13 Fluctuations in the response to the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams

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Fluctuations in critical and popular reaction to the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams are hardly surprising when one considers the length of his creative career – effectively from 1895 to the day of his death sixty-three years later. Or, if one measures it from his first childhood composition, *The Robin's Nest*, in 1878 the total becomes eighty years, a huge span stretching in musical terms from the lifetime of Brahms and Wagner to the experimentations in electronic music by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Vaughan Williams's music began to be noticed by a small coterie of keen musicians in the 1890s when some songs, part-songs and chamber works were performed at Cambridge University and elsewhere. His teachers at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music between 1892 and 1895 included two of the most influential figures of the day both as academics and composers, Sir Hubert Parry and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. Both were impressed by Vaughan Williams and put his name forward to enterprising concert-giving bodies. The first of his works of any significance to have been performed in London seems to have been the *Heroic Elegy and Triumphal Epilogue* for orchestra, which Stanford conducted at the Royal College of Music on 5 March 1901. It was generally admired and he revised it in 1902. After more performances in England, the last known in Leeds in January 1905, nothing more was heard of it until the score surfaced in the United States in about 1970.

In 2006 it was performed, published and recorded. While clearly immature, it was recognisably Vaughan Williams in style and showed why three leading critics singled out the work and its composer for special mention in surveys of the British musical scene that they contributed to periodicals in 1903. An anonymous writer in *The Strad* mentioned Vaughan Williams's 'ideas of real beauty'.[1] W. Barclay Squire in *The Pilot* named Cyril Scott, Vaughan Williams and Cecil Forsyth as 'the most interesting' of England's promising composers and found Vaughan Williams the most interesting of all.[2] The *Heroic Elegy* had impressed him, as had the 'strong poetical feeling' of the setting of Rossetti's 'Silent Noon' which he had heard a few days earlier when it had its first performance. He anticipated the 'birth of a really individual school of English composers'.

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Edwin Evans in *The Musical Standard* wrote in detail of the *Heroic Elegy* and of how Vaughan Williams had been described to him as 'somewhat in the unhappy state of "not yet having found himself". . . .This was true enough', Evans wrote, but Vaughan Williams was 'rather painfully conscious' of it and 'has a disposition to be less satisfied with what he does than would be desirable as an incentive to push on . . . [He] has little reason for this extreme diffidence as there are amongst his works many which reveal a subtle personality with individual traits none the less calculated for being presented free of the remotest suggestion of blatancy.'[3] This was an extraordinarily prescient analysis of Vaughan Williams's attitude to his work for most of his life, and partly explains why he withdrew or took no further interest in his chamber works of the first decade of the twentieth century, which have been revived only since 2000. It is hard to understand why he apparently made no attempt to encourage any performance of his setting for soprano, chorus and orchestra of Swinburne's *The Garden of Proserpine* (1897–9), which, as its first performance in 2011 established, contains many traits of the mature composer. Perhaps he took his eye off the ball after 1903 when he began to collect folksongs in earnest and also agreed to edit what became *The English Hymnal*.

The opinions quoted above demonstrate that it was more than the popularity of his song 'Linden Lea', which was published in 1902, that made his name mean something in musical circles. The 1904 *Songs of Travel* soon went into the repertoire of baritones seeking something new but accessible for their recitals. *Toward the Unknown Region*, his setting of words by Whitman for chorus and orchestra, was chosen for the 1907 Leeds Festival where it was clamorously received. The music critic of *The Times* was moved to describe it as the 'perfect maturity of his genius' and to rank Vaughan Williams, who was thirty-five, as 'the foremost of the younger generation'.[4] Vaughan Williams had advanced to this eminence in the space of fewer than ten years, at a time when Bantock, Bridge and several others were writing fine works. But he was still dissatisfied with his music. If he had been writing reports on himself he would often have used the phrase 'Could do better'. His solution was a crash course of lessons in 1907–8 with the French composer Maurice Ravel, after which he never looked back. In the period from 1908 to 1914 he composed, or completed, the String Quartet in G minor, *On Wenlock Edge*, music for *The Wasps*, *A Sea Symphony*, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, *Five Mystical Songs*, the Phantasy Quintet, the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, folksong arrangements, incidental music for plays at Stratford-upon-Avon and *A London Symphony*. He went to war leaving an opera, *Hugh the Drover*, in vocal score, and the orchestral rhapsody *The Lark Ascending* in an unrevised

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violin and piano version. In spite of the composer's tinkering between 1918 and 1934 with the score of *A London Symphony*, this ambitious work, a success at its first performance in 1914, kept its place in the repertory. This symphony was the first to reach the United States of America when it was played in Chicago, Boston and New York during 1920–1.[5] It was championed by Frederick Stock in Chicago, who programmed it in six out of ten seasons during the 1920s, and three times in the 1930s; it was similarly popular in New York. It is not clear exactly when Vaughan Williams's music was first introduced to the USA, but it is probable that one of the *Songs of Travel* was included in recitals given by visiting singers such as Harry Plunket Greene, who toured the country in 1905. The impact of the song-cycle *On Wenlock Edge* for tenor and piano quintet (1909) can be documented: it was performed in Boston in 1919, and Eric DeLamarter, Assistant Conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, arranged the work for performances with the orchestra in the 1919–20 season. The success of *A London Symphony* probably lay behind the invitation Vaughan Williams received to conduct his new symphony, the *Pastoral*, at the Norfolk Music Festival in Connecticut on 7 June 1922, only a few months after its premiere in London on 22 January. This festival had been founded in the 1890s by Carl Stoeckel, a wealthy music-lover (Vaughan Williams called him 'my millionaire') who had persuaded Sibelius to be his guest composer in 1914 and to conduct the first performance of *The Oceanides*. Stoeckel lavished hospitality on Vaughan Williams and Adeline. In a letter to her sister Cordelia Curle, Adeline wrote that 'Ralph feels a little restive from a surfeit of kindness!. . . Meals are too rich and wine flows all the time!'[6] The growth of the composer's American reputation was further stimulated by the release in 1925 of one of the first recordings of his music, on the Aeolian label, which featured the ballet *Old King Cole* (1923) conducted by the composer himself. In 1926 he provided the score of *On Christmas Night*, a masque with dancing, singing and miming, freely adapted by Adolph Bolm and Vaughan Williams from Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. This was first performed in Chicago by the Bolm Ballet on 26 December 1926 conducted by Eric DeLamarter, who possibly had commissioned it. If so, this was a unique occurrence; Vaughan Williams was asked on several other occasions to accept an American commission, notably by the Library of Congress and Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge in 1926, but he never accepted. Curiously, however, this awakening of American interest in Vaughan Williams's music in the mid-1920s did not include what might have been regarded as his 'American works': neither of his two most ambitious Whitman settings from the first decade of the century, *Toward the Unknown Region* (1907) and the great *Sea Symphony* (1909)

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were widely performed, despite the fact that no American composer had yet identified themselves strongly with this poet's mystical vision of democracy.

But if *A London Symphony* opened doors for the composer on both sides of the Atlantic, the next symphony, the *Pastoral*, first performed in 1922 in London, gave Vaughan Williams his first taste of an antagonism towards his style. Although Samuel Langford, the *Manchester Guardian's* critic, hailed it at once as 'among the masterpieces of the time',[7] the majority of critics were less perceptive and fastened only on what its title seemed to imply. They looked for folksongs where none existed. Nobody at that date connected it with the war which had ended only three years earlier and in which Vaughan Williams had served. They looked for larks ascending and the tranquillity of the Cotswold landscape. Sir Hugh Allen, director of the Royal College of Music, was reminded of 'VW rolling over and over in a ploughed field on a wet day'. And Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock) likened the symphony to 'a cow looking over a gate'. Years later Elisabeth Lutyens coined the phrase 'the cowpat school' to denigrate English works of a pastoral nature. Holst and Herbert Howells admired the *Pastoral* and noticed its darker side, but no one noticed that it was a 'war requiem' and not 'lambkins frisking' (Vaughan Williams's phrase). The spectral 'Last Post' in the second movement and the girl's lamenting voice in the finale were not noticed until well after the end of the Second World War.[8]

Although this chapter is mainly concerned with the last phase of Vaughan Williams's life, study of the earlier years shows that his changes of style even disconcerted many of his admirers. His desire to explore, even if it led him into strange byways, resulted in 1925 in one of his most experimental and also sensuous compositions, *Flos Campi*, which for want of a better word he described as a suite for solo viola, small chorus and small orchestra. The chorus is wordless and each of the six movements is headed by a quotation in Latin from the Song of Solomon. The music has an erotic flavour deriving, as it is now known, from Vaughan Williams's passion for a Royal College of Music student. But one could be forgiven for assuming a religious context, as many listeners obviously did. For a performance at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert on 3 November 1927, two years after its premiere, Vaughan Williams supplied a programme note in which he said that he had 'discovered that most people were not well enough acquainted with the Vulgate (or perhaps even its English equivalent) to enable them to complete for themselves the quotations from the "Canticum Cantorum", indications of which are the mottoes at the head of each movement of the Suite'. Even the title and the source of the quotations gave rise to misunderstanding:

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> The title 'Flos Campi' was taken by some to connote an atmosphere of 'buttercups and daisies', whereas in reality 'Flos Campi' is the Vulgate equivalent of 'Rose of Sharon' (*Ego Flos Campi, et Lilium Convallium*, I am the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the valleys). The Biblical source of the quotations also gave rise to the idea that the music had an ecclesiastical basis. This was not the intention of the composer.[9]

This work puzzled H. C. Colles, the music critic of *The Times*. In his review of the first performance he complained that Vaughan Williams had 'wilfully surrounded the flowers of his musical thought with a thorny hedge of riddles . . . One may be a little irritated by the surface eccentricities of a very sane mind, but one cannot listen for long without being assured of the sanity.'[10] In a further article, Colles raised objections to the use of a wordless chorus because the melody, sung simply as 'Ah', lacked the eloquence of the same melody played on Lionel Tertis's viola. Moreover, the references to the Song of Solomon, 'whether given seriously or not, are certainly not explanatory. He has, rather, wilfully raised barriers in the minds of his hearers which the music itself may not be strong enough to sweep away.'[11] He even suggested that the work would benefit from revision and expansion. Another view of this composition was that of the composer and critic Cecil Gray who found *Flos Campi* to be music of a very intimate and subjective order, devoid of any programmatic implications. 'In this work Vaughan Williams seems to have acquired a sureness of touch and a concision which had hitherto been lacking in his art without thereby impairing the apparent spontaneity which has always characterized it.'[12] Gray objected to the use of the word 'sincerity' as the highest praise for Vaughan Williams's music. It was a negative virtue possessed more often by mediocrities. 'Almost alone today, he is entirely without self-consciousness and has the courage to write simply as he feels, without misgivings. He is not afraid to write the kind of music that anybody could have written, with the paradoxical result that he has evolved a more personal style than almost any other composer in this country.' Another composer, Joseph Holbrooke, in a book published in 1925, attributed Vaughan Williams's failings to his having had

> a fairly smooth path. . . There is no overwhelming horror ever felt in the music of this composer. . . There is no splendid uncontrollable passion in him or his music to be discerned or felt. . . The only misgiving one may have with the dreamer like Vaughan Williams is whether he can hold his own with the men who feel savagely, who feel enormously, who feel very very deeply on all things and willy-nilly put it into their music. There is a heavy suspicion to many when any artist meets favour from the academics in power. Vaughan Williams has had this huge misfortune. His art pleases the dull ones of our profession.[13]

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Vaughan Williams would have recognized the social envy which lay behind Holbrooke's array of chips on his shoulder, and he would have ignored it.

Of more concern to him was the lack of sympathy shown by his close friend Gustav Holst, whose C*horal Symphony* to words by Keats had its first performances on 7 October 1925 at the Leeds Festival and in London on 29 October. The two composers, friends since 1895, had shown each other their compositions from the earliest stages and had been fearlessly honest in their mutual criticisms. Yet Vaughan Williams could only muster 'cold admiration' for this latest work, while admitting that the Leeds chorus's performance had been poor. He had not wanted

> to get up & embrace everyone & then get drunk like I did after the H. of J. [*Hymn of Jesus*]. . . I couldn't bear to think that I was going to 'drift apart' from you musically speaking . . . so I shall live in faith till I have heard it again several times and then I shall find out what a bloody fool I was not to see it all first time.[14]

Holst's reply was to confess to a similar response to *Flos Campi* which he had not been able to 'get hold of at all' and was therefore 'disappointed with it and me. But I'm not disappointed in *Flos*'s composer because he has not repeated himself. Therefore it is probably either an improvement or something that will lead to one.' Other friends were also puzzled by *Flos Campi* (had they forgotten that Vaughan Williams had studied with Ravel?) and in the following year they were baffled again by his oratorio *Sancta Civitas*. Today, in *Flos Campi* the keen listener can hear anticipations of *Riders to the Sea* (1925–32) and the *Sinfonia Antartica* (1949–52). Nothing in the *Pastoral Symphony* had led listeners to expect the exotic harmonies of these works. The neoclassicism and back-to-Bach style of the *Concerto Accademico*, as the Violin Concerto was at first known in 1925, were other signs that it was never going to be easy to pin down this composer. Had Vaughan Williams's contemporaries looked into his sketchbooks between 1926 and 1930, they would have found ideas for a piano concerto, a Christmas masque, more Housman songs, a musical comedy, a Shakespeare opera, an opera based on Synge and a Blake ballet (or masque), not to mention work on *Songs of Praise* and *The Oxford Book of Carols*.

The 1920s were his most fertile period. During the course of the decade he became recognized by musicians as the obvious successor to Elgar, but when the post of Master of the King's Music became vacant in 1924, Elgar was appointed. The royal household brought forward the name of Vaughan Williams but he was turned down as not being as well known by the general public as Elgar (which was probably true); and he refused

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the appointment after Elgar died in 1934 but filled the vacancy in the Order of Merit in 1935. Vaughan Williams had his champions among British conductors but his works were not as frequently played as those by Elgar, even though Elgar was out of favour with academics and some critics. Moreover, there were newcomers in the field: Bax, Bliss and Howells represented the generation after Vaughan Williams, while Walton and Britten were the strongest contenders among those born in the twentieth century.

Vaughan Williams made his second visit, lasting two months, to the USA in the autumn of 1932 to give the Mary Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania.[15] His theme was 'National Music' (the eventual title of the published lectures), and it covered, among other things, the evolution of nationalism and the history of folksong. Vaughan Williams tactfully steered clear of his views on American contemporary music. We do not know how much of it he had heard. He does not mention Henry Cowell or Charles Ives, nor Aaron Copland. But he met and encouraged a young student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Samuel Barber, who played him his setting of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', a poem Vaughan Williams had begun to set in 1899 before abandoning the project. He heard the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. In Boston, Serge Koussevitzky asked him which of his own works he would like the orchestra to play; he chose the Tallis Fantasia because of the orchestra's renowned string section.

The year 1935 was to be a turning point for Vaughan Williams, when the harsh dissonance of his F minor Symphony (No. 4) burst upon a musical public which had not listened carefully enough to the way in which his music was developing in recent works such as *Sancta Civitas* (1923–5), the Piano Concerto (1926–31) and most of all *Job: A Masque for Dancing* (1930). Listeners and commentators are uncertain about the context of the F minor Symphony even after the passage of eighty years. A belief persists that it was a warning of the wrath to come after the rise of Hitler; yet Vaughan Williams began to write it in 1931, two years before the Nazis came to power in Germany, and he finished it early in 1935. The first performance was on 10 April when Adrian Boult conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The enthusiastic ovation was 'almost hysterical', one report stated. The critics generally welcomed the change of style as a divergence from his folksong period – 'no corduroy tunes', said Edwin Evans. H. C. Colles, music critic of *The Times*, mentioned the humour in the Scherzo.[16] Eric Blom, in the *Birmingham Post*, described Vaughan Williams as 'one of the most venturesome composers in Europe. The new symphony was as harshly and grimly compromising in its clashing

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dissonant polyphony as anything the youngest adventurer would dare to fling down on music paper.'

Although William McNaught thought the symphony was 'masterly', this judgement demanded first that 'we grant the abandonment of the humanities'.[17] Harsher criticism came from Neville Cardus in the *Manchester Guardian*. For all his admiration of its parts, he could not believe that it was likely to be listened to twenty years from today. The music failed to warm the senses, Cardus wrote, or to enter the mind as an utterance of conviction. 'The content of Vaughan Williams's music . . . is respectably middle-class English, and the technique, as I have suggested, is old-fashioned, looked at from standards unashamedly modern.'[18] Cardus was echoing reservations expressed by Copland after he had attended a performance of the *Benedicite* in London in 1931. 'Inherent banality' and 'bourgeois grandeur' were two of Copland's verdicts. Vaughan Williams, he decided, was 'the kind of local composer who stands for something great in the musical development of his own country but whose actual musical contribution cannot bear exportation. Besides, he is essentially not modern at all . . . His is the music of a gentleman farmer, noble in intention but dull.'[19] Nevertheless, Copland was in a minority among American musicians at the time, and it was the Fourth Symphony that accelerated assessment of Vaughan Williams in the USA after 1935. Several American conductors championed the work, notably Dimitri Mitropoulos and Leonard Bernstein, both of whom recorded it with the New York Philharmonic.

It is noteworthy that reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic made little reference to the violence of the music and there is no attempt to draw a parallel with international events. Colles had asked, 'Is its daring and its gaiety really new, or does it hark back to something which Vaughan Williams left on one side with the works of pre-war days, an old impulse newly revived?'[20] Personal reactions from friends were telling. Elizabeth Trevelyan, wife of the writer R. C. Trevelyan, heard 'your poisonous temper in the scherzo'. The folksong scholar Maud Karpeles confessed to having 'missed the clue' to the symphony. 'Someone said it should have been called "Europe 1935" and that is rather what it conveyed to me.' Nearly two years later Vaughan Williams wrote to his friend R. G. Longman, the publisher, who had heard no beauty in the work. Vaughan Williams replied: 'I *do* think it is beautiful – not that I did not *mean* it to be beautiful because it reflects unbeautiful times . . . I wrote it not as a picture of anything external – e.g. the state of Europe – but simply because it occurred to me like this – I can't explain why'. He had written earlier in the letter that 'I am not at all sure that I like it myself *now*. All I know is that it is what I wanted to do *at the time*.'[21] As is often quoted, he said at a rehearsal of the symphony: 'I don't know whether

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I like it, but it's what I meant'. Asked what it really did mean, his answer was 'F minor'. On another occasion: 'I wish I didn't dislike my own stuff so much when I hear it – it all sounds so *incompetent*'.[22]

As he told me on one occasion, he did not like the practice of attaching 'meaning' to works. But his Fourth and Sixth Symphonies have attracted many theories. Of the Fourth, the most plausible theory is that he began it after reading a review and description in *The Times* of a performance of a twentieth-century work (possibly Webern's Symphony) at a modern music festival. He certainly used Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as a model. The resemblances are several, notably the brief motifs on which the whole work is founded and the linking passage between the Scherzo and Finale. His widow Ursula favours this genesis in her biography and adds that the symphony was also a self-portrait.[23]

Fourteen years separated the *Pastoral* and Fourth Symphonies. By now, Vaughan Williams was regarded as the leader of English music: Elgar's successor as the musical spokesman for the nation. Although he held no official post, it was true that no state occasions, celebratory or commemorative, could be imagined without a work by Vaughan Williams. His 1936 cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem* was an unconcealed warning of the dangers now obviously brewing in Europe. When war came in 1939, several of his works were found to be in tune with the mood of the times. He found a new outlet as a contribution to the war effort by writing in 1940 his first score for the cinema, *49th Parallel*. It was followed by four more during the war and several afterwards. He enjoyed the disciplines imposed by film-making.

Widespread celebration of his seventieth birthday in 1942 left no doubt of the British musical public's affection for him. The principal work-in-progress on his desk had been started in 1938 when he had decided that his ongoing plan, first materializing in 1906, for an opera based on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* would come to nothing. Themes intended for it were now commandeered for his Fifth Symphony, which was completed and first performed in 1943. The lyricism and serenity of this work were at the opposite extreme from the furies of the Fourth. It is not fanciful to say that the arrival into his life in 1938 of Ursula Wood (later Ursula Vaughan Williams), thirty-nine years his junior, was a catharsis which had a profound effect on him in every respect. She sent him a scenario based on Spenser's *Epithalamion* from which they devised a masque called *The Bridal Day*. Plans to perform it for the English Folk Dance and Song Society were a casualty of the war and it reappeared in 1951 adapted for television. Mrs Wood also assisted him in choosing the Shakespeare text for the *Serenade to Music*, which he composed for Sir Henry Wood's golden jubilee as a conductor. This masterpiece, written for

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sixteen solo singers associated with Wood, was never merely a *pièce d'occasion*. Its exquisite harmonies and luminous orchestration have endeared it to performers and audiences ever since the first performance in October 1938 and it takes its place among his greatest achievements.

This work, and the *Five Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'*, written for the New York World's Fair in 1939, must have reassured his admirers that the Fourth Symphony was a development of an existing strand rather than a new path. It looked back, not forward. The Fifth Symphony, coming as it did in the midst of war and just when he had reached three-score-years-and-ten, could have been taken as a benediction, a farewell, 'Now lettest thou thy servant'. It is dedicated (without permission) to Sibelius, whose Fifth Symphony also begins with a horn call, and it explores conflicts of keys and tonal/modal contrasts as thoroughly as the Fourth becomes a dissertation on semitones. The Fifth is 'about' ambiguous tonality fixated on D and G, but it is unlikely that one would listen exclusively to this musical argument and forget *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the strongly programmatic undercurrent. The nostalgic Oboe Concerto (1942–4) and the Second String Quartet (1942–4) are side-shoots of the symphony. The concerto in particular is a bigger work emotionally than it may have seemed at first.

In the last fifteen years of Vaughan Williams's life, the contrasts between the lyricism he had always been able to summon to his aid and the sense of musical citizenship he had described in 1912 became even more apparent.[24] Film music and the music he wrote for the coronations in 1937 and 1953 were a part of this. He was by now the 'grand old man' – a term he hated – of English music, revered not only as composer but as teacher, conductor, writer and lecturer. He encouraged some of his young friends to call him 'Uncle Ralph' and this misled some people into thinking that his approach to music tended sometimes to be avuncular and that the later works could be regarded as *péchés de vieillesse*. Some composers were more wary: William Walton, for instance, who met him in April 1942 while visiting Oxford University Press's London office. Norman Peterkin of OUP described the encounter (when Vaughan Williams left Peterkin's office) in a letter to Sir Humphrey Milford, Publisher to the University of Oxford:

> Walton came into my room remarking 'Well, the old pussy cat has gone at last.' I suppose I must have shown some astonishment for he went on to say that 'of course V.W. was a really big pussy with very sharp claws' and was 'the biggest intriguer of the lot'; that it was astonishing how nobody noticed it (except W.W. apparently) and how he managed to get away with it as a result.[25]

Between 1944 and 1958 Vaughan Williams wrote four symphonies staggeringly different in style and mood. He told a friend that he had so

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much music in his head that he knew he would not have time to write it all down. While he was completing the Eighth Symphony in 1955, he wrote to me: 'I hope it is going to be all right. But I feel rather nervous. . . At my age . . . I cannot afford to let out anything 2nd rate – which is not really straight from the fountain-head'.[26] Those who comforted themselves with the thought of the Fifth Symphony as a summing-up of the Vaughan Williams they knew and loved were in for a rude awakening when the Sixth Symphony was announced for 1948. He had begun it in 1944. The themes, or motifs, which open the second and fourth movements were based on music written in 1943 for the film *The Flemish Farm* but not used. The first performance was given in the Royal Albert Hall on 21 April 1948 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. It had been played through months earlier on two pianos and (on 16 December 1947) by the orchestra. After this performance, Vaughan Williams's friend, the émigré composer Robert Müller-Hartmann wrote to express 'the overwhelming impression' it had made on him. 'It seems even to transcend your symphonies in F and D [Fourth and Fifth].'[27] The public and critical response to the work was the zenith of his whole career. Only Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* in 1945 had aroused comparable excitement. The symphony's hundredth performance was given by the Hallé Orchestra on 6 July 1950. In the previous two years it had been performed in America, Australia, Holland and elsewhere. It was recorded by HMV on 78 rpm discs in February 1949 and the revised Scherzo was later re-recorded with the same catalogue number.

Most attention was paid to the Finale, which is marked to be played *pianissimo* throughout. 'The music', says the composer's programme note, 'drifts about contrapuntally, with occasional whiffs of theme' – after which it fades into nothingness.[28] Not unexpectedly there was widespread speculation about the programme behind this mysterious movement, which follows a tempestuous opening allegro, a sinister slow movement and a jazzy scherzo. It is 'like nothing else in music', wrote Richard Capell in *The Daily Telegraph*. The symphony, he decided, 'takes a new direction. It will challenge every hearer . . . The music says that the soul of man can endure pain and face the thought of a remoteness beyond the outermost of the planets.'[29] Strangely, he did not mention 'Neptune' in Holst's *The Planets* as a possible source of musical inspiration for the finale. Frank Howes in *The Times* drew nearer to an analogy with the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. An annotator of the symphony fifty years hence, he averred, 'will certainly relate the symphony to the experiences of war, its challenges, its sinister import for ultimate values, its physical bombardment even. But what will he make of the ghostly epilogue? Here the composer seems to be seeking not answers but the right questions to ask of human

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experience.'[30] Howes returned to his theme in a review of the work in August 1949 in which he described it as a 'War Symphony'.[31] This brought him a personal reply from Vaughan Williams: 'I dislike that implied connotation very much. Of course there is nothing to prevent any writer from expressing his opinion to that effect in a notice. But it is quite a different thing, this reference to a supposed title as if it was official on my part.'[32]

A critic of a younger generation, Desmond Shawe-Taylor, referred to Vaughan Williams's 'serious and courageous glimpse into the future, to have meditated on first and last things with a grasp and profundity worthy of Beethoven'. This was nearer the mark, as can be deduced from the composer's letter to me about the finale dated 22 January 1956: 'I do NOT BELIEVE in meanings and mottoes, as you know, but I think we can get in words nearer to the substance of my last movement in "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."'[33] The critic and scholar Deryck Cooke wrote some years later of the effect on him of the first performance as 'nothing short of cataclysmic'. He cited

> the violence of the opening and the turmoil of the whole first movement; the sinister mutterings of the slow movement, with that almost unbearable passage in which the trumpets and drums batter out an ominous rhythm, louder and louder, and will not leave off; the vociferous uproar of the Scherzo and the grotesque triviality of the Trio; and, most of all, the slow finale, *pianissimo* throughout, devoid of all warmth and life, a hopeless wandering through a dead world ending literally in *niente* (Vaughan Williams's favourite word for a final fade-out of any kind) – nothingness . . . I was no more able to applaud than at the end of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*.[34]

In the 1940s Vaughan Williams's music for films had undoubtedly spread his reputation further in the United States. Besides the symphonies, smaller works such as *The Lark Ascending* were heard often in broadcasts; more interestingly, the American premiere of Britten's *Peter Grimes* – the musical sensation of 1945 – at Tanglewood in 1946, conducted by Bernstein, was preceded by Vaughan Williams's one-act opera *Riders to the Sea*. But it was the excitement over the Sixth Symphony in 1948 that raised his American reputation to a new height, and it continued to grow over the subsequent decade. A survey in the periodical *Musical America* reported that in the 1956–7 concert season American orchestras had played the music of Vaughan Williams more than that of any other foreign-born twentieth-century composer except Stravinsky and Hindemith; it placed Vaughan Williams ahead of Bartók, Barber and Shostakovich, and equal with Gershwin and Copland. In the same periodical's report on the 1951–2

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season, with thirty-one performances he surpassed Copland (sixteen performances) by a margin of nearly two to one.[35] In equivalent surveys throughout the 1950s, his performance tallies were ahead of those of Bartók, Shostakovich and, among Americans, Roy Harris, who was then at the height of his popularity. But after Vaughan Williams's death in 1958, this number of performances declined sharply. Conductors such as Bernard Herrmann, André Previn and Leonard Slatkin tended to conduct his music while abroad rather than in American concert halls. Surprisingly, there is no reference to his impact on American musical life in any of the primary texts on the history of American music published from 1958 to the present day. Only after the mid-1980s was there serious research on Vaughan Williams (and indeed other British composers) in the United States.

This is to run ahead somewhat, however. In the years after the war there is little doubt that Vaughan Williams and Britten were the leading living English composers. The decades of the 1940s and 1950s saw a marked decline in Elgar's reputation. Of course he had a host of admirers and his music kept its place in programmes because most of the English conductors of the day championed his music – Adrian Boult, John Barbirolli, Malcolm Sargent and others. But among many critics and scholars, he was considered to be outdated and was tarred with the adjective 'imperialist'. Of course, Vaughan Williams had shown that he could write patriotic music and martial tunes, as a list of his wartime compositions shows – *Six Choral Songs to be Sung in Time of War*; *England, My England*; 'A Call to the Free Nations'; 'The Airmen's Hymn'; *Thanksgiving for Victory*, later retitled *A Song of Thanksgiving*. And there was the film music. But for the most part he avoided the kinds of associations that would come to dog Elgar in the 1950s, as the patriotism of the Edwardian era was increasingly vilified.

Before he began to sketch the Sixth Symphony, Vaughan Williams returned to the task that had tantalized him since 1906 – making an opera from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Convinced it would never reach the stage, he used some of its themes in the Fifth Symphony. At some point in 1942, the BBC asked him for incidental music for a radio adaptation by Edward Sackville-West of Bunyan's book. This was the stimulus he needed. The result was a major score comprising thirty-eight sections. Some of it was already written for the opera, some of it (with references to the Tallis Fantasia) linked to the Reigate performance of over thirty-five years earlier. Much of the radio music was excluded from the final version of the opera (or 'morality'), on which he resumed work from 1944 to 1949 and which would be produced at Covent Garden in 1951.[36] None of his previous operas had been staged at the Royal Opera House. But 1951 had been designated for the Festival of Britain, which the government had

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planned as a nationwide celebration of the arts and recovery from the war. Most events were in London, which opened the new Royal Festival Hall for the occasion. English music was a central theme. Covent Garden decided on *The Pilgrim's Progress* as its chief offering, with the premiere fixed for 26 April. The opera was received politely rather than with the fervour the composer's friends anticipated. Capell in *The Daily Telegraph* dismissed the production as 'anti-theatrical'. Musically, he thought, fulfilment had come in the symphonies and in the ballet *Job*. 'The admirable score', as he rather coolly described it, 'will find its niche, but this will not be in the theatre.' In *The Times* Frank Howes took the opposite line: 'The stage can show the inner conflict of principles as well as the outer conflict of action'. He wrote of the 'astonishing ringing of changes on diatonic tunes and simple triads that lifts the heart to something beyond the power of language'.[37]

No one could pretend that it had been anything but a failure. It was dropped as soon as the second set of performances in the 1951–2 season was over. It received only one performance, at Leeds on 12 July 1951, in the provincial tour which Covent Garden undertook every year. Vaughan Williams was deeply hurt. He said to Ursula Wood: 'They don't like it and they won't like it and perhaps they never will like it because it hasn't got a love story or any big duets, and it's not like the operas they are used to, but it's the sort of opera I wanted to write, and there it is'.[38] Happily, a production at Cambridge in 1954 enabled him to see something much closer to his vision. Opinions of the work were, except in a few cases, either ambivalent or lukewarm.

For the coronation in June 1953 of Queen Elizabeth II, he contributed an unaccompanied part-song, 'Silence and Music', with words by Ursula Vaughan Williams (as she had become since February 1953), to *A Garland for the Queen*, in which British composers and ten poets paid tribute to the new monarch. It was dedicated to the memory of Stanford and his 'Bluebird', beside which it is not unworthy to stand. Feeling that the congregation were overlooked in the coronation service, he made a grand ceremonial arrangement ('a mess-up' he called it) of the *Old Hundredth Psalm Tune* ('All People that on Earth Do Dwell') for mixed choir, congregation, orchestra and organ. The large brass section was to include 'all available trumpets' which made an unforgettable sound in the Abbey on 2 June. But his most treasurable contribution to the service was the exquisite unaccompanied motet 'O Taste and See', the quintessence of his hymnal style, music with the innocence and timeless freshness of 'The Woodcutter's Song' he had added to *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

From the *Pilgrim* premiere we can date the beginning of a falling-off in esteem for Vaughan Williams as a composer, though not as the acknowledged

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head of the profession, as the tributes to him on reaching his eightieth birthday in 1952 testify. Cardus found the right note for the occasion. He wrote:

> His music is an atmosphere. It does not woo the impressionable senses, it does not satisfy all the moods of pleasure-loving and sinful man. The greatest of it comes from a certain order of our national way of living, independent and natural as a growth out of the earth, refreshed by all the weathers and humours and dispositions of the reserved but romantic English.[39]

Yet as he began his ninth decade, Vaughan Williams became more adventurous than ever before. One is tempted to think that his obvious employment of a richer and more exotic instrumentation stemmed from two causes: the film companies' willingness to employ larger numbers of orchestral players, and, for all that he missed Holst's advice, perhaps a feeling of slight relief that his friend's candid criticisms were no longer on tap. He became interested in the solo capacities of such instruments as the harmonica, writing a Romance in D♭ in 1952 for the American virtuoso of the instrument, Larry Adler, whom he consulted about its capabilities. Shortly after giving one of the smallest instruments a place in the sun, he did the same (although in a less original manner) for one of the largest, the bass tuba, in a three-movement Concerto in F minor, first performed in London in 1954. This piece quickly established itself; and its slow movement, bearing the title 'Romanza', always a signal that the music was of special significance to him, was arranged as a separate piece for euphonium, bassoon, cello and piano. He also wrote several of those short and exquisite works, like the *Serenade to Music*, which seem always to have existed and rank him with the best of Purcell, Tallis and Byrd. These include the *Three Shakespeare Songs* of 1951 for unaccompanied mixed chorus, the second of which contains the lines which inspired the Sixth Symphony finale: 'we are such stuff as dreams are made on'. Other works of this period which showed that there was no risk of his drying up include the cantata *Folksongs of the Four Seasons* (1949), written for the Women's Institutes, the ill-advised revision of the Piano Concerto for two pianos (1946), the *Fantasia (quasi variazione) on the 'Old 104th' Psalm Tune* (premiered at the Three Choirs Festival in 1950), and the Concerto Grosso for strings (1950) which catered for various standards of playing among schoolchildren. These were the kind of works he was happy to supply as part of his credo that music was not only for the technical wizards, but for everyone. One haunting work, which slipped out almost unnoticed in 1949, was *An Oxford Elegy*, a setting for speaker, small chorus and orchestra of extracts from Matthew Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis*. This is music to rank with the *Serenade to Music* and has gradually

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become recognized as such. Ernest Newman, never a whole-hearted – or even half-hearted – admirer, complained in the *Sunday Times* that Vaughan Williams had deliberately distorted Arnold's poems for his own purposes in order to give extra emphasis to the poet's emotion for Oxford.[40] That will not bother most listeners to this deeply moving work.

The first substantial book devoted to Vaughan Williams and his music was published in 1950.[41] It was written by his former publisher Hubert Foss and gave a non-technical summary of his works, relating them to the English literary tradition. It contained also the composer's contribution in the shape of his 'chapter of musical autobiography' which since has been printed elsewhere and, for musicians, is as quotable as *Hamlet*. Vaughan Williams thanked him for sending him a copy of the first edition and added: 'I am quite overpowered by the affection and thought in your book. I feel hopelessly unable to live up to it.'[42] Seven months later he sent Foss a list of over thirty amendments and corrections. These included wrong datings of the Tallis Fantasia, which were repeated by other writers and in *Grove's Dictionary* for some years (and sometimes still are).

Since the end of the war the climate of British music had changed as the old gave place to the new. For the younger generation, Vaughan Williams now represented an entrenched traditionalism which also claimed Britten although few of his followers noticed it. For instance, Britten's views on the composer's place in society are not very different from those expressed by Vaughan Williams in 1912 in 'Who Wants the English Composer?'[43] The 1950s were a time for the reappraisal of reputations and the exploration of avant-garde composers native and foreign. There was a strong reaction against late Romanticism. Serialism was all the rage. The music of Strauss, Rachmaninov, Elgar, Sibelius, Walton and many others of their ilk was disparaged by academics; and the music of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg was exalted despite its continuing unpopularity with the general concert-going public. It was no longer *de rigueur* that the conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra should be British. At the BBC itself the appointment in 1959 of William Glock as Director of Music was bad news for middle-of-the-road composers (although not quite as bad as has sometimes been made out). Britten was regarded as a special case, and Vaughan Williams's death in 1958 removed his personality from the scene but affected performance of his music much less than might have been expected.

From the vantage-point of sixty years later, one can pinpoint 1954 as the *annus horribilis* in which Vaughan Williams's reputation took its first serious knocks. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Sinfonia Antartica* and the Christmas cantata *Hodie* were the works which began the critical slide. The opera, fruit of a life's work, was regarded as weak dramatically and

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static musically, while the symphony was . . . well, what was it? Re-hashed film music or an old man playing games with unusual instruments? At the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester in September 1954, he conducted the first performance of *Hodie*, a large-scale work for soprano, tenor and baritone, mixed chorus, boys' voices and orchestra. The text was compiled by the composer from the Bible, prayer books, Coverdale, Milton, Hardy, Drummond, Ursula Wood and others. The music belongs in style to various periods of Vaughan Williams's career, and those who loved it from the start will have agreed with the critic and author J. H. Elliot who wrote in the *Hallé Magazine* in December 1954 that there was as much vigour of spirit and execution as there was in his music of twenty years earlier.

> But it has something else which I can only call the fullness of wisdom – spiritual tranquillity that is not mere resignation and a simplicity that is grander than any intimacy of performance or bold and exultant splendour of expression. . . . It is the music of old age in the truest sense, the final maturity of a great mind. It breathes a deep peace of soul.[44]

No other critic came as near as that to assessing the true nature of this still-undervalued masterpiece, but the general reaction was favourable. However, the periodical *Musical Opinion* in its April and May issues of 1955 asked the critic Donald Mitchell for a survey of Vaughan Williams's work.[45] He took aim at *Hodie*, which he regarded as 'grossly over-praised and grossly under-composed'. He continued:

> If this is the kind of music that rouses cries of exaltation, then our musical culture is in a worse condition than I thought possible. Of course, a good deal of the whooping is positively Pavlovian . . . There is a level below which 'directness' and 'forthrightness' of utterance – qualities for which Vaughan Williams is praised – deteriorate into a downright and damaging primitivity . . . It is doubly damaging when his contemporaries are so blind (or deaf perhaps) that they mistake patent coarseness as evidence of genius.[46]

Mitchell then turned his guns on the collection of writings by Vaughan Williams published by OUP in 1954 with the title *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony*. He described them as 'often reminiscent in their creaking humour of that arch-comical bore, though brilliant analyst, Sir Donald Tovey'. They led him to Vaughan Williams's references to his own 'amateurish technique' which had

> more than a grain of uncomfortable truth . . . When listening to a work of the character of *Hodie*, where, I suspect, Vaughan Williams's compositional conscience was at a low ebb, it suddenly becomes very noticeable how clumsy his technique can be, and how much he relies on his inimitable

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> idiosyncrasies to pull him through. At the same time one is reminded, rather disturbingly, of many a more masterful composition of his where his technique has not seemed fully adequate to his needs . . . The composer who pioneers in the national field loses that very freedom of artistic expression which his pioneering activities confer upon his successors. In a sense he becomes the first – perhaps only – victim of his revolution . . . I believe Vaughan Williams will be regarded as a major minor composer . . . His very real and personal genius will keep his music alive, though I fear the limitations which circumscribe it will become increasingly apparent.[47]

Mitchell was shrewd in citing Vaughan Williams as a victim of his own pioneering. The next generation of English composers – Britten in particular – had embraced Austro-German developments just as Vaughan Williams had immersed himself in folksong and French influences. But the new English generation was fixated on Schoenberg and his followers dedicated to atonality, many of whom had settled in Britain after the war and had penetrated British musical life at many points, notably the BBC. Vaughan Williams had no time for atonality – 'the worst kind of German music' – and did not endear himself to its followers by his contribution to the symposium in *Music & Letters* on the death of Schoenberg in 1951: 'Schoenberg meant nothing to me – but as he apparently meant a lot to a lot of other people I daresay it is all my fault'.[48]

The principal composition of this period was the *Sinfonia Antartica*, first performed in January 1953. This was the outcome of the music he had written in 1947–8 for the film *Scott of the Antarctic* which was first shown in November 1948. The story of Captain Robert Scott's expedition to the South Pole in 1912, which ended with the death of Scott and his four companions, seized Vaughan Williams's imagination. Man against nature was a theme he had explored in other works. He was full of admiration for their heroism but was shocked by the inefficiency with which the expedition was planned. He decided in 1947 to expand the film music into a symphony in which he could also indulge his taste for illustrative orchestral colouring. This had always been a trait – the imitation of mouth-organs in *A London Symphony*, for example, and the gathering of birds in *Five Tudor Portraits*. The women's voices in the howling Antarctic winds were foreshadowed by the sea-machine and the keening in *Riders to the Sea* and by Apollyon's followers in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The icy bleakness of the Antarctic landscape was akin to the finale of the Sixth Symphony and to some of the 1946 music for the film *The Loves of Joanna Godden*.

The choice of this subject for a symphony aroused keen public interest. And it aroused critical scrutiny. Film music, even when written by Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Bliss, Walton, Britten, Malcolm Arnold or

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Vaughan Williams, bothered the critics. I remember the scorn and derision which were poured on William Alwyn's First Symphony at Cheltenham in 1950. He had composed much film music and so a straightforward symphony was highly suspect. Was *Antartica* a symphony or a tone poem? No one was quite sure. However, perhaps attitudes were changing and minds getting broader. One of the younger critics, Colin Mason in the *Manchester Guardian*, had no doubts. He singled out the work's 'masterly and completely unified symphonic form', its originality of design and the symphonic logic of the treatment of the material. He ended: 'Nothing could better demonstrate the rightness of his attitude to his art than the new symphony'.[49] Frank Howes was also firmly for the work, asserting that Vaughan Williams had broken new ground 'not in the fact that he uses a larger orchestra but that he has found in sheer sonority devoid of thematic significance a means of conveying his vision and placing it within a symphonic scheme'.[50]

It was Cardus in the *Manchester Guardian* who came nearest to the heart of the matter: 'The *Sinfonia Antartica* seems to me the most powerfully imaginative of all the composer's works ... For sheer brilliance, vividness and spontaneity in the moulding and releasing of tone, in a swift imaginative blending of instrumental colours, everything serving the composer's inner vision, Vaughan Williams has never equalled this latest of his scores.'[51] Yet despite appreciation of this nature, and although Vaughan Williams was riding high in public esteem and was revered by most of his colleagues, mutterings were to be heard from some critical outposts where a cooler wind was blowing. In continental Europe he was scarcely mentioned in academic circles and any opinion (when there was one) would most likely have been similar to Aaron Copland's quoted earlier. What could the *Five Tudor Portraits* mean in Paris? *Sinfonia Antartica* raised a few eyebrows: was the old boy beginning to be seduced by his own image? The answer in 1956 was the Eighth Symphony, his shortest and lightest, dedicated to John Barbirolli, dubbed 'Glorious John' by the composer after the first performance of *Antartica*. Its first sketches date from 1953. The four movements comprise a set of variations 'in search of a theme', a Scherzo for wind, a Cavatina for strings with a cello solo in tribute to the dedicatee (a cellist) and an exuberant Finale which required a large percussion section 'including all the "phones" and "spiels" known to the composer' (in fact, side drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, vibraphone, xylophone, glockenspiel, tubular bells, three tuned gongs and celesta). The symphony was enthusiastically received when Barbirolli conducted the first performance in Manchester on 2 May 1956, only a minority wondering if it was a concerto for orchestra. The critic Frank Howes suggested it might be better called a sinfonietta, but got short shrift

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from Vaughan Williams: 'I am not taking your advice', wrote the composer. 'I feel the thing is a symphony and it is going to remain one.'[52]

Colin Mason, in a long *Guardian* review, was the most perceptive of the critics. He thought the symphony did not quite satisfy

> as a complete musical form, as the *Antartica* satisfied those who listened for its form as well as for its antarcticness. Nor are all the sound-effects justified by any real musical significance . . . The first movement is most beautiful and original both in shape and content . . . What is also refreshing in this first movement is the modal variety and flexibility of the melodic line which are more elegant, easy and graceful in motion, less tied to his usual distinctive but rather lumpish modal formulae than any he has ever written and show him at 83 still extending his musical range. As this is the most sophisticated, civilized and universal music he has ever written, so the second movement is the wittiest . . . This movement made the audience laugh, and in the old days, when audiences knew their own mind and did not hesitate to express it, an immediate encore would have been demanded.[53]

No one has discovered a detailed subtext to the Eighth, though it has been suggested that the flute solo in the first variation of the opening movement relates to the 'human' music in the Intermezzo of *Antartica* and also to Holst's tune for the Remembrance Day hymn, 'O Valiant Hearts'.[54] Variations 2 to 5 were written first, which explains the 'searching for a theme'. An American critic, Paul Henry Lang, noted the resemblance of the principal theme of the *Cavatina* slow movement to the Passion chorale 'O Sacred Head'. Vaughan Williams replied: 'I was thinking about the slow movement and how I wanted a cello tune and it suddenly occurred to me how lovely that chorale would sound on the cellos so as far as I can remember, without deliberately adopting it, the two themes got mixed up in my mind with the result you know. I am quite unrepentant!'[55] Critical response to the symphony was on the whole favourable and friendly but with an overlay of patronizing surprise that a man of his age could write such youthful music and still be aware of contemporary trends, notably in his treatment of percussion. The public liked it and it was programmed in eight cities in Europe, including Vienna, within six months of its premiere. Stokowski conducted it in New York, and it also won the New York Critics' Circle award for the best new symphonic work performed there in 1956.

Vaughan Williams's reputation in America was at its zenith in the 1950s and his third (and last) visit was awaited like a musical state occasion. His friend the English baritone Keith Falkner, who was teaching at Cornell University, arranged a period of residence in Ithaca. Accompanied by his wife Ursula, Vaughan Williams sailed from Liverpool to New York early in October 1954. At Cornell he gave a series of lectures on *The Making of Music* (its published title) and some

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composition tutorials. After ten days he flew to Toronto to give a lecture. He had intended that this visit should be a holiday and he had to fight hard to keep it that way. He refused more invitations than he accepted, and at a party in his honour annoyed his publishers, Oxford University Press, by spending more time talking to ordinary people than to dignitaries.[56] He refused to appear on NBC television in a coast-to-coast interview, one of a series in which Einstein, Bertrand Russell and Carl Sandburg had previously appeared; he also declined an opportunity to conduct the New York Philharmonic in one of his works. But he had a long private talk with the *New York Times* critic Olin Downes, who had always admired his music. Explaining his attitude to these invitations, he wrote to the organizers: 'I fear I am being difficult, but we do want to enjoy ourselves in America, and that we definitely shall not do, our natures being what they are, if we are besieged by invitations to dinners and theatres and concerts. And I want my time which is not occupied by my duties at Cornell to be peaceful and quiet in order to see whether America will not stimulate me with new ideas.'[57] Before returning to London, he went to Yale University to receive the Howland Prize, which, thirty years earlier, had been awarded to Holst. At a dinner in New York before sailing, he met the composer William Schuman, and renewed his acquaintance with Samuel Barber.

No one could fail to admire the fertility of a composer on the eve of his eighty-fifth birthday who could produce a symphony as compelling as the Eighth, and it was soon known that a Ninth was on the way. This had its first performance in London on 2 April 1958 and was not well received except by a small minority. The gist of more than one critical notice was 'composing for the sake of composing'. Words like 'silly' and 'asinine' (the second movement) had never before been applied to his music. His own comment to a friend the next morning was 'I don't think they can quite forgive me for still being able to do it at my age'.[58]

Once more it was Cardus who fully appreciated what he had heard. Writing in the *Manchester Guardian* he called the symphony 'an astonishing production'. He continued:

> Much of the technical formula is familiar; his music is much an art of cadence, with blocks of harmony the supporting pillars. But this Ninth Symphony is not repetitive of the content of the immediately preceding ones. The changes go deeper than the externals of instrumentation – saxophones and flugelhorn, and so on. The texture of musical brainwork is different and more direct, subtle yet simple . . . Vaughan Williams's great achievement has been to dispense with the current musical coin of the period of his basic culture and maturity and to modulate to the contemporary tone and language without obvious iconoclasms. He is of our period and yet he is full of harvest – which means to say that he is a master.[59]

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In what were to prove to be the last weeks of his life he went on holiday, revisited favourite places in the West Country, attended performances of his opera *Sir John in Love* and went to the Proms (where the Ninth was performed). He also began to compose an opera with Ursula as his librettist. Most of the obituary tributes acknowledged that he was a great composer and a remarkable man. Respect and affection were everywhere expressed. But as so often happens after a composer's death, a dip in his reputation and in the frequency of performances set in, although not drastically. There was never a time when it was difficult to find a Vaughan Williams performance; he still had conductors who championed him and the record companies issued new discs of the symphonies, operas and other works. Nothing like the neglect of Bax and Bliss came his way. It was in the universities that he was virtually *persona non grata*. His death coincided with the arrival of a new wave of avant-garde composers with a passionate interest in the Second Viennese School and its successors. And it looked as though Parry's remark that the British only like one English composer at a time might be true once again. Now it was Britten. It would be wrong to call Vaughan Williams a neglected composer at any period of his career, but the question was bound to be asked whether Donald Mitchell was right when he said that Vaughan Williams would be regarded by posterity as a 'major minor composer', the equivalent, though not so flattering, of Richard Strauss's classification of himself as 'a first-rate second-rate' composer. For a while in the 1970s, Mitchell seemed to have persuaded a vocal group to come near to his own judgement. But taking a broad view of the fifty years after Vaughan Williams's death, one can say that he always occupied a high place in the English pantheon. Who in the 1950s and 1960s would have dared to forecast the present popularity and high rating of Elgar? Even the most devoted supporter of Vaughan Williams must have been taken aback by the immense surge of interest in his music in 2008. Suddenly it was everywhere – and this enthusiasm and interest did not fade when the anniversary year was over but continues, intensified, at the time of writing.

Not only did the major orchestras extend their acquaintance to more than two or three of the symphonies in concert halls, but the BBC devoted hours of air-time to his works. The Proms revived the Piano Concerto. Two long and detailed television films were made (and shown several times). Radio programmes held polls to discover the best liked English works: *The Lark Ascending* and the Tallis Fantasia dominated the voters' choices. But even more pleasing was the belated recognition that the Ninth Symphony, far from being the 'the mixture as before', as so many of its first listeners casually and thoughtlessly described it, could even be considered as a culminatory summit, opening up a new phase. Alain Frogley's intensively researched and

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well-balanced monograph on the work ushered in a deeper and more comprehensive appreciation of its mastery and originality.[60]

Several other excellent books on his music have been published in recent years. Performances in the United States and in Europe have steadily increased. Although there had been a marked diminution of interest in America after his death in 1958, there had never been a total eclipse. In the *Musical America* review of orchestral performances in the 1961–2 season, Vaughan Williams was the twelfth most performed foreign contemporary composer, ahead of Britten, Kodály, Webern and Sibelius. While the surge of interest after the fiftieth anniversary in 2008 was not as great as in Britain, it was still remarkable. In Britain, what would have pleased him most of all is the revival of interest in his operas. *The Pilgrim's Progress* has convinced many critics that it is the masterpiece its admirers believe and opera companies in several countries have staged it or have plans to do so. There were seven performances in London by English National Opera in November 2012 at the Coliseum. These were the opera's first professional staging in the capital since its premiere at Covent Garden in 1951–2.

Encouragingly, many of the less often played works have found advocates. *The Poisoned Kiss*, for example, has had more performances after 2008 than it had had in the previous seventy-five years. And this is true not only of his operas. We now can have a different perspective on his development into one of the greatest of composers, with the publication and performance since 1996 of early works that were withdrawn. These include chamber music, the Mass (*A Cambridge Mass*) he wrote in 1899 for his doctorate, his first choral masterpiece, *The Garden of Proserpine*, the *Bucolic Suite*, the Serenade of 1898, and other orchestral works. Now we can hear the complete Vaughan Williams.

Notes

1 *The Strad*, 13/9 (March 1903), 37.
2 'Some English Music', *The Pilot*, 4/1 (21 March 1903), 280.
3 'Modern British Composers. VI.', *MSt* 65/2034 (25 July 1903), 52.
4 12 October 1907, 6.
5 I am deeply indebted to Alain Frogley, who made freely available to me his research material on Vaughan Williams and America.
6 Letter of 8 June 1922, quoted in *UVWB*, 144.
7 *The Manchester Guardian*, 27 June 1922, 16.
8 The quotations are as follows: Heseltine: Robert Nichols, 'At Oxford', in Cecil Gray (ed.) *Peter Warlock: A Memoir of Philip Heseltine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), 78–9; Allen, *KW*, 156; Lutyens, generally credited to lectures at Dartington Summer School some time in the 1950s; 'Lambkins frisking' letter, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Dorking, to Ursula Wood, London, 4 October 1938, quoted in *UVWB*, 121.
9 Programme note for *Flos Campi*, 1927; reprinted in *VWOM*, 347.
10 *The Times*, 12 October 1925, 9.
11 *The Times*, 17 October 1925, 10.
12 *The Nation and the Athenaeum* 38/8 (21 November 1925), 290.
13 Joseph Holbrooke, *Contemporary British Composers* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925), 96–8.
14 *LRVW*, 150.
15 *UVWB*, 192–3.

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16 *The Times*, 11 April 1935, 12.
17 *MT* 76 (May 1935), 452.
18 *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 April 1935, 6.
19 Aaron Copland, *Copland on Music* (London: André Deutsch, 1961), 197.
20 *The Times*, 11 April 1935, 12.
21 Trevelyan and Karpeles quoted in *KW*, 245 and 246 respectively. The Longman letter is in *LRVW*, 254–5.
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23 *UVWB*, 190.
24 See 'Who Wants the English Composer?', *RCM Magazine* 9/1 (1912), 11–15, reprinted in *VWOM*, 39–42.
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34 Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 252–3.
35 The 1956–7 survey appeared in *Musical America*, 79/7 (August 1957), 15 and 28, the 1951–2 survey in 74/6 (July 1952), 6 and 24.
36 For a more detailed discussion of the composer's different musical responses to *The Pilgrim's Progress* see Chapter 8.
37 *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 1951, 6; *The Times*, 27 April 1951, 8, quoted in *KW*, 310–11.
38 *KW*, 315.
39 *KW*, 320–1.
40 *The Sunday Times*, 12 April 1953, 9.
41 Hubert Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1950).
42 *LRVW*, 466.
43 *Royal College of Music Magazine*, 9/1 (1912), 11–15; reprinted in *VWOM*, 39–42.
44 Quoted in *KW*, 330.
45 Donald Mitchell, 'Contemporary Chronicle: Revaluations: Vaughan Williams', *MO* 78 (1955), 409–11, 471, quoted in *KW*, 330–31.
46 Mitchell, 'Contemporary Chronicle', 471.
47 *Ibid.*
48 'Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)', *ML* 32/4 (1951), 322.
49 *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1953, 3.
50 'A New Symphony: Vaughan Williams's "Antartica"', *The Times*, 15 January 1953, 3.
51 *The Manchester Guardian*, 23 January 1953, 5.
52 *UVWB*, 358.
53 *The Manchester Guardian*, 3 May 1956, 5.
54 See Oliver Neighbour, 'The Place of the Eighth among Vaughan Williams's Symphonies', in *VWS*, 213–33 at 230–1.
55 Letter to Paul Henry Lang, 18 October 1956, quoted in *LRVW*, 597.
56 This was at a large tea-party that Lyle Dowling at the New York office of OUP had finally managed to put together, about which Dowling reported back to the publisher's London office. Speaking of the many missed opportunities such as the television interview, he adds ruefully: 'But to compensate for all this, there remains the fact of his extraordinary character – and the pleasure, not unmixed, of dealing for a change with a celebrity who is 100 percent un-commercial; a rare event in my life, I can assure you.' Internal OUP memo of 4 January 1955 from Dowling to Alan Frank, OUP, London.
57 Letter to Lyle Dowling, 6 June 1954.
58 *KW*, 343.
59 Neville Cardus in *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 August 1958, quoted in *KW*, 345.
60 Alain Frogley, *Vaughan Williams's Ninth Symphony*, Studies in Musical Genesis and Structure (Oxford University Press, 2001).

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