

Ralph Vaughan Williams (born Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, Oct. 12, 1872; died London, Aug. 26, 1958) was the most important English composer of his generation, and he was a key figure in the 20th-century revival of English music. It is clear that he held the viola in a special place in his heart throughout his compositional career, having contributed the *Suite* for viola and orchestra, *Romance* for viola and piano, *4 Hymns* for tenor, viola, and strings, and *Flos Campi* for viola, choir, and orchestra. The *6 Studies in English Folksong* are originally for cello, but he transcribed them for viola as well as many other different instruments. Vaughan Williams learned violin as well as piano and organ at an early age. He switched to viola for three years before taking up an interest in composition. Later, he studied composition and music history at the Royal College of Music and Trinity College.

Vaughan Williams had embarked on his own “amateurish technique”, which he said dogged him all his life. His early frustrations had much to do with his deep dissatisfaction with the musical scene in England. This led to his later studying with Bruch in Berlin (1907) and Ravel in Paris (1908). At the same time he realized how important it was to retain his own national identity, which thus led him to his extensive use of English Folksong, Elizabethan, and Jacobean music. His music often has simple, lyrical, modal sounding character. “Visionary” is a word much used in describing Vaughan Williams’s music, and it has often been assumed that the vision is theistic and specifically Christian. The reality is more complex. Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote “he was an atheist...though he later drifted into cheerful agnosticism; he was never a professing Christian”. He was a first-generation atheist with a profound, not to a visionary, sense of the past, which means a disappointed theist. However, he did relate with the more common aspirations of the English church, such as folksong, and he was aware of the common aspirations of ordinary men with whom he felt a deep, contemplative sympathy. His works therefore contain a fundamental tension between traditional concepts of belief and morality and a spiritual anguish which is also visionary. His output includes nine symphonies, various chamber works, and a large number of vocal and choral works.

The *Six Studies in English Folksong* is one of the only four Vaughan Williams instrumental-piano duo combinations (the other three being his *Violin Sonata* 1956, *Suite de Ballet* for flute and piano, and the *Romance* for viola and piano). This piece, although originally for cello, works extremely well on the viola. Much of the transcription remains at the same pitch level as the cello version, putting much of the piece in the lower register of the viola. This makes for an easy arrangement for the violist to play, which actually helps to bring out the simplicity of the work. These pieces are not, according to the composer, exact transcriptions of specific and identifiable folksongs, but each is founded on a strophic melody with a recognizable likeness to a definite type of folk-tune. The origins of the studies have been identified thus: (I) *Lovely on the Water*; (II) *Spurn Point*; (III) *Van Diemen’s Land*; (IV) *She Borrowed Some of her Mother’s Gold*; (V) *The Lady and the Dragoon*; (VI) *As I Walked Over London Bridge*. The first tune is a ballad, the second is an Irish tune, the third is a good square ballad tune in the Aeolian mode, the fourth is a carol, the fifth is a love song, and the sixth is a brisk patter song, the scherzo of the set. The studies were premiered at the London’s Scala Theatre on June 4, 1926 as

part of the English Folk Dance Society Festival be cellist May Mukle (the dedicatee) and her sister Anne on the piano.

There is not very much information of Vaughan Williams's *Romance* for viola and piano because it is a work not discovered until after his death in 1958. Ursula Vaughan Williams and Roy Douglas took the task of sorting through 4 drawers, 3 trunks, and a suitcase all stuffed full of manuscripts from every period of his life. Many of the works were familiar, some not, others not thought to be worthy of publication. Some of the pages were turned inside out, some were pages merely torn from scores, and other were sheets of one work tucked into another. Besides the *Romance*, also discovered among the manuscripts was the *Suite de Ballet* for flute and piano, both with no indication of date. These were both published by Oxford University Press in 1961. This piece is written in an arch form, beginning and ending with a soft songful character, with the middle section stirring more unrestful and vigorous feelings. The work received its first performance by Bernard Shore and Eric Gritton in a Macnaghten Concert on Jan. 19, 1962.

The *Four Hymns* for tenor voice, viola, and strings seems to be a smaller scale companion piece to his *Five Mystical Songs* for baritone voice and orchestra, written three years earlier in 1911. These hymns were written for the Worcester Festival, but its premiere was delayed until 1920 because of WWI. In 1914, aged 41, Vaughan Williams felt bound to involve himself in the war (no compositions were written by him between 1914-1920), serving as a wagon orderly with the Royal Army Medical Corps in France, later becoming an artillery officer. The works were written for Orchestra at Cardiff, six years after the work was written. These hymns are another example of how Vaughan Williams was able throughout his life, despite being agnostic, to set music words in the accepted terms of Christian revelation as if they meant to him what they must have meant to their authors. The texts are as follows:

LORD! COME AWAY!

Lord! Come away! Why dost Thou stay?
Thy road is ready; and Thy paths made straight
With longing expectation, wait
The consecration of Thy beauteous feet!

Ride on triumphantly!
Behold we lay our rusty and proud wills in Thy way!
Hosanna! Welcome to our hearts!

Lord, here Thou hast a temple too; and full as dear
As that of Sion, and as full of sin:
Nothing but thieves and robbers dwell therein;
Enter, and chase them forth, and cleanse the floor!
Crucify them that they may never more
Profane that holy place
Where thou hast chose to set Thy face!

And then, if our stiff tongues shall be
Mute in the praises of the Deity,
The stones out of the temple wall
Shall cry aloud, and call
“Hosanna!” and Thy glorious footsteps greet!
Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)

WHO IS THIS FAIR ONE?
Who is this fair one in distress,
That travels from the wilderness,
And press'd with sorrows and with sins
On her beloved Lond she leans?

This is the spouse of Christ our God,
Bought with the treasures of His blood,
And her request and her complaint
Is but the voice of ev'ry saint:

“Stronger than death Thy love is known
Which floods of wrath could never drown,
And hell and earth in vain combine
To quench a fire so much divine.

“But I am jealous of my heart
Lest it should once from Thee depart:
Then let my name be well impress'd
As a fair signet on Thy breast.

“O let my name engraven stand
Both on Thy heart and on Thy hand;
Seal me upon mine arm and wear
That pledge of love for ever there.

“Till Thou hast brought me to Thy home,
Where fears and doubts can never come,
Thy countenance let me often see,
And often shalt Thou hear from me:

“Come, my beloved, haste away,
Cut short the hours of Thy delay,
Fly like a youthful hart or roe,
Over the hills where spices blow.”
Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

COME LOVE, COME LORD
Come love, come Lord, and that long day

For which I languish, come away,
When this dry soul those eyes shall see
And drink the unseal'd source of Thee,
When glory's sun faith's shades shall chase,
Then for Thy veil give Thy face.
Richard Crashaw (1613-1649)

EVENING HYMN

O gladsome light, O Grace
Of God the Father's face,
The eternal splendour wearing;
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
Joyful in Thine appearing:

Now, ere day fadeth quite,
We see the evening light,
Our wonted hymn outpouring;
Father of might unknown,
Thee, His incarnate Son,
And His Holy Spirit adoring.

To Thee of right belongs
All praise of holy songs,
O Son of God, Life-giver;
Thee, therefore, O Most High,
The world doth glorify
And shall exalt for ever.
Robert Bridges (1844-1930) (from the Greek)

The *Suite* for viola and small orchestra was written for the English viola virtuoso, Lionel Tertis, for whom Vaughan Williams had also composed *Flos Campi*. Apparently, this work proved to be no easy task for Vaughan Williams to complete, he remarked to his friend Peter Montgomery "My viola suite is not finished- I do not know if it will ever be". The work is about 25 minutes in length, and though the viola part is technically virtuostic, it is not particularly concerto-like. Rather, it is a group of character pieces for solo instrument and orchestra. This work is much lighter and more attainable than the previous Lionel Tertis commission, *Flos Campi*- a very serious, introspective piece. This suite was originally published in 3 groups. These groupings (3, 2, 3) did not suggest that the pieces were separable- in fact that was not the intention at all. The first performance took place with Lionel Tertis under an orchestra directed by Malcolm Sargent at the Courtauld-Sargent Concert on Nov. 12, 1934. The version for viola and piano was prepared for publication in 1936 by Vaughan Williams so that the accompaniment would be more readily available for students as a teaching piece, and also more readily available for performance.

The *Fantasia on Greensleeves* is originally a piece for string orchestra, flute and harp lifted from Vaughan Williams's opera *Sir John in Love* (1924-29). The orchestra arrangement was done by Ralph Greaves in 1934, the same year the *Suite* for viola was composed. Vaughan Williams did not write this Elizabethan tune, he merely used it in his opera. In fact, "Greensleeves" was not even a popular Christmas tune at the time he wrote the opera, he only aided in the acclaim it has today. Unfortunately, many people mistakenly know Vaughan Williams as "the man who wrote that beautiful Christmas tune- Greensleeves". The viola and piano arrangement was done by Watson Forbes in 1947.

Notes by Kenneth Martinson