I've been telling young composers to leave off their last chords for fifty years now."

What he disliked he disliked irrevocably and, as always, he expressed himself forcibly. "It will . . . be evident," he wrote in his book *Beethoven's Choral Symphony and Other Writings*, "that I am not a loyal Beethovenite. For example, I love the 'Moonlight Sonata' and I think it well named. This, I know, puts me out of court, for did not Beethoven himself prefer that dreary affair, The Sonata in F sharp major (op. 78)?"

The harpsichord he always disliked and asked to be protected from "the abominable detached twangs of that obsolete instrument," which he likened in another instance to "the ticking of a sewing machine." Although he never grew to like the organ, and indeed never wrote for that instrument with a great deal of knowledge, he held decided views on the proposed re-introduction of the Baroque Organ and in 1953 wrote, "I see there is a movement afoot to substitute this bubble-and-squeak type of instrument for the noble diapason and soft mixtures of our Cathedral organs." But throughout all his thinking on music there was noticeable his great

erudition, his depth of scholarship, and—most valuable of all—his great sincerity. He detested the purely academic musical mind with all his being, and on this subject in 1953 he wrote,

Certain types of musical thinkers seem to have inherited the medieval fear of beauty—they talk about “mere beauty” and “mere sound” as if they were something to be feared and avoided. But in our imperfect existence what means have we of reaching out to that which is beyond the senses but through those very senses? Would Ulysses have been obliged to be lashed to the mast if the Sirens instead of singing to him had shewn him a printed score . . . ? Would any amount of study of his own score have led Haydn to declare that his “Let there be Light” came straight from Heaven?

Vaughan Williams has, then, in addition to his wealth of composition for the orchestra, the concert hall, the cathedral and church choir, the choral society, and the theatre (both in the form of opera, masque, and incidental music), left an indelible impression on English musical life and thought over the last half century, and his pupils, from the Royal College of Music, number hundreds.

He was, perhaps, least happy in the sphere of chamber music, and most at home when writing symphonically and atmospherically for orchestra, and dramatically for chorus and orchestra and voice. His operas include Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, *Sir John in Love*, *Hugh the Drover*, and *The Poisoned Kiss*. His morality, *Pilgrim's Progress*, written for the Festival of Britain in 1951, was pondered over for thirty years (one cannot help noting that this was the same period of debate Beethoven had over setting Schiller's “Ode to Joy,” which became, in its final form, the last movement of the “Ninth Symphony”), and his fifth symphony contains two direct references to this morality or masque-opera, the original manuscript declaring what the printed score has suppressed—that some of the themes were taken from the then unfinished opera, and the third movement bearing the superscription “Upon this place stood a cross and a little below a sepulchre.”

This continual reference throughout his symphonic works to extra-musical significances, and his success in a predilection for descriptive and programme music, show the essentially romantic turn of Vaughan Williams' mind. He was of a generation necessarily influenced by Wagner, and he himself told how on first hearing *Lohengrin* and *The Ring*, he knew them already, in that indefinable way great art can affect one. His admiration for the Wagnerian idiom was, however, countered by his deep love of English folk-song and his great reverence for the English tradition as expressed in the music of Tallis and Byrd, Morely, Weelkes, and Purcell. The resulting music contains, therefore, little apparent influence in style either of orchestration or content, but rather in spirit. One can

never point to direct Wagnerian influence in Vaughan Williams' music as one can with Strauss, Schönberg, and Elgar, for the "Englishry" of Vaughan Williams' intensely nationalistic music obscures all but the most oblique reference. The *spirit* of Wagnerism is, however, frequently apparent in his fundamentally romantic bias in the *dramma per musica* *Riders to the Sea*, which is an essay in *unendliche melodie*, in the opening bars of the last movement of the *Sea Symphony*, and in the strong influence of Debussy on the Introduction to *A London Symphony*—Debussy, himself, had to destroy twenty pages of *Pelléas et Mélisande* because of the too noticeable influence of *Tristan*. But, if musically Wagnerism was there underneath, philosophically there was no trace in Vaughan Williams' forthright and devout Christian faith, and he may truly be said to have followed Debussy's advice to all post-Wagnerian composers to be "après Wagner mais non d'après Wagner."

It is an unwise critic who attempts to prophesy future reaction to contemporary work, for he lays himself open to ridicule from posterity if wrong, and accomplishes what posterity can do better if right. But indicate he may, in all wisdom, asking his readers to remember that the ten years following a great man's death are the years of denigration, the years when the scholars, who spoke guardedly whilst he was alive, pronounce pontifically, and the little men who were too frightened, pipe derogatorily.

Vaughan Williams will endure many years of purgatorial comment, but when his reputation re-emerges and reaches its true stature, although his list of works will be shorter than now, it will contain only his best. Not shut away from this world like Sibelius, but very much in the swing of daily life, and having seen the flower of his generation and many of his contemporaries fall by his side in 1914, Vaughan Williams has achieved in all his work something of the sublimity of Bach and Palestrina. In a world where, as E. M. Forster has said, "We have lost the luxury of silence," in a world where there is little or no repose, in a world where every man is exposed to the full horror of war, Vaughan Williams, through his staunch Christian faith and his great genius, has achieved in his works sublimity, profundity, humour, humanity, and sincerity, which are, surely, the very attributes of immortality.