

These recordings of Schubert's cycles by Bostridge, Vogt and Adès present a wonderful opportunity to survey the gamut of the composer's compositions for the genre, from the early 'Einsamkeit' to the late *Winterreise*, and finally, to the post-humously arranged *Schwanengesang*. Bostridge's daring and compelling vocality, encouraged by Adès's compositional perspective and Vogt's thoughtful pianism, probes new depths in the composer's 'schauerliche Lieder'.¹⁸ Although Schubert used these words to describe *Winterreise* to his friends, they also aptly characterize the 'swan songs'. Said's observation that 'late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present'¹⁹ rings true: though all three vocal works were published after Schubert's time – too late for him to see their reception – his late works have acquired a sense of timelessness, for they endure as vessels through which we grapple with the same questions that shape and bring meaning to the human condition.

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Vaughan Williams: On Wenlock Edge & other songs

Nicky Spence, *ten*, Julius Drake, *pf* Timothy Ridout, *vla*
 Piatti Quartet: Michael Trainor, *vl*, Zara Benyounes, *vl*,
 Tetsuumi Nagata, *vla*, Jessie Ann Richardson, *vnc*
 Hyperion CDA68378, 2022 (1 CD: 69'50") £8.99

This disc features a most welcome mixture of vocal-instrumental fare by Ralph Vaughan Williams. By my reckoning it presents the third (and best) rendering of *On Wenlock Edge* released by Hyperion, the label's first complete *House of Life* cycle, and its only offering of *Four Hymns* in the work's scoring for tenor, piano, and viola (as opposed to tenor, viola, and strings).¹ While the accompanying folk song arrangements come from collections both pre- and post-dating World War I, each of the extended compositions was first completed no later than 1914. So in addition to its splendid performances and sound quality, this recording affords the listener several glimpses of Vaughan Williams's early-career development, especially as a text setter. For these reasons alone it belongs in the collections of both seasoned enthusiasts and newcomers.

¹⁸ Deutsch, *Schubert: Memoirs by his Friends* (London: A. & C. Black, 1958): 137–8.

¹⁹ Said, *On Late Style*, 24.

¹ For the other recordings of *On Wenlock Edge* mentioned here see Hyperion CDA67168 and Helios CDH55187.

While spending time with these interpretations, one early debate about Vaughan Williams's inclinations as a song composer kept coming to mind. Writing in *The Musical Times* in 1918, Edwin Evans passionately defends *On Wenlock Edge* as an imperfect English masterpiece that is nonetheless beautiful, fresh, spontaneous, and free from the 'self-indulgence of excess', among other qualities.² On the other hand, Ernest Newman, to whom Evans was responding (and who offered a rejoinder in turn), faults Vaughan Williams's *Shropshire Lad* settings in this work principally on the grounds that it more often paints a pictorial scene or atmosphere than it does effectively capture the specific emotions in their characters' hearts and words.³ Evans somewhat concedes Newman's point, though he does not place as much emphasis on it in his valuation of the music.⁴ The common ground reached in this debate is instructive: regardless of how far one wishes to follow Newman in faulting Vaughan Williams for his grasp of the text's emotions (and I probably fall somewhere between his and Evans's positions), the element of ambience has been noticed to loom large, both in his early choice of lyrics and in his manner of setting them.

To anyone who at all values *On Wenlock Edge* for its rich capacity to paint vibrant scenes in the listener's mind, Spence and Company's rendition cannot be recommended enough. Theirs is one of the slower performances I have heard, clocking in at 22'41". But I find that the bit of extra time better facilitates an emphasis on colour, and allows the listener to savour the rich ensemble playing and recorded sound. Spence's voice, with its supple diction and warm tone, is well-suited to his instrumental support. This is a performance that invites immersion in the pictorial aspects of Vaughan Williams's chosen texts. Compare it to quicker accounts by Pears, Britten, and the Zorian String Quartet (on Decca); or Langridge, Shelley, and the Britten Quartet (on EMI), for example: a greater sense of tragic urgency comes across in their brighter and sometimes harsher sounds, perhaps, but this does not always play to the music's strengths.⁵ If you like things on the dreamier side, the present choice is quite attractive.

Emphasis on vivid imagery also characterizes the Dante Gabriel Rossetti sonnets set in the yet earlier song cycle for voice and piano, *The House of Life*. So often these poems seem to be as focused upon savouring the figurative and the metaphorical as they are about any direct experience of love. Multiple commentators have noted the difficulty inherent in setting such texts, with James Day voicing a kind of consensus that the cycle 'does not quite achieve greatness'.⁶ But Hubert Foss is surely correct when he suggests that as a work capturing the composer's early creative enthusiasm and aspirations, *The House of Life* is

² Edwin Evans, 'English Song and "On Wenlock Edge"', *The Musical Times* 59/904 (1918): 247–9.

³ Ernest Newman, 'Concerning "A Shropshire Lad" and Other Matters', *The Musical Times* 59/907 (1918): 393–8.

⁴ Evans, 'English Song and "On Wenlock Edge"', 248.

⁵ These performances are available on Decca 4782345 (Disc 5) and EMI 724358515527.

⁶ James Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 3rd ed., The Master Musicians Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 112. See also A.E.F. Dickinson, *Vaughan Williams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963): 145–9; and Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 78–80. Simon Heffer rather more harshly dismisses the cycle as being from the composer's 'bottom drawer'; see Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 21.

important in its own right.⁷ Equally, it shows a pattern that would hold throughout Vaughan Williams's entire career: a proclivity to treat genre conventions loosely. The songs in this cycle may not entirely conform to typical Romantic lied text choices or composition practices, but they are quite engrossing, nonetheless. And in their capacity to colour the poetry's strongly visual content and remain in the listener's memory, they decidedly 'punch above their weight'.

The House of Life's long genesis does lend to an impression of unevenness. Its second number, 'Silent Noon', appeared first as a standalone song and was premiered in London in March of 1903. The whole cycle of six songs was not performed together until almost two years later in December of 1904, the same month it was published.⁸ Although Vaughan Williams produced a fair amount of music prior to 'Silent Noon', only some of it was published, and much of this considerably later. Just two other songs were published prior to its first appearance – 'Linden Lea' and 'Blackwore by the Stour' (both set to poetry by William Barnes). In addition to coming almost at the very beginning of the composer's professional career, 'Silent Noon' shares both musical and textual affinities with these two songs. All three paint idyllic natural scenes, and their verse structures are more rounded and conventionally 'songlike'. Moreover, 'Silent Noon' was for a long time one of the composer's most popular and marketed compositions, having a life of its own that has in some aspects eclipsed the rest of *The House of Life*.⁹

This is all to say that performing *The House of Life* comes with subtle challenges related to aesthetic consistency, an uneven reception history, and shifting interpretive grounds. Although natural imagery crops up throughout, the later-composed songs (with the possible exception of the fourth number, 'Heart's Haven') reflect their poems' more atomistic use of it through closely matching sonorities, and forms that are less continuous (at times incorporating material closer in feeling to recitative), than what 'Silent Noon' presents. Spence and pianist Julius Drake perhaps wisely opt for consistency. Their 'Silent Noon' is on the slow side, with longer pauses that interrupt its flow but feel well in place given the natures of the other songs and a general emphasis upon atmosphere. Both singer and accompanist are beautifully adept at capturing the kaleidoscopic harmonies Vaughan Williams employs to paint the texts' rapidly shifting images. If Drake *very* occasionally underplays his *piano* dynamics, and Spence slightly over-pronounces his consonants once in a while (as in the word 'grass' early in 'Silent Noon'), such quibbles do not prevent their interpretations from being distinguished indeed.

With the *Four Hymns* we arrive at a significant crossroads in Vaughan Williams's output. This is some of the last music he completed before World War I (along with the famous *Lark Ascending* in its pre-revised form); its premiere was delayed by the onset of hostilities. Although this set has received relatively scarce treatment in the secondary literature, Eric Saylor rightly argues for its importance in his recent life-and-works volume by discussing how it anticipates Vaughan Williams's postwar style and tendencies.¹⁰ But merely listening to the performance of the *Four Hymns* on

⁷ Hubert J. Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974): 84.

⁸ See Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 407–8.

⁹ I discuss how this song and others were marketed in early recordings of Vaughan Williams's music in a forthcoming book chapter. See Ryan Ross, 'Early Recordings', in *Vaughan Williams in Context*, ed. Julian Onderdonk and Ceri Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁰ See Eric Saylor, *Vaughan Williams, The Master Musicians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 95–6.

this disc, in comparison with the other cycles it offers, gives a sense of the latter's considerable development as a text setter and composer in the roughly half and full decades since their respective completions. If *The House of Life* and *On Wenlock Edge* show a gifted artist on different points along a protracted musical maturation, the *Four Hymns* are the product of an accomplished craftsman who had soundly mastered his tools and learned how to play to his strengths. With years of church music performance and study behind him, and his folk song collecting days finally at an end, this work finds Vaughan Williams handling a fully integrated modal idiom with complete assurance. There is a smooth homogeneity in manner and execution here that is not quite present in the accompanying cycles.

A key element in the *Four Hymns*' success is Vaughan Williams's choice of texts. In carefully selecting poems by four separate authors, which nonetheless share a specific focus of religious devotion, he avoids the vicissitudes of tackling diffuse or otherwise uncongenial material. He also sidesteps any situation where he would be forced to privilege the pictorial at the expense of the directly emotional. Moreover, his mature style is highly conducive to treating sacred themes, and especially their mystic, visionary, and ecstatic aspects. It is no accident that, while the *Four Hymns* close the composer's first, pre-war period, they equally augur a post-war decade that would see the appearance of multiple large-scale sacred works which remain among his most impressive and characteristic efforts.¹¹ Saylor also is correct to note how these hymns anticipate the postwar pastoral music, with which Vaughan Williams's sacred works share some similarities. Prominent among these, as he briefly points out, are the gently undulating triads and motivic affinities shared between the last number, 'Evening Song', and the *Pastoral Symphony*, the latter of which was conceived in large part during the war and premiered early in 1922.¹²

Even on a disc of otherwise excellent performances, Spence's, Drake's, and violist Timothy Ridout's interpretation of the *Four Hymns* would alone justify its price. From delicate passages in 'Come Love, Come Lord', to the rapturous exclamations of the opening 'Lord! Come Away!', and everywhere in between, one struggles mightily to find fault. Well do these gentlemen capture the manifold, gold-tinged hues of the music and text throughout. It is a performance that argues vigorously for this chamber version of the work, which affords a special intimacy (and immediacy) lacking in the composer's alternative scoring for tenor, viola, and string orchestra. In the smaller ensemble, the timbre of the piano is my strong preference over the strings which might replace it, and the single viola is allowed to shine in such a setting as opposed to the reduced timbral separation it achieves when pitted against a full orchestral section. Happily, Ridout is every bit up to his task, and is a defining factor in the venture's success.

The bonus of the three folk song arrangements here requires little comment. Spence and Drake dispatch them with plenty of character and polish. Although the songs are isolated excerpts from larger collections (specifically *15 Folk Songs from the Eastern Counties* and *Six English Folk Songs*), their selective inclusion here

¹¹ For another discussion along these lines, see Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 167–8.

¹² Vaughan Williams himself claimed that much of the music in the *Pastoral Symphony* was inspired during his war service. See his letter to Ursula Wood of 4 October 1938 (Letter VWL1378) at The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams Database, <https://vaughanwilliamsfoundation.org/letter/letter-from-ralph-vaughan-williams-to-ursula-wood-100/> (accessed 13 September 2023).

points to Hyperion's usual practice of filling out their compact disc offerings rather than issuing them with stingy total playing times. (I will refrain from mentioning certain serial offenders in this regard among major classical labels.) One always appreciates more repertoire, even if loosely included.

Also true to form is the beauty of this physical product, especially its artwork and liner booklet. For those of us who like collecting the hard artifact, and do not mind that Hyperion had for long avoided the streaming platform, we have another sumptuous item to add to our shelves. As we continue to await what comes next for the label in the wake of its sale to Universal, we can at least be grateful for years of enjoyable, important releases.¹³ This spectacular Vaughan Williams disc is only one of the latest (and hopefully not one of the last) in a long tradition.

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¹³ For more on this sale, see: www.billboard.com/pro/universal-music-acquires-classical-label-hyperion-records/ (accessed 17 September 2023).