



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 5 – Postcards from the Isles

April 15, 2023

Overture from Aristophanic Suite: “The Wasps” – Ralph Vaughan Williams

Ralph Vaughan Williams is perhaps Britain’s most important and influential composer of the first half of the twentieth century. Prolific in most musical genres, he was an active composer from his student days right up until his death in 1958, at the age of eighty-six. He composed dozens of works that are part of the core repertory of British music of the last century, including the important series of nine symphonies, a variety of other orchestral works, and a wealth of vocal music.

He lived a long life—long enough to have written in a number of rather different styles, all of them authentic and reflective of his changing interests and the times. He was born into an educated, upper middle-class family—related to both the famous Wedgwoods and the Darwins--attended Cambridge University, and studied with eminent musicians and scholars, including a stint with Maurice Ravel. Among his early close friends and fellow students were such luminaries as Bertram Russell, Leopold Stokowski, and, of course, Gustav Holst. Not a precocious musician, he began modestly, studied diligently, and slowly achieved public recognition as a composer, not publishing until his early thirties. In addition to his copious activities as a composer, he spent his entire life engaged in championing the support of English music, whether as teacher, writer, festival organizer, or conductor—including the most modest levels of amateur music making.

In addition to his early activities as a rising composer, he and Holst were among the leaders in the efflorescence of serious study and collection of English folksong that arose in the late nineteenth century. He and Holst frequently spent time in the countryside tracking the rapidly vanishing body of song, writing them down, and preserving them. He later served as president of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. And, inevitably, his appreciation of this great literature became a major influence on one facet of his musical style—evidenced by every American band student’s encounter with his *English Folksong Suite*. An important interest and activity of his early on was his editorship of the *English Hymnal* (1906), his interest in the great English composer, Henry Purcell, and of all of the music, in general, of the Renaissance in England.

After WWII, his musical stock languished to a large degree, owing to the predominance of radical musical modernism, and it became fashionable to denigrate Vaughan Williams and his British peers as hopelessly passé. Vaughan Williams, Butterworth, Holst, Delius, and others were snidely dismissed as “pastoralists,”—composers of lush, beguiling, tuneful, nationalistic music that reeked of nature. Benjamin Britten scornfully deemed them the “cowpat” school. Time has erased that woeful assessment.

Early in his career, in 1909, not long before the successes that first brought him widespread accolades, he was commissioned to provide incidental music for the Cambridge Greek Play, an old tradition at the University of Cambridge wherein every three years one of the great Greek plays is given entirely in the ancient Greek language.

The play chosen in 1909 was Aristophanes' "The Wasps," considered one the greatest comedies in theatre. The play is a rousing satire of the Athenian judiciary, with the behavior of elderly jurors generating a comparison with the eponymous insects. Having said that, Vaughan Williams' music for the play has absolutely nothing to do with wasps or ancient Greece. Rather, it is typical of the composer's folksong-inflected, cheerful, and witty British style. The music is a suite comprised of an overture, two entr'actes, an eccentric little middle movement called "March Past of the Kitchen Utensils," and a "Ballet and Final Tableau." They are all charming, tuneful, and perfect accompaniment to an evening of comedy in ancient Greek for an educated audience. It must be admitted, though, that the opening of the "Overture" is a perfect imitation of swarming wasps, but that little bit of musical onomatopoeia just sets the stage, so to speak, and doesn't return as a signature musical element. After the opening swarm of wasps, the overture lays out a bustling succession of tunes in the best traditional Vaughan Williams style. His forays with Holst collecting English folksongs bear fruit here, as well as his study with Ravel. But, there's nothing French about it, simply an eloquent and mellifluous testimony to the composer's innate musical gifts. The attentive listener will spot any number of Vaughan Williams' signature stylistic features: pentatonic and modal melodies, broad lyrical tunes combined polyphonically with "dancing" faster tunes—even snatches of later, well-known compositions of his. These, and the rousing ending all are harbingers of his musical maturity, and lasting significance.

Horn Concerto, op. 58 – Ruth Gipps

Ruth Gipps is not a name well known in this country, but was a distinguished composer, performer, conductor, and public voice for feminism in the arts in Great Britain until her death in 1999. She born into a middle-class English, business family, of which many were excellent musicians. Her talent surfaced when she was very young, and her skills as an oboist, pianist, and composer grew at impressive rate. She was only eight years old when she was first published. She entered the Royal College of Music when she was fifteen, where she studied with Vaughan Williams, among others. From that time on her career brought her prizes and awards, as well as public performances of her works. She was honored with a performance of her tone poem at the Promenade Concerts in 1942, when she was twenty-one. In 1948 she was the youngest woman to earn a doctorate in music in Great Britain.

She sought a career as a concert pianist, but along the way earned her living as a professional oboist. She finally settled upon conducting as a focus, but faced lifelong difficulties in that aim, owing to her gender. So, she formed her own orchestra, which finally led to more opportunities as a conductor. Later, she taught and served as a leader of music in Britain in various capacities. But, composition was her forte, and she contributed a distinguished series of orchestra works, as well as chamber and choral music.

Her concerto for horn was composed in 1968 for her son Lance Baker, who gave the première with his mother conducting, but for many years it did not enjoy as many performances as this admirable work deserves. And that is simply because it is a formidable challenge to even the best players. However, its difficulties don't knock you in the face with dazzling roulades of virtuosity. Certainly, the rapidly-tongued arpeggios

and formidable four-octave range pose significant challenges, but it all is simply part of the natural course of her artistic vision—not an end within itself. In fact, the technical challenges are so integral, that at times they sound deceptively easier than they actually are.

The concerto is cast in the traditional three movements, but that is all that is traditional. The first movement moves along, but the mood is somewhat reflective, eschewing the typical gravitas of a first movement. Instead of the usual slow, middle movement, Gipps composed a scampering scherzo. And the finale, while beginning suitably energetically, soon turns to a slow, lyrical section that leads to alternating fast and slow moments. While commentators place her firmly in the line of late Romantic English musical style—Vaughan Williams and the other “pastoralists”—there is much in her music that, to this writer, is somewhat redolent of the “sound” of Debussy. She was a master of orchestration, and that of her horn concerto, in its pastel colors, its lightness, and its transparent, imaginative textures, seems so French in essence. Comparisons in the arts can be odious, but nothing comes to mind so strongly as does Debussy’s *Première rhapsodie* for clarinet. There are many points of subtle similarity, but that’s for another time.

The first movement is based around a few easily discerned themes, traded off mainly between the woodwinds and the solo horn. As a woodwind player herself, Gipps imaginatively features the former, both with solos and in section scoring. The horn part, itself, is rather gestural and ruminative—it right away explores the highest and lowest range of the instrument—it all seems rather casual and yet supremely confident. The middle section is more rhythmic, with astoundingly difficult rapidly tongued passages in the solo horn. These ideas, combined with the initial ones, are recapped, ending with a cadenza that probes the main ideas. A serene, gentle conclusion ends it all.

The innovative choice of a scherzo movement comes next, and an ethereal, gossamer-like affair it is. Cast primarily in the somewhat unusual time signature of 7/8, it lightly skips along, gently pulsing in beats of 2+2+3. And, as in the first movement, the solo horn constantly engages in “conversations” with various woodwinds. There is a brief interlude near the end, where the tempo slows significantly, and introduced by woodwinds alone, the solo horn ascends quietly from “*de profundis*” for a meditative gesture. But, the light, faster tempo proper quickly returns for an abbreviated recap of the opening.

The vigorous last movement is rather like the traditional rondo, so common in these works, and is built around two ideas, both heard immediately in the string section. One is the main motive and the other is a jagged arpeggio that serves at first as an accompaniment. Both are explored thoroughly in the movement, including in the slower and more serene moments. It’s not a long movement, and perhaps the most interesting moment comes near the end where there is a remarkable exchange between the solo horn and the celesta. But then, that is thoroughly characteristic of Gipps’ sparkling orchestration and general brilliant “sizzle” throughout.

There are many virtues to Gipps’ horn concerto, and should only whet one’s appetite to hear more of her symphonic works. She was a pioneer for women in classical music in Great Britain, a composer of the very top tier, and one whose musical style is not just attractive and accessible, but clearly exemplary of what so many capable

composers strive for and fail to achieve: a distinctive voice. Her music is long overdue for widespread performance.

***Irish Rhapsody No. 1 in D Minor, op. 78* – Charles Villiers Stanford**

Fame, power, recognition, influence—all that and more, so ardently sought by so many—we tacitly agree is fleeting. And there are few musicians of recent times whose former position at the top of the profession are now generally so fallen into relative obscurity as Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century he had plausible claim as the most influential and acclaimed musician in Great Britain. He was a distinguished educator, conductor, and composer standing then in that country somewhat as Bernstein, Copland, Dudamel—or even John Williams—may be regarded in our own. Born into an eminent Anglo-Irish family in Dublin, he was a precocious lad, whose talent in classical studies and music was revealed early. A prodigious composer—starting in his youth—he contributed a wealth of works in almost every genre, both instrumental and vocal. He early on distinguished himself as organist and conductor, later teacher, at Cambridge University, and was instrumental in founding the Royal College of Music. England at that time it must be said did not enjoy a rich music culture in most aspects, and Stanford was a frequent visitor on the continent for tutoring and concert going. He took as his models Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms and was a lifelong conservative in musical style—as well as in politics (he ardently supported Irish union with England.) He was most successful in composing Anglican sacred music, and left an impressive body of work thereof. But his orchestral music enjoyed widespread performances on the continent and Gustav Mahler conducted his Symphony No. 3 “Irish” with the New York Philharmonic in 1911. Moreover, the leading virtuosos of the time—familiar names all—performed his concertos frequently. Nevertheless, as time went on during the Edwardian era, his sun was setting. His condemnation of the music of Debussy, Ravel, Strauss, and Stravinsky was typical of his cynical, reactionary outlook, and soon, he was eclipsed by Edward Elgar, who became the toast of musical Great Britain, and the rest is history.

His music exhibited a masterful craftsmanship, always characterized by an impressive technical command, and was an apt reflection of his admiration for the German tradition of those who followed Beethoven’s model. His contempt for what he considered the execrable chromatic harmonic language of Wagner informed his orientation in a sophisticated, but conservative diatonic style.

But, above all, he had a remarkable gift for melodic lyricism. That is clear in all of his works, but perhaps nowhere more evident in his celebrated six Irish rhapsodies for orchestra. There, coupled with his profound love of all things Irish, he created the works that have remained in the public’s eye, and are the remnants of his musical legacy. He composed them relatively late in his career, between 1901 and 1923—the last in the year before his death, by which time his star had definitely waned.

The first rhapsody, commissioned by the great conductor, Hans Richter, was given its première in 1902. It became inordinately popular; almost to the composer’s own exasperation. But, it must be admitted that it drew a dismissive comment from Elgar (the two were not exactly mutual admirers). The time of the latter nineteenth century was one of increasing exploration of nationalistic emphases in art, and folk, or “folkish” elements

became an important aspect of classical music. Witness the works of Grieg, Sibelius, Smetana, Dvořák, Glinka, Chopin, and a raft of others. Stanford's eloquent mining of Ireland's musical heritage is in the mainstream of this movement, and he is perhaps one of its most successful.

Irish Rhapsody No. 1, while it bears the title of rhapsody, it is not the freely structured affair that one often encounters bearing that characterization. Rather, it is completely representative of the essential style of Stanford: tightly constructed, clear and balanced form; imaginative manipulation of minimal elements; and a logical direction to the flow of ideas. Nothing could better place him in the Romantic camp of Mendelssohn, Schumann, and his model, Brahms. Forget the "rhapsodies" of Liszt, the rhapsodic texture of Wagner, and like works of their followers. The *Irish* rhapsodies of Stanford are sophisticated paeans to Irish tunes—tunes that are the foundation for a deft weft of masterful development.

Irish Rhapsody No. 1 is cast into a simple three-part form, based upon two Irish folksongs. Stanford was more than familiar with the genre, having arranged and published hundreds of them over his career. The first section is based upon a simple, vigorous tune, whose straightforward melody and rhythm lends itself to adroit manipulation. In point of fact, his derivation of two aspects of that tune serves rather like a first and second theme. The middle, slower movement is an eloquent exposition of perhaps the most famous of Irish melodies, "Londonderry Air," first subtly alluded to by the English horn, before the violoncellos sing it out in full. The whole section functions as a development. The third section, while ostensibly a return, or varied recap of the first, faster tune, is much more than that. Elements of "Londonderry Air" are skillfully woven into the first tune, in a blend of both in the faster tempo. It's not just a rhapsody, but seems to sneak in elements of sonata form. So, it's a typical work by Stanford: lyrical, classical constrain in form, and developmental texture in the Viennese tradition—all built upon Stanford's complete mastery of Romantic orchestration.

Stanford left a large body of admirable compositions that are largely more or less out of vogue, now. The winds of musical change that were stirring just before World War I, and which swept all before thereafter, put paid to his late romantic style—no matter how well crafted. It is probable that his greatest legacy was the remarkable number of his significant, gifted students, whose own compositions saw much greater acceptance and longevity: Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Frank Bridge, John Ireland, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, George Butterworth, Herbert Howells, and others. Nevertheless, he was knighted by Edward VII and was buried in Westminster Abbey with Great Britain's musical legends. Perhaps it's time for non-Britons to reconsider more of his appealing *oeuvre*.

Variations on an Original Theme ("Enigma Variations"), op. 36 – Edward Elgar

Elgar's first significant, acclaimed work, the *Variations* was given its première in 1899, conducted by the great Hans Richter. It was an immediate success, and garnered performances and praise in Europe—including from Richard Strauss. Not bad for a composer of modest reputation who had chiefly labored far from the bustle of London. Although he had been steadily building his reputation in provincial English cities as a well-respected composer of cantatas and the like, an orchestral work on the scale of the

so-called “*Enigma*” *Variations* seemed to be without precedent. What is clear, however, is that, at the age of forty-two, he had served his apprenticeship well, and years of experience laid a solid foundation for his most famous work—especially his vaunted mastery of orchestration.

The importance of the composition and its delightful “enigma” generated an enormous interest and speculation, which has continued unabated to the present. The genesis of it is well known, for Elgar left ample record of his thoughts. Apparently, after a long day of teaching, he trudged into the house, and his wife said something to the effect that he looked like he could use a good cigar. He indulged himself, sat down at the piano and was improvising rather desultorily, when his wife, Alice, said that she liked one of the tunes, and he continued improvising little variations on the tune that reflected some aspect of the personalities of his close friends. On the score, over each variation, Elgar wrote either the initials of each friend, or in a few cases, a name or nickname. Who these folks are and some of their “characteristics” limned by the composer is known, now, but that was not the enigma. The tune, itself is clear; we hear it straightway, at the beginning. It’s a simple little affair: a short motive of four notes, preceded by a rest, heard six times, half of them in reverse rhythm—a wonder of musical concision. And then follow thirteen variations, one each for thirteen friends, and a last variation about the composer, himself. So what is the “enigma?”

Elgar spoke several times of a “larger theme” that runs throughout the work, but is “not played.” Furthermore, he referred to its “dark saying,” declaring that it would remain a mystery. And why even call the work “Enigma,” in the first place? Generations have tried to solve the mystery, to no avail. All manner of tunes have been adduced as the mystery tune—including “Pop Goes the Weasel.” Elgar created a mystery and it remains a mystery, for the composer took it with him to the grave.

The short theme is heard first, with a brief contrasting section before the theme returns. The first variation (C.A.E.) follows immediately, dedicated to his beloved wife, Caroline Alice Elgar. The second variation (H.D.S.-P.) is a tribute to Hew David Stuart-Powell, an amateur musician at whose chromatic warm-ups Elgar gently poked fun. (R. B. T.) Richard Baxter Townshend follows, a send up the amateur thespian’s breaking voice, rather like an adolescent boy. After two more variations we arrive at No. 7 (“Ysolbel”), a viola student of Elgar, depicted by a solo viola playing a passage that sounds a bit like an etude for that instrument. Variations 8 and 9 refer to Troyte Griffiths, an architect who was a rather poor pianist—you can hear it—and Winifred Norbury, whose calm personality is there in the variation. A held note in a sole violin unmistakably leads into the next variation—the most beloved of them all.

“Nimrod” holds a special place in the hearts of Britons, for its magnificent grandiloquence and poignancy, and one hears it played publically in times of great tragedy or circumstance—rather like Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* in this country. It is dedicated to Elgar’s best friend, Augustus Jaeger. Jäger, of course, is German for “hunter,” and Nimrod was the great hunter in the Old Testament.

“Dorabella” was a good friend, whose stutter is famously depicted in the little flutter in the woodwinds. Variation 11 hilariously tells the incident wherein Dan, the bulldog of friend, George Sinclair, falls down the bank of a steam, paddles along, and barks happily upon his exit from the water. “B.G.N.” was a cellist (he inspired the cello concerto), and so he gets a little cello solo, here. The mysterious “***” left on a sea

voyage before Elgar could get permission for the dedications, so she is anonymous, here. A quotation from Mendelssohn's "*Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*," is heard in the solo clarinet, with the timpani contributing some nautical engine noises.

Finally, the fourteenth and last variation is of Elgar, himself ("E.D.U" from his wife's pet name for him—the German, Eduard. It is telling that in this music ostensibly about himself, he uses the material from the two variations dedicated to the persons most important in his life, his wife, "C.A.E," and his great friend, "Nimrod." Elgar was a complex man, but it is a certainty that his enjoyment of friendship and the love of others were central to his being, and the work perfectly illustrates that.

--Wm. E. Runyan
©2023 William E. Runyan