

Vaughan Williams - The Symphonies

(Based on WEA and Recorded Music Society presentations in the 1990s)

Introduction

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born on October 12th 1872 and died at the end of August 1958 when he was nearly 86. His nine symphonies span over 50 years of some of the most tumultuous changes in our history. He began his First Symphony in 1903 and completed his Ninth in 1957.

The nine symphonies are all different - one from another. They all inhabit different sound worlds. Clearly this is a huge subject and I have had to be ruthless in my selection of music and equally ruthless in pruning my comments to the relevant minimum without being too superficial. I am concerned to show the rich diversity and supreme craftsmanship and innovation of these wonderful works. If you do not know them, then I hope that you will go on to discover them; if you do know them then I hope you will have pleasure in rediscovering them with me.

May I recommend Michael Kennedy's excellent book *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*.

There are a number of recorded cycles of the symphonies to choose from – including those by Boult, Barbirolli, Previn, Haitink, Handley, Slatkin and Sir Andrew Davis. My choice has been a mixture of critical consensus and my own inclinations. My apologies if I miss out your favourite interpretations.

When Vaughan Williams was born in 1872:-

- Wagner was at work on *Götterdämmerung*
- Brahms was sketching his First Symphony
- Tchaikovsky was writing his *Little Russian* Symphony No 2
- Ravel was not even born yet
- Sullivan's *Irish* Symphony had been written six years previously
- Stanford's first symphony was three years into the future and Parry's first symphony eight years.
- Holst was but a twinkle in his father's eye. He was born two years after RVW in 1874
- Elgar was fifteen and just before his fifteenth birthday, on June 2nd, he was writing his earliest dated and finished composition to survive - *The Language of Flowers* - and his First Symphony lay 36 years in the future

RVW was born to well-to-do parents at Down Ampney in Gloucestershire. However, his father died when he was only two years old and the family returned to their roots in Surrey He was educated at Charterhouse and went on to the Royal College of Music in 1890 to study composition under Parry and to further music studies at Cambridge in 1892.

There were a number of formative influences and associations. He developed an intense interest in English Folksong which he shared with his friend Gustav Holst. They started collecting folk music in 1903. He loved English church music and edited *The English Hymnal* between 1904 and 1906 for which he arranged and harmonized many tunes and contributed four original ones. He took a great interest in earlier English music of Tudor times - music of such composers as Thomas Tallis and Byrd

In 1897 he studied for a period with Max Bruch in Berlin and in 1908 he took lessons in orchestration with Ravel for three months.

He was also developing a very impressive facility in writing for voices. He showed taste in his selection of texts and he had a fine feeling for the musical value of words. Again and again his music elevated them

from the beautiful to the sublime. He had the happy knack of hitting on the perfect accentuation or the richest harmony and modulation so that poems and melodies fused into one perfect partnership.

The Symphonies

Symphony No.1 - *A Sea Symphony*

Michael Kennedy said that this is his favourite RVW symphony - He once told me: 'I think it's got nobility. All right, it has its faults but it does have such generosity and emotional power. It's very genuine.'

A Sea Symphony was first performed in 1909 at Leeds - one year after the outstanding success of Elgar's First Symphony. RVW had commenced work on it in 1903 when he was thirty-one. *A Sea Symphony* is passionate, vigorous and it has nobility and grandeur but it is much more than just a breezy, salty evocation of the sea

The text of *A Sea Symphony* is from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's verses, as used by RVW, are not just vivid pictures of the sea and the heroism of sailors but allegories for the mysteries of the universe and the soul's last journey.

The work opens with a thrilling brass fanfare introducing an almost visible picture of the swelling ocean as the choir enters with the tremendous announcement: 'Behold, the sea itself.... And on its limitless heaving breast the ships...' The orchestration vividly depicts the dashing spray and the tang of the sea.

The first movement celebrates the sea and those who sail on it. It commemorates 'the sailors of all nations who went down doing their duty' and suggests a brotherhood symbolised by a 'pennant universal subtly waving all time o'er all brave sailors, all seas, all ships'. The slow movement, 'On the Beach at Night Alone' contemplates the immensity of the universe - 'all things locked by a vast similitude, all distances and all souls'

The third movement is the brilliant, swiftly-moving scherzo, 'The Waves', which acts as a breathing space before the immense finale. Here is all the excitement of a sea voyage - the whistling winds and a myriad waves before the music broadens out to become noble and heroic at the thought of the adventurous sea-ship

The Final movement, 'The Explorers', is set on a huge, dramatic canvass. The opening section is the most moving part of the whole work. Whitman contemplates the Earth its power and beauty, its rotation through day and night and its never-ending journey through space. And he begins to wonder about its inscrutable purpose. Here Vaughan Williams makes the simplest of musical statements uplift the heart Vaughan Williams admitted that Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* and the 'Enigma' Variations inspired the music of this sublime movement. The whole movement is filled with the most glorious music. The text goes on to recall that from very ancient times man has questioned his existence. The sea then becomes a metaphor for the ultimate journey from this life onto the next 'O we can wait no longer, We too take ship O Soul' sing the soloists in great exultation and expectation.

In passing I have to comment that I prefer the older recording of Boult ([review](#)) to the newer ones. Granted they may have better sound engineering but they lack commitment. Listen to Boult's choir - there is *sincerity* there, a commitment to the spirit of Whitman's fine mystical text as set by RVW in that glorious finale movement - 'O vast rondure swimming in space...'

'...O my brave soul! O father farther father sail! With these words in diminuendo, the work ends softly quietly - a dying echo as the Soul sails on its journey away from the earth.

Symphony No. 2 - 'A London Symphony' (1913)

Vaughan Williams's Second Symphony – 'A London Symphony' - was composed between 1911 and 1913. RVW was 41 when it was first performed in London in March 1914. This was RVW's own favourite amongst his symphonies.

It opens quietly with an impressionistic vision - very Debussy-like - of London before day-break. The clarinet and harp intone the Westminster chimes and the orchestra stirs. The music gradually gathers momentum and then pulsates with life. A good number of melodies are introduced: some have grandeur reflecting the city's pride; some are cheeky evoking cockney high spirits; and others are more reflective suggesting small, quiet squares and churches.

The third movement is an evocation of the City at night. A scene of Cockney conviviality centred on an accordion and mouth-organ is vividly painted before a sinister mood reminds us of the ugliness, loneliness and tragedy that can lurk beneath the surface of the City

The final movement contains dark music too, possibly expressing discontent with the seamier side of London. The music is dominated by a dark, solemn march and a spirit of conflict. At length the Westminster chimes usher in the epilogue and the work ends quietly as it began.

But for me the highlight of *A London Symphony* has to be the lovely *Lento* second movement. Here Vaughan Williams evokes a quiet Bloomsbury square on a November afternoon. The strings and cor anglais set the misty scene... The music speaks of tenderness and nostalgia. The jingle of hansom cabs and the cries of 'Sweet Lavender' are heard. The music becomes momentarily restless and foreboding before rising with passion to a large climax. Afterwards, the music gently fades and takes its leave with a solo viola. My preferred version is the 1956 version made by the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Barbirolli ([review](#)).

Symphony No. 3, 'Pastoral' (1921)

Michael Kennedy has said that he thinks that the Third - the 'Pastoral' Symphony - is the greatest of the nine. Again, it is innovative. Quite unusually, it has three slow movements. Quoting Kennedy, "It is a *tour de force*. To write three slow movements with the variety of colour, harmony and melodic resource shown here is something to be achieved only by a composer of high genius..." The predominant mood of the symphony is of sadness and compassionate melancholy. One might be forgiven for thinking these predominantly quiet and serene scenes are entirely evocations of English landscapes, but this is not entirely true for part of the symphony's inspiration came to him in a France torn by the bloody conflict of World War I. Vaughan Williams had gone out there to serve with an ambulance unit and it was his habit of an evening to climb a hill near his camp. From his vantage point he would gaze at the beauty of the setting sun. Below he could hear a solitary bugle call. This call and something of that evening scene is captured in the second movement - dusk turned into notes.

The third movement - in effect the scherzo - is the only movement in which one senses movement by animals and humans - a rustic dance.

The Finale begins with a soft drum roll and a solo soprano sings a wordless intonation giving an impression of a remote benediction. Again, quoting Kennedy: "The result is unbearably poignant, like a lament for the flowers of the forest cut down in the 1914-18 war; yet the grief is somehow transcended and it becomes more cosmic than personal without losing intensity". The soprano fades, the strings steal in quietly, and the music gradually builds in passion and intensity. This is music of mystical and transcendent beauty. This symphony requires superb playing and enlightened conducting. It should give the right effect

of tunes flowing from one instrument to another always slightly varied like cloud shadows moving over a summer landscape. Of all symphonies this is designed for private listening and therefore ideally suited to the gramophone. I prefer the Boult Decca recording made in 1952 ([review](#)).

Vaughan Williams' 'Pastoral' Symphony was composed between 1916 and 1921 and first performed in 1922 when RVW was 49. Thirteen more years were to pass before the premiere of his Fourth Symphony in 1935. The Fourth Symphony could hardly be more different to the Third.

Symphony No. 4 in F minor (composed between 1931 and 1934)

It is angry, violent and discordant but to some, this symphony remains Vaughan Williams's greatest achievement because of its sheer musical logic, rhythmical elasticity and remarkably effective orchestration.

The growing consciousness of international tension caused some people to see this symphony as coming from one who was regarded, with awe, as a remote seer. It was also seen as a commentary on the times - about the rising tide of fascism. Now who can define musical inspiration? Who knows from where it comes? And what it says to men of genius, its communicators - men like Ralph Vaughan Williams? We do know that music can say many things at the same time and that it may recall things from our distant pasts - from our collective unconscious, so might it not also foresee future events; perhaps to warn us? The late Christopher Palmer in writing the notes for the Andrew Davis Teldec recordings of this and the Sixth Symphony, held such an opinion and I must say that I sympathise with it. On the other hand, it should be remembered that the bulk of this Fourth Symphony was written before the average Englishman was conscious of the gathering storm

Vaughan Williams, himself, was reticent about the symphony's meaning. Of it he said "I don't know if I like it, but it's what I meant" This famous remark was made at rehearsals for the first performance of the work by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult. Two and a half years later Vaughan Williams made a recording of the work himself ([review](#)). The sheer menace in the music is quite palpable from the first movement. Good recordings emphasise the sardonic humour and parody of the scherzo.

Symphony No. 5 in D major (1943)

Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony was premiered on 24th June 1943. It had been written over the previous five years. Here in the midst of the ravages of war, was a vision of Peace Eternal. The symphony uses themes taken from music Vaughan Williams had been writing for many years for a dramatisation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The *Romanza* slow third movement is sublime. It must be played with the utmost warmth and sensitivity. Michael Kennedy has said that it can be placed alongside the *Larghetto* of the Elgar Second Symphony as the high peaks of English romantic symphonic art. It is in this sublime movement that most of the *Pilgrim* music occurs. The agitation at its centre is Pilgrim's cry "Save Me, Lord! My burden is greater than I can bear." The music culminates in an impassioned *Alleluia* and it fades away into one of the most magical and radiant codas in all music as high *tremolando* strings shimmer over distant horn calls and the lower strings then reply in compassionate contemplation.

Symphony No.6 in E minor (1947)

With the Sixth Symphony we descend again into anarchy and violence. It is the scenario of the Fourth Symphony revisited. My remarks about that symphony's inspiration apply equally well here. This time the anger is even more frenzied and hope seems lost. Deryck Cooke described it as "nothing short of cataclysmic" The first movement opens violently and the music is in turmoil with grotesque jazz figures stalking the score. The only ray of hope in the whole work is uttered at the end of this movement. The

melody will be familiar to those who enjoyed the ITV series *A Family at War*. Of the nightmare music that is the second movement, with its relentless battering percussion strokes, Andrew Davis was heard to say as he listened to a playback of his recording, - Horrible! Horrible! Horrible. The scherzo has been described as something out of the devil's kitchen and the extraordinary finale stalks a desolate, barren landscape which seems to be devoid of life and lying in ruins. What did RVW say about this creation? Again, he was reticent. And again Christopher Palmer thought that this awe-inspiring work had been suggested by the holocaust of the Second World War and that the enigmatic last movement was a warning to us all as we entered the atomic age. As Palmer so perceptively commented: "It is the ultimate negation of *The Lark Ascending*. It un-writes the finale of the Sea Symphony. No solo-violin lark, no sky, even; instead the dead, cold sound of unison flutes. No poet or "true son of God" comes, singing his songs. 'He did come,' Vaughan Williams seems to say; 'but nobody wanted to listen.'"

Vaughan Williams's 6th Symphony was composed between 1944 and 1947 and first performed under the baton of Adrian Boult in London in April 1948. RVW was then 76

My preferred recording is by Sir Andrew Davis and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, originally issued by Teldec and now on Warner Classics ([review](#))

Symphony No 7, *Sinfonia Antartica* (1952)

The Seventh Symphony is generally regarded as the weakest of the set. *Sinfonia Antartica* is of course a programme symphony based on the score that Vaughan Williams wrote for the 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic*. Nevertheless, it has grandeur, nobility, atmosphere and humour. The Scherzo has a brilliant evocation of penguins and 'Landscape' is a towering portrayal of the immensity of the Ice Walls and endless blue-white landscapes of the Antarctic.

The finale tells of the final tragedy when Scott and his party are lost in the white wilderness. Vaughan Williams uses a noble heroic theme for the explorers and the tragedy and hopelessness of their position is imaginatively evoked by a wordless chorus and soprano solo intoning over a wailing wind machine as the music dissolves into bleak nothingness.

My choice recording - Andre Previn conducting the LSO with Heather Harper and the Ambrosian Singers ([review](#))

Symphony No 8 in D minor (1953-5, rev 1956)

Sinfonia Antartica was first performed in Manchester in 1952, when RVW was 80, by Barbirolli and the Hallé orchestra and it was Barbirolli who, in 1956, premiered the 8th Symphony - to 'Glorious John', as RVW described Barbirolli, the dedicatee of the work. I like to think of this symphony as being very like Beethoven's Eighth Symphony - Beethoven's Little Symphony. Both are full of energy and high spirits. Vaughan Williams' score is remarkable for its youthful outlook. He could still keep on surprising us even in his eighties! The orchestration is supremely imaginative; in fact, I would suggest that this work is RVW's Concerto for Orchestra - all players have virtuoso parts.

Its opening mood set by trumpet and celeste is extraordinary, the second movement is, I think, an affectionate parody of English brass band music, the third movement for strings returns us to Thomas Tallis country and the finale is a tour de force for the percussion section.

Barbirolli's 1957 recording with the Hallé orchestra is my recommendation ([review](#)).

Symphony No. 9 in E minor (1957)

Vaughan Williams' last symphony was first performed in 1957 the year before his death. And again we can only wonder: his gifts and innovatory powers seemed undiminished still. True, a number of commentators thought he was a played out force because he was using the device of self quotation from his earlier works - especially *A Sea Symphony* - rather as Elgar did, in *The Music Makers* but the quotations were used for a purpose! Also many of the high art boys were thinking his music to be old hat!

The Ninth symphony is an amazing composition for an 86-year-old composer. Here he is still experimenting with a different ghostly sound world and unusual instrumentation – i.e. flugelhorn and saxophones used naturally and unforced within the drama of the score, adding unusual warmth and colour. It is a darker work again than the sunny Eighth - assertive yet mysterious - mystical and visionary even. There is a thread of a programme for the work has associations with Salisbury and Hardy's *Tess* and a ghostly drummer of Salisbury Plain. The finale, which is the climax of the work, has some mysterious veiled music at its close. A few thought that they noted despair in the music; others found hope some thought it a tranquil leave-taking. Was Vaughan Williams saying goodbye?

Ian Lace