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Vaughan Williams's Ninth Symphony, by Alain Frogley; Vaughan Williams, by Simon Heffer (review)

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an historically informed performance. Gabriele Dotto believes that with collateral information, performers can now determine how “authentic” they want to get.

Gossett’s essay provides perhaps the best summation of the book and its arguments:

The theatre is not a place where one pays obeisance to a written score, but where one performs an opera with real singers and orchestral musicians; audiences with trains and buses to catch; administrators who are employed to watch the cash box as well as the artistic product; successive generations of critics, each of which remembers a past golden age but fails to appreciate its own. Our aim should not be to provide a museum for the petrification of performances of the past, but the re-recreation (within the context of our very different social structures) of the characteristics that made Italian opera a vital art form of the nineteenth century and can help it remain so today. (p. 144)

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Vaughan Williams’s Ninth Symphony. By Alain Frogley. (Oxford Studies in Musical Genesis and Structure.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. [xxiv, 313 p. ISBN 0-19-816284-7. \$74.] Discography, bibliography, index.

Vaughan Williams. By Simon Heffer. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000. [167 p. ISBN 1-55553-472-4. \$26.95.] Discography, bibliography, index.

Ralph Vaughan Williams has been undergoing a significant reevaluation in recent years. Once dismissed as a cozy establishment figure whose narrow musical nationalism embodied an impediment to musical modernism in Britain, he is now increasingly viewed as a figure of major significance with a distinctive contemporary voice addressed squarely to the modern predicament. This new attitude—which in many respects represents a return to the view of the composer proclaimed during his lifetime—is reflected to varying degrees in the two books under review here.

Alain Frogley is as responsible as anyone for the recent changes in Vaughan

Williams’s fortunes. Author of many articles on the composer and editor of *Vaughan Williams Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), he has dedicated himself to exposing the misconceptions and half-truths of received tradition in a sustained effort to revive the composer’s reputation. His most significant work in this respect has been on the details of Vaughan Williams’s critical reception, but the underlying project of rehabilitation informs nearly everything he has written. This is particularly true of the present monograph, which constitutes a powerful defense of one of Vaughan Williams’s greatest and most unjustly neglected works, the Ninth Symphony.

Composed in 1956 and 1957, the Ninth appeared at the very end of the composer’s life, precisely when critical decline was setting in. Accordingly, the work has been slighted and, despite growing admirers, is considered generally inferior to his earlier symphonies. This judgment has not deterred Frogley who, with passionate advocacy, undertakes the most detailed examination of a Vaughan Williams work to appear in print. Each of the four movements is given its own chapter and subjected to an exhaustive formal analysis that considers rhythmic pacing and textural balance no less than thematic interrelationship and tonal planning. The picture that emerges is of a highly integrated symphony that holds a strong claim to be counted among Vaughan Williams’s tautest works.

Frogley’s concern is not just to demonstrate the virtues of the completed work, but also to combat criticism directed at the Ninth (often expressed about the late music generally), that Vaughan Williams “lacked self-criticism, composing more out of habit than focused creative purpose” (p. 5). To this end, he embarks on an examination of the sketches and working drafts that the composer, against his usual practice, preserved for future generations. Indeed, the focus here is fundamentally on the sketches—the book is a new addition to the Oxford Studies in Musical Genesis and Structure series—and Frogley pursues a meticulous examination of this voluminous material, describing manuscript sources, tracing the composer’s working methods, and offering a running commentary on each movement as it progressed. The results show that, far from being composed

unreflectively, the Ninth Symphony emerged only after protracted compositional effort. Such crucial aspects of the work as the trajectory of rhythmic acceleration and deceleration in the first movement (ultimately imparting a sense of exhausted struggle), the precise formal balance between the two primary sections of the last movement, even the tight melodic interrelationships connecting many themes (whether within movements or across them)—all these turn out, upon examination, to have been subject throughout to much alteration, or to have emerged only after much preliminary experimentation. The work's tonal plan especially—E in opposition to its upper and lower semitone neighbors, with C playing an important mediating role between them—appears to have cost Vaughan Williams much labor: the sketchbooks show that tonal modifications in one movement often prompted revisions in others, and subsequent drafts of the finale reveal a constant tinkering with tonal emphases in order to obtain the “right” balance. Far from indicating a lack of concern with detail, the sketches and drafts present a composer pursuing the realization of his ideas with “rigour and tenacity” (p. 300).

The strength of these observations—and conclusions—largely depends, of course, on the circumspection of the author's approach. Sketch studies are a notoriously tricky field of study in which the divide between accurate reconstruction and subjective misinterpretation is hair thin, especially where an artist's musical handwriting is (famously, in Vaughan Williams's case) difficult to read. Fortunately, Frogley brings enormous care to this complex material. The crucial question of the chronology of drafts is handled with extreme delicacy, and the transcriptions themselves admirably clarify compositional intent even as they allow for editorial uncertainty and speculation. Sensitive, moreover, to the pitfalls of interpreting sketches solely in the light of the completed work, Frogley is not afraid to identify promising ideas that did not make the cut, or to demonstrate how certain themes that appear (in the finished score) to derive from earlier themes were in fact composed in reverse order. So careful an avoidance of the knee-jerk “meliorism” and “organicism” to which sketch studies are prone lends authority to his

findings, and ultimately serves to make his case for the symphony more persuasive.

The book concludes with a consideration of the symphony's extramusical meanings. While it is well known that the Ninth originated in ideas taken from Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Vaughan Williams suppressed the details of the program and subsequent commentators have not pursued them. But precisely because his approach to the work is through the manuscripts, which retain clues to the program in the form of written annotations, Frogley is here able to identify many of the ways (often quite literal) that *Tess* influenced composition. His illumination of further extramusical associations—with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Salisbury Cathedral, and Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, among others—meanwhile enables him to trace a metaphorical progression in the symphony “if not definitively from darkness to light, then from something approaching exhausted despair to determined endurance” (p. 292). Such an interpretation testifies to Vaughan Williams's starkly modern viewpoint even as it places the Ninth firmly in the humanist tradition of the Beethovenian symphony. Strikingly, it also forms the point of departure for many of Frogley's most valuable insights about the manuscript materials—the struggle for rhythmic articulation and differentiation, for example, or the constant reworkings of tonal emphasis in the finale. Indeed, for Frogley, it is Vaughan Williams's “manifoldly complex vision” (p. 300) of the symphony that explains the great pains he took over it.

No greater contrast with Frogley's scholarly tone could exist than Simon Heffer's brief volume written for popular consumption. A political commentator and journalist, Heffer is not specially trained in music and his book, predictably, offers little technical discussion, relying heavily on the standard Vaughan Williams literature. Examining the composer almost exclusively from a “nationalist” angle, for example, he overemphasizes his English musical influences and duplicates many other well-worn opinions. Nonetheless, there are moments when Heffer breaks out of this narrow frame, as when he praises the difficult “modernist” works for their contemporary relevance, and downgrades the more accessible but “conservative” folk song-flavored

works. Even this judgment is accommodated to a nationalist framework, however, as when he says of the astringent Sixth Symphony that it “evoked the common cultural experience Vaughan Williams was having with his fellow English” (p. 116). The point is not to be dismissed—for one thing, identification with the harrowing vision of the Sixth surely was one source of its public acclaim—but it also runs the risk of overstating the music’s exclusively English orientation and appeal.

Whatever the book’s shortcomings, Heffer’s interest in the non-folk song works

does represent a departure (hesitant, but a departure nonetheless) from the prevailing wisdom about Vaughan Williams. That this occurs in a book aimed at a popular audience, where opinions change at glacial speed, demonstrates the trickle-down effect that the scholarship of Frogley and others is having. This is progress.

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INSTRUMENTS

The Contemporary Violin: Extended Performance Techniques. By Patricia Strange and Allen Strange. (The New Instrumentation.) Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. [xiii, 337 p. ISBN 1-55553-472-4. \$26.95 (hbk.); ISBN 0-520-22409-4. \$24.95 (pbk.).] Music examples, bibliography, discography, list of scores, internet resources, index.

The violin family is beloved for its seemingly infinite flexibility of sound, color, and nuance. For centuries the voice of the violin has been prized for its proximity in character to the human voice, sharing its capacity for subtlety as well. Closer to our own time, composers have begun to branch out and consider the violin from differing points of view, exploring the instrument’s possibilities for tonal colors and effects, alternate tuning systems, electronic modifications, and the use of the violin body as a percussion instrument. *The Contemporary Violin: Extended Performance Techniques* by Patricia Strange and Allen Strange attempts to catalog and explicate these possibilities, illustrating each technique with appropriate examples from the literature.

This is a voluminous work, evidently a labor of love, and the product of intensive thought, research, and experience. The book is well organized by type of technique, grouping ideas into chapters entitled “Bowing,” “The Fingers” (further divided into right and left hands), “Percussion Techniques,” “Harmonics,” “Tuning Systems,” “. . . and Variations”

(dealing with experiments with the form of the violin itself), “Amplification and Signal Processing,” and “MIDI, Strings, and the Computer.” In a field which thrives on creative experimentation and thus always growing and in flux, the book gives a feeling of some kind of completeness and authority. There are numerous music examples establishing context for the techniques discussed, a bibliography of scores from which the examples are culled, and a discography of available recordings, guiding the reader who is interested toward avenues for further exploration.

Unfortunately, the book does not satisfactorily fulfill its promise as a practical compendium of the capabilities of the contemporary violin. Its most egregious drawback is the insufficient illumination of the sonic landscape. An accompanying compact disc with aural examples would have served to make this book quite a bit more useful. It seems reasonable to suppose that many readers of this book are likely to be composers wanting to expand their awareness of recently developed possibilities for the instrument. They will need to have at their fingertips not merely a listing of available techniques, but also some grasp of the expressive gestures embodied in these techniques. Often there is no verbal description that can adequately convey the impact of the sounds produced. In one instance, when discussing Tamar Diesendruck’s *Etudes for Violin* and a special use of the instrument meant to imitate the vocal inflections of cartoon characters, the authors state: “This music must really be heard—the notation cannot convey the full sense of