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Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895-1958, edited by Hugh Cobbe (review)

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supply short, easy piano pieces; and that the title "Impromptu" was provided by the Viennese publisher Haslinger when he published the first set (D. 899) in December 1827.

Finally, in a book on the "unknown" Schubert it would have been nice to find some discussion of the genre of his compositions most frequently heard during his lifetime by Viennese concert audiences and most foreign to audiences today: the male-

voice part-song. To us these tend to sound like German barbershop quartets, but then they had very different associations—with the *Burschenschaften*, the politically liberal and nationalist university fraternities. What other valence they may have had, and why they appealed so strongly to Schubert, remains, mostly, unknown.

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COMPOSERS AND THEIR WRITINGS

Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895–1958. Edited by Hugh Cobbe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [xx, 679 p. ISBN-13: 9780199257973. \$190.] Illustrations, music examples, bibliography, indexes.

This long-anticipated volume more than meets the high expectations that greet it. For some twenty years, Hugh Cobbe, former head of music collections at the British Library, has been collecting, transcribing, and editing letters to and from Ralph Vaughan Williams. Enthusiasts of the composer's music have been treated to tantalizing glimpses of the project in the form of progress reports, the occasional published article, and (for those bold enough to contact the editor privately) a generous sharing of information along the way. The letters' publication after so long a span is therefore cause for much rejoicing—especially since the job has been so well done. The judicious selection of 757 letters, the admirable pacing of the book, and the wonderfully clarifying editorial commentary provide the reader with an unparalleled picture of the composer's working life.

Cobbe's spadework has to this point uncovered some 3,300 letters—a number that represents, in his estimation, about twenty percent of the total that the composer probably wrote or dictated over the course of his lifetime. (While more surely remain to be discovered, these are likely to be few in number for reasons Cobbe discusses in his introduction.) The 757 letters printed here represent between a quarter and a fifth of the known correspondence and include fascinating letters to a wide range of correspondents. Among these are music critics, amateur conductors and perform-

ers, artistic collaborators, folksong collecting colleagues, performers of Vaughan Williams's music, composition students, old university friends, editors at Oxford University Press, scholars and musicologists, composer colleagues, family members, and of course close friends. In addition, there are letters to newspapers like *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Musical Times*, as well as to functionaries and dignitaries at the BBC, the Leith Hill Music Festival, and various universities. Perhaps most charming are the letters to various amateur performers and enthusiastic music lovers, various school children, and at least one autograph hunter among them.

Most of the letters included in the volume are published here for the first time. But because Cobbe's stated goal is to "provide as full a self-portrait of VW as possible" (p. xiii), he purposely interleaves many new discoveries with a sizable number of key letters previously printed in one of three standard reference books on the composer—*R. V. W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* by his second wife Ursula (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), Michael Kennedy's *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), and *Heirs and Rebels* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), the volume of correspondence between Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst edited by Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst. The strategy pays off, not merely because the editor is thus able to fill in the

gaps and contexts surrounding specific well-known letters—the composer’s notorious 1941 rebuke of the BBC for their banning of the music of the communist Alan Bush is a stellar example—but also because it is Cobbe’s editorial policy to present these, and indeed all, letters in unexpurgated and complete form. The results can sometimes be startling, as when we learn of Vaughan Williams’s withering opinion of Rutland Boughton’s Glastonbury Festival (p. 110), or overhear the otherwise sensitive and socially-minded composer employ a common racial epithet to describe black porters in 1920s New York (p. 133). (Both of these examples come from expurgated portions of letters printed previously.) Moreover, the reprinting of familiar letters allows for the chronological adjustment of previously misdated letters and for the filling in of crucial background information omitted by earlier editors. Vaughan Williams’s letter of 20 March 1932 to Holst (letter no. 211), reprinted from *Heirs and Rebels* but here given complete, is exemplary: Cobbe’s eight editorial footnotes clarify oblique references in the letter by identifying the individuals and musical works concerned, explaining the financial arrangements for Holst’s 1932 tour of the United States, and providing a thumbnail history of the Gregynog Music Festival and its founders, the Davies sisters. Such panoramic commentary—extended to the newly-published letters as well—illuminates details of Vaughan Williams’s life and personality (Cobbe is particularly adept at decoding the composer’s many literary allusions) and even makes the book a kind of informal history of the twentieth-century British music scene.

Meticulous editing informs other features of the book. Chief among these is the handling of Vaughan Williams’s notoriously bad handwriting and often sloppy orthography. Cobbe’s elegant solution has been silently to correct small errors or omissions, and to leave untouched those misspellings or misstatements that “seem to contribute to the pen-picture” (p. 4), with an occasional *sic* to reassure the reader that these last are not undetected misprints. (A number of the humorous drawings the composer sometimes included in his correspondence are also reproduced.) No less challenging has been the need to provide a

representative sampling of letters from all parts of Vaughan Williams’s career. Given that fully one third of the extant correspondence dates from the last decade of his life, when he was virtually a national institution, Cobbe’s balanced selection of material is a major accomplishment. Indeed, concern for balance partially accounts for his decision to include some thirty letters written to Vaughan Williams by various friends and colleagues. John Ireland’s reminiscences of student days, Hubert Parry’s misgivings about Vaughan Williams’s World War I army service, Michael Tippett’s gratitude for the older composer’s public defense of his conscientious objectionism—these and other letters, most written before the 1950s, contribute materially to the composite picture. Cobbe also includes a small handful of letters that were neither written nor received by Vaughan Williams: most of these involve Ursula Vaughan Williams, but they include one remarkable Oxford University Press internal memo from Norman Peterkin to Humphrey Milford that contrasts William Walton’s perceived cattiness with Vaughan Williams’s more “gentlemanly” behavior. The document is fascinating in showing that the composer—described by Peterkin as “looking more like an Ancient Briton than ever” (p. 335)—was already, by 1942, identified in the public mind with Englishness itself.

In the main, the picture of Vaughan Williams that emerges from the letters is not markedly different from prevailing views of the composer. His advocacy of a national music, dedication to folksong, embrace of amateur music-making, love of English literature, encouragement of students, financial support for fellow musicians, social tactfulness, capacity for hard work—all of these well-known attributes are brought out with a wonderful immediacy. On the other hand, certain letters emphasize less-appreciated aspects of his personality that have important ramifications for our understanding of the composer. Significant here is correspondence detailing his interest in contemporary (especially American) music and a life-long devotion to the aesthetics and accomplishments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Austro-German music. Other letters seem to reject conclusively the idea, recently much debated, that his Christian faith was in any

way active. The image of him as an Establishment insider and operator, controversially forwarded by Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes (and interestingly echoed by Walton in Peterkin's memo cited above), is meanwhile neither confirmed nor refuted. We overhear him expressing ambivalence about self-promotion, but also observe him contacting critics and authors about his music and pulling strings to get performances by favored students and performers. Even letters touching on his politics (including much valuable new source material) suggest that his views were far less ideologically consistent than has been supposed, and were often driven by practical concerns applied to each situation on a case-by-case basis.

Where the letters are most valuable, though, is in charting the daily activities of Vaughan Williams's working life. Business dealings, travels, work habits, performance arrangements, publishing contracts, committee work—all this and more provide unparalleled insight into the everyday concerns of a major artist. Such detail helps us to know the man and to sharpen our knowledge of his music. Tracing precisely when certain works were written, performed and revised, the letters materially aid our reconstruction of the compositional history of specific works. In some cases, they uncover possible connections between works—or between individual works and larger social circumstances. Gerald Finzi's suggestion, after the 1953 premiere of the massive and opulently-scored *Sinfonia Antartica*, that Vaughan Williams's next symphony "will probably be for a Haydn-Mozart orchestra, now that everyone is expecting you to get bigger and bigger" (p. 514) may have planted a seed that resulted in the decidedly smaller-scale Eighth Symphony of 1956. Vaughan Williams's 1941 comment to Tippett about the "peace of mind" that comes from doing "all the little jobs" required during wartime (p. 329) suggests why he could continue to write the tranquil Fifth Symphony, begun in 1938, during this period, and raises the possibility that the work's unparalleled serenity was in fact a response to his wartime experiences.

There are some surprising omissions from the book, and occasional lapses from its high editorial standards. Though he

refers to them in a footnote, Cobbe includes none of the letters from Maurice Ravel, and omits correspondence with Cecil Sharp that details Vaughan Williams's important qualifications of Sharp's sometimes extreme views on folksong's origin and transmission. Certain items that call for explanation, notably the composer's grumpy letter (no. 377) to the editor of the journal *Civil Liberty*, are strangely lacking in editorial commentary. Doubtless there are sound practical reasons for some of these omissions—the letters to Sharp, for one, are in the form of rather cryptic point-by-point rejoinders to various books by Sharp that would have made for unwieldy reading—and they are in any event very few in number. The overwhelming evidence is that the editor has done a superlative job in the face of a multiplicity of competing requirements and limitations. By uncovering much fresh material, clarifying and correcting the work of previous editors, and generally bringing Vaughan Williams and his works vividly to life, *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* joins the handful of standard reference books that are essential reading to anyone interested in this composer's music.

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Camille Saint-Saëns on Music and Musicians. Edited and translated by Roger Nichols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. [xii, 187 p. ISBN-13: 9780195320169. \$29.95.] Index.

For its jubilee year in 1893, the Cambridge Music Society, under the direction of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, proposed awarding honorary doctoral degrees to the most distinguished composers of the era and inviting them to Cambridge to conduct their works. Johannes Brahms declined to attend (thereby also declining the honorary degree) as he hated foreign travel, and Giuseppe Verdi excused himself due to his age. Tchaikovsky came, as did Arrigo Boito from Italy, Max Bruch from Germany, and Camille Saint-Saëns from France. Historically the occasion provides us with an idea of who one august group thought were the greatest composers at the end of the nineteenth century. For the