

Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872–1958

A Former Student's Tribute

by W. S. Lloyd Webber

WITHIN the space of these few words it is not possible to give a complete picture of the range and depth of this great composer's contribution to his art. However, as church musicians, we may perhaps venture to consider some aspects of his life and work which are of particular interest to us.

Ralph Vaughan Williams was the son of a clergyman, and he held an organist's post at South Lambeth Church for three years. As a student at the R.C.M. he studied with Stanford and Parratt, and at Cambridge with Charles Wood and Alan Gray. All these men were of course intimately connected with the church music of their time. Although he became very dissatisfied with his early writings and went abroad for further study, his active connection with church music and musicians was never severed.

He did not write extensively for the organ, but there can be few players who have not retained an abiding affection for the prelude on RHOSYMEDRE. It is a short piece of music, but it has a feeling of inevitability about it, and quite an extraordinary freshness. Particularly intriguing is the treatment of the inverted tonic pedal in the last two bars, and the counterpoint is delightfully unacademic, with pert little consecutive fifths here and there.

What a magnificent tune is SINE NOMINE, and how it outshines any of the other tunes written for Walsham How's stirring words! The courage and fortitude of the Church, militant and triumphant, stream forth in the unison passages, and the harmonized middle verses give the quiet contrast of peace and calm of 'Paradise the Blest'. The composer was born at Down Ampney in Gloucestershire, and this title seems peculiarly appropriate for the tune of 'Come down, O Love Divine'. With tenderness, but without sentimentality, the strongly diatonic curve of the melody emphasises 'the yearning strong, with which the soul will long'.

It is interesting to note that three of the greatest composers of recent times have shown their interest in the musical affairs of the common man. Elgar and Sibelius have written music which can be played for sheer relaxation and enjoyment, and Vaughan Williams has always been ready to write for the ordinary person. One of the many examples of this is the spontaneous setting of 'O taste and see', which, as we all know, was written for a very happy occasion—the Coronation of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. The alacrity with which this has been accepted and used in churches as an introit or short

anthem makes us wish that the composer had written more of these short settings for our use.

Turning to choral works on a larger scale, but which might be considered for special occasions when the requisite numbers are available, we might note the extended anthem *Lord, Thou has been our refuge*. This is written for chorus, semi-chorus and orchestra or organ. It is very dramatic and colourful, but not over difficult. The organ is quite adequate if no orchestra is available, but if it is possible to procure the services of a good trumpet player, he can enter with thrilling effect in the finale section, where he plays a chorale against a strongly woven counterpoint in the voices and organ. The writer remembers well a performance given by the choir of his previous church some years ago for the BBC Third Programme. On this occasion, as the organ possesses a superb orchestral trumpet on the solo division, his assistant leaned across and played the chorale on the top manual—the engineers wanted to know where the trumpet layer was hidden, as they had not given him a balance test!

Another work which is much more well known, but always fresh in effect is the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*. The familiar words and tunes seem to take new life by the composer's skilful arrangement of them. The setting of Whitman's impressive words 'Towards the Unknown Region' is a very good introduction to the mystical leanings of Vaughan Williams. It is not too hard for any reasonably competent choral society and local orchestra. Choral conductors who are fortunate enough to have a well-balanced choir or choral society should certainly at some time or other attempt the *Mass in G minor*, which, together with the *String Fantasia on a Theme by Tallis*, may be said to represent the most characteristic aspects of the composer's style.

The orchestral works cover a very wide range, but it is in the nine symphonies that we can feel the visionary content of his mind. There are passages in the later symphonies that seem to suggest the dreadful wasteland to which large sections of the world would be reduced after atomic warfare. One can only hope that these passages are a warning, and not truly prophetic. In contrast to these rather frightening movements, we have in *Symphony No. 5 in D major* a work which breathes peace and serenity. The *Serenade to Music*, for sixteen solo voices and orchestra is also full of the most entrancing sounds, and is perhaps one of the composer's most immediately appealing works. It is to be hoped that we shall have more frequent opportunities of hearing the stage works of Vaughan Williams. *Hugh the Drover* is an opera that deserves to find a permanent place in the repertoire of our native opera companies.

Although the composer avoided entanglement with administrative work, he was active in his encouragement of local music-making, and founded the annual Leith Hill Festival, which he directed every year. It was my privilege to spend a short time during the course of my studies at the Royal College of Music as a composition pupil with him, and I have very clear recollections of my lessons. An indication of the true quality of the teacher may be gained in that during my year's course, never a word about his own music was uttered by him, and he took immense trouble to help me with kind suggestions concerning my own poor efforts. We also analysed most carefully the four symphonies of Brahms! One is grateful to have had this opportunity of paying a very small tribute to the memory of a very great Englishman.