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MODERN BRITISH COMPOSERS

BY EDWIN EVANS

X.—RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (*concluded*)

The references to Vaughan Williams's earliest works which appeared in the first section of this article, and those made last month to such of his compositions as are, directly or indirectly, based upon folk-song, practically exhaust the list of his orchestral works, save for the one which is his masterpiece, the 'London' Symphony. Before passing to a consideration of that remarkable work, it is, however, desirable to mention his incidental music to 'The Wasps' of Aristophanes, written for a performance which took place at Cambridge in 1909. In the form of a suite, it is not unfamiliar in the concert-room, though scarcely performed with the frequency it deserves. Though quite unpretentious, and unaffected by Hellenistic or any other kind of learning, it is possible that this playful music really does reflect something of the mental attitude of an average Athenian citizen when stimulated by the witty irreverence of the father of comedy. It has even a touch of innuendo, not to speak of a reasonably free indulgence in colloquialism. That it is an outrageous anachronism is entirely in its favour. Imagine how dull the same theme could have been made by certain musicians possessing views or theories upon what is authentically Greek. It would be much worse than going to a Tudor expert for incidental music to 'The Merry Wives.' Happily the precedents set by Parry and others in similar circumstances were such as to afford Vaughan Williams the right guidance, if indeed he had need of it, which does not seem probable.

The time has come to speak of a work which forms a peak not only in Vaughan Williams's career, but in the annals of modern British music, the 'London' Symphony. It is significant that it should have come for the first time before the public at one of the four remarkable concerts given by the late F. B. Ellis, at Queen's Hall, in the spring of 1914, for this private venture, which would have deterred any of the professional concert-givers of the day, happens to have proved one of the turning-points in the movement with which these articles are concerned. Perhaps it is equally significant that the next opportunity for hearing it in London was provided by the enterprise

of Mr. Adrian C. Boult, who had not then taken the place among our conductors which is now acknowledged to be his due. Finally, its recent repetition at Queen's Hall was due, not to the initiative of those organizations whose business it is to supply us with orchestral music, but to that of the newly formed British Music Society, which was enabled to perform this public service by the munificence of a private patron. Add to this that it is about to be published, not in the ordinary course of business enterprise, but under the auspices of the Carnegie Trust, that is to say, again under private patronage. After all allowance has been made for the difficulties, technical and financial, involved in giving to the world a work of such dimensions and importance, the mere relation of the circumstances is an indictment of the commercial side of our musical world, which cannot truthfully claim to have fulfilled its function in the community.

Between the various performances certain revisions took place, chiefly, but not exclusively, in the direction of compression. Even as it stands the work is lengthy, though there are many modern symphonies which contrive to say much less at even greater length, and this has not proved to be an enduring objection to their inclusion in the repertoire.

The effect which the Ellis concerts, with their catholic selection of new or unfamiliar works, had upon criticism at the time was that of raising once more the vexed and perennial question 'What is English music?' My own contribution to the discussion* being intimately associated with the first performance of the 'London' Symphony, I trust that I may plead extenuating circumstances for including in the present article those portions of it which appear relevant:

'Music is primarily the expression of an individual. It expresses a race only in the degree in which its creator is typical of that race. Vaughan Williams's music is often hailed as characteristically English, especially by those who are cosmopolitan enough to look at their countrymen, as it were, from the outside, and these are the best judges, as the stay-at-home Englishman's idea of himself is built up chiefly of catch phrases. Therefore Vaughan Williams must, in some way, be typical. It has nothing to do with externals, or his critics would not be so eager to seize upon the unfamiliar elements of his idiom and ascribe them conveniently to French influences, as they happen to know that he spent a few months in intimate association with Maurice Ravel. Moreover, the interpretation in music of mere English externals is quite another matter. In his very small manner, Edward German accomplished it fairly well; and who would claim to detect anything in common between Edward German and Vaughan Williams? The fact is that the Englishman tends to express himself outwardly in conventions, and it is these that a composer like German seizes upon, whilst Vaughan Williams

* *The Outlook*, April 4, 1914.

expresses the Englishman within him. There is no screen of convention between him and his music.

'That in itself is, however, not enough. The inner personality must be in some measure typical, and that must be revealed by his music, if the general impression is justified. Here I am perhaps dealing with subtleties beyond the scope of musical criticism, but I distinctly feel in Vaughan Williams's music a type of personality which I believe to be so frequent in these islands as to be rightly considered national. It is a personality that is intellectually aristocratic—not to say fastidious—and biologically, if that word expresses my meaning, democratic. Using the word "caste" in a purely intellectual—and not a social—sense, it is a temperament that without compromising caste and, above all, without conscious condescension, can be sincerely and wholeheartedly of and with the people. Now that is a combination that I believe to be peculiarly English. The intellectual democrat of the Continent either condescends or becomes a vulgarian. It was so in the 18th century, and I do not believe that the French Revolution has made so great a change as it is credited with.

'All this is not so remote as it seems from a consideration of the "London" Symphony. That remarkable work is the expression, not of London, but of a Londoner. Its reflective side, which is overwhelmingly predominant, owes its most beautiful moments to its detachment from all that the title might imply on the material side. That is the composer's innate fastidiousness. But the frequent references to the bustling scene in which this inner reflective life has its being are handled with a sympathy so sincere that even occasional vulgarities are touched upon with affection. Add to that a certain diffident reserve that almost brings the flow of musical communicativeness to a premature stop, and you have the Englishman who feels deeply, but is embarrassed when he suddenly discovers that he has been showing it.'

The spacious forms of music are said to be passing out of fashion. This is not strictly true. The immense expansion of the art of music which has been taking place during the last half century has obviously had a stimulating effect upon the receptive faculties of the more enlightened sections of the international musical audience. Composers whose sympathies are buried in the past have failed to realise that, as an inevitable consequence of this, those listeners to whom symphonies are addressed have become capable of assuming, as a matter of course, much that formerly had to be told them explicitly. The long-winded discussion of a small group of themes, whose implications can be perceived almost before the close of the exposition, puts an unnecessary strain upon the patience of the modern listener, whose mind has become sufficiently alert to take such discussions as read. Many modern composers, conscious of this new development, curtail the length of their works by adopting elliptical methods, sometimes in the presentation of the thematic argument,

often in the harmonic progress, and practically always in the recapitulation. Such works as still retain their large dimensions in the music of to-day can easily be divided into two classes: those which owe their length to methods of development which are rapidly becoming obsolete, and those which owe it to the wealth of material employed. The prodigality of invention in the latter case may result from the fruitfulness of the musical idea, or from the importance of the underlying poetic conception. In the best music the two causes operate together. It is to such influences as these, and not to mere musical discursiveness, that one must ascribe the length of Arnold Bax's *Pianoforte Quintet* which was performed recently, and of Vaughan Williams's 'London' Symphony. The poetic basis of the latter precluded brief statement. One might write a sonnet on the Pyramids, but the thoughts of the Londoner on the kaleidoscopic surroundings in which his life is spent cannot be so compressed, if their expression is to be adequate. Only the spacious forms of the symphony could supply a sufficient breadth of canvas to accommodate enough of the myriad evocations which the very name of London calls up, for the result to be commensurate with the source of inspiration. It is also doubtless due to the subject, as well as to Vaughan Williams's modern outlook, that these broad spaces are filled with a profusion of material, that the developments are rich in new incident, and that the recapitulations are curtailed, the formal balance being restored by an important *Coda* to the first movement, and by the *Coda*-like relation of the *Finale* to the whole. Much of the material is of purely incidental quality. Especially is this the case with such easily recognisable features as the Westminster Chimes, the Lavender Cry, and the frequent snatches of tunes having the jovial rhythm which, to the man of the London streets, is the quintessence of musical enjoyment. That some of these fragments should have even a Transatlantic twang, does not, in the days we live in, make them less relevant. But it is important to remember that all these suggestions are subordinate to the broad outline of the Symphony, which rests securely upon personal foundations, in thought and theme.

The Symphony has the orthodox four movements, and although there is some recurring material, their unusually close relation to each other is due to a far more subtle unity of conception than is usually conveyed by such recurrence. From that point of view it is only the connection of prologue and epilogue that has any formal importance. The *Allegro*, with its amazing wealth of suggestion, would have led a lesser musician to diffuseness. The fact that, in spite of the utmost apparent freedom in development, it remains a close knit symphonic movement would alone almost suffice to place Vaughan Williams among the foremost composers of his day, for it is precisely this power of concentration which is the mark of the elect.

The slow movement, from which we quote the following:

Lento.

pp Wind and Harp.

pp Str. *con sordini.*

Horn.

pp

Wind and Str.

is lyrical, and therefore much less complex. Its meditative reflections are carried to a nodal point, and then subside upon a viola solo, unaccompanied. The *Scherzo* has the bustling animation, the humour, and even some of the noises of the popular scene. An amusing incident is the passage of London youths equipped with mouth-organs. But we are reminded that the composer's attitude is subjective when he turns, so to speak, from his open window, in order to muse upon his theme in the quiet calm of a nocturne. The *Finale* is perhaps the most transparent movement of the whole, and from the listener's standpoint seems to clinch the matter under discussion far more effectively than the majority of modern symphonic conclusions.

An adverse fate seems to overhang the majority of Vaughan Williams's excursions into the field of chamber music. I have already mentioned the Quintet for pianoforte, violin, clarinet, violoncello, and horn, which dates from 1901 and was played at one of the Clinton concerts. It is no longer permitted to appear in the authoritative list of the

composer's works. A Quintet in C minor, for pianoforte, violin, viola, violoncello, and bass which followed in 1904, is still included, but there are symptoms of its possible excision at the next overhauling of the list. The String Quartet of 1908 has been lost apparently beyond recall, and there remains only the Phantasy Quintet for two violins, two violas, and violoncello. This has had several performances, and has made a lasting impression on those who heard it, but I hesitate to trust my memory, and as the reason why the manuscript is not available at the moment is that there is a prospect of the work being shortly accessible in print, I cannot grieve over the inevitable lacuna in the present article. I must, however, content myself with saying that in my recollection it is one of the most characteristic works of its author, and one which makes lovers of chamber music regret that his contribution to their *répertoire* should not be more voluminous.*

Vaughan Williams does not seem at any time to have been much attracted by keyboard music. The list of his works does not include a single composition for pianoforte solo, and it is even more remarkable, considering his early experiences as an organist, that his first organ work should have made its appearance only last year. It consists of three preludes founded on Welsh hymn-tunes. The second and third of them are strikingly characteristic both of his harmonic method and of his line of musical thought, in all its simplicity. The opening bars of the third prelude, entitled 'Hyfrydol':

MANUAL *Moderato maestoso.* Melody by R. H. PRICHARD (1811-87).

Gt. to Principal (with 16-ft.) coup. to Full Sw. without Reeds.

mf

PEDAL.

mf

* A quotation from the Phantasy Quintet is given in an article on Vaughan Williams by the Editor of *Music and Letters* which appeared in the second issue of that journal.

furnish a good example. The author of the tune, the Rev. Rowland Hugh Prichard, ministered at Bala, his birth-place, and acted as precentor at the annual Sasiwns y Bala.

In the opening section of this article, and again in writing of the 'London' Symphony, Vaughan Williams's position in our music has been so fully indicated that there remains little to add by way of epilogue. We have deprecated the tendency in some quarters to endow him with a kind of leadership to which he does not aspire. Apart from the danger which besets both those who bestow and those who accept such titular prominence, Vaughan Williams's personality is so pronounced that it is best appreciated as an isolated appearance. There is no musician who closely resembles or follows him. One might at most detect a certain affinity of outlook between his music and that of Gustav Holst, but the analogy which strikes one at a distance begins to fade in proximity, and familiarity with the works of both dispels all idea of a close comparison. There is nothing but good to come of this isolated position, for to-day, perhaps more than at any other time, we have need of strong uncompromising individualities. For all its urbanity that of Vaughan Williams is hewn in rock. The very absence of concession, either to the senses or to sentimental inclinations, which gives his music an aspect of austerity, also endows it with the quality of gaining immediate confidence, even when it does not please. It is the language of the plain-spoken man, who abhors subterfuge, and endeavours, not always with complete success, to state neither more nor less than what is in his mind. Men of that stamp have not been of frequent appearance in the history of music. So far as we can gauge the mentality of the past, the 16th century would appear to have been the most conducive to the deployment of such character in music. Probity then still retained much of the glamour that it had acquired in the Middle Ages, and the best musical works of that period have the quality of cathedrals. It is perhaps relevant to note that where we find the same love of 'honest building' we can generally also detect the same constructional methods, or at least derivatives from the same principles; and there are few modern composers in whom they can be so readily traced as in Vaughan Williams.

LIST OF WORKS

- 1895 Three Elizabethan Part-Songs (Joseph Williams).
 1896 Song—'Claribel' (Boosey).
 1898 Serenade for small orchestra (MS.).
 1902 Song—'Whither must I wander' (Boosey).
 1903 'Willow Wood' (Rossetti), for baritone solo, female voices, and orchestra (Stainer & Bell).
 „ Songs—{ 'Blackmore' } (Boosey).
 „ { 'Linden Lea' }
 „ „ { 'Orpheus with his Lute' } (Keith Prowse).
 „ { 'When I am Dead' }
 „ „ { 'If I were Queen' }
 „ { 'Boy Johnny' }
 „ „ { 'The Splendour Falls' } (Boosey).
 „ { 'Tears, Idle Tears' }
 „ { 'Winter's Willow' }

- 1903 'The House of Life' (six Sonnets of Rossetti) (Ashdown).
 „ 'Sound Sleep,' for three female voices (Novello).
 1904 Two Orchestral Impressions—'Harnham Down' and 'Boldrewood' (MS.).
 „ Quintet in C minor (MS.).
 „ Songs of Travel (seven songs, two vols.) (Boosey).
 „ Songs—{ 'Reveillez-vous Piccarz' } French Folk-Songs (Boosey).
 „ { 'L'Amour de Moy' }
 1905 Symphonic Impression—'In the Fen Country' (MS.).
 „ Song—'Dreamland' (Boosey).
 1906 Heroic Elegy (MS.).
 „ 'Toward the Unknown Region,' for chorus and orchestra (Stainer & Bell).
 „ Norfolk Rhapsody No. 1, in E minor (MS.).
 1907 „ „ No. 2, in D minor (MS.).
 1908 Quartet in G minor (MS.).
 „ Folk-Songs of England. Parts II. & IV. (Novello).
 1903-9 Sea Symphony, for soli, chorus, and orchestra (Stainer & Bell).
 1908 Songs—{ 'Buonaparte' } (Boosey).
 „ { 'The sky above the roof' }
 1908-9 'On Wenlock Edge,' for solo, strings, and pianoforte (Boosey).
 1909 'The Wasps,' Overture (Bowes & Bowes).
 1910 'The Spanish Ladies' (Folk-Song) (Boosey).
 1910-11 Five Mystical Songs, for solo, chorus, and orchestra (also for baritone and men's chorus) (Stainer & Bell).
 1910 Fantasia for String Orchestra on a Theme by Tallis (MS.).
 1912 Fantasia on Christmas Carols, for baritone solo, chorus, and orchestra (Stainer & Bell).
 1912-13 'London' Symphony (MS.). (To be printed for the Carnegie Trust.)
 1913 'O Praise the Lord,' Motet for double choir and semi-chorus (Stainer & Bell).
 „ Five Folk-Songs for unaccompanied chorus (Stainer & Bell).
 „ Fantasy Quintet (MS.).
 1914 'The lark ascending,' Romance for violin and orchestra (MS.).
 1911-14 Ballad-Opera, 'Hugh, the Drover' (MS., unfinished).
 1914 Four Hymns for tenor solo and string orchestra, or pianoforte and viola (Boosey).
 1919 Three Preludes for organ, founded on Welsh tunes (Stainer & Bell).
 „ Eight Traditional English Carols (Stainer & Bell).
 „ 'The Turtle Dove' (Folk-Song) (Curwen).
 1920 'O clap your hands,' Motet for chorus, brass, and organ (Stainer & Bell).

PART-SONGS AND MADRIGALS (NO DATE OF COMPOSITION ASCERTAINABLE)

- 'Fain would I change that note,' S.A.T.B. (Novello).
 'The Jolly Ploughboy,' Folk-Song, T.T.B.B. „
 'Come away, Death,' S.S.A.T.B. (Stainer & Bell).
 'Ward, the Pirate,' Folk-Song, T.T.B.B. (Curwen).
 'The Winter is gone,' Folk-Song, T.T.B.B. (Novello).
 'Mannin Veen,' Manx Folk-Song, S.A.T.B. (Curwen).
 'Love is a Sickness,' S.A.T.B. (Stainer & Bell).
 'Ring out your bells,' S.S.A.T.B. (Laudy).
 'Rest,' S.S.A.T.B. (Laudy).
 'English Hymnal' (tunes arranged).
 'Welcome Songs,' Purcell Edition, Part I. (Novello).
 Folk-Song Society Journal, Vol. I., No. 8 (61 tunes, Eastern Counties, collected.) Printers, Barnicott & Pearce.
 'Welcome Songs,' Purcell Edition, Part II. (Novello).