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Vaughan Williams on Music by David Manning (review)

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tween two stools. At the same time, this is as good a solution to that problem as one could ever reasonably expect and, despite some of the issues highlighted above, the volume as a whole is, by turns, enlightening, controversial, and imaginative, as well

as containing many fruitful contributions to the study of what is doubtless the central musical trend of our times.

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

Vaughan Williams on Music. Edited by David Manning. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [xix, 435 p. ISBN-13: 9780195182392. \$35.] Music examples, bibliographical references, index.

Reading the prose writings of major composers is always a dangerous business. While such writings undoubtedly illuminate aspects of a creative mind by filling in biographical details or fleshing out personal beliefs, the temptation to extrapolate from the writings to the musical works themselves is difficult to resist. The results, all too frequently, are misconceptions and half-truths about specific works, even about composers' styles as a whole. Thus the emotional outpourings of Hector Berlioz's *Mémoires* prompt critics to fasten upon the "arch-romantic" features of the *Symphonie fantastique* even as they ignore the classicizing tendencies of *Harold en Italie*. By the same token, Igor Stravinsky's anti-romantic polemics encourage notions of the arid and "objectivist" works of the interwar years that overlook their stylistic and aesthetic points of contact with the "Russian" ballets written before World War I.

A similar fate befalls Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose prose essays have particularly influenced perceptions of his music that are misleading and often downright wrong. These perceptions, inevitably, revolve around the subjects of folksong and English musical nationalism—subjects about which the composer did indeed write copiously. But he also wrote about much else, including the music of continental European composers, and it is this failure to recognize the broad range of his interests that is the source of so much of the trouble. It has not only prevented listeners from noting the continental influences, from J. S. Bach through Maurice Ravel, that so obviously permeate his music, but also promoted serious misunderstanding about the very nature of his nationalism. Vaughan Williams's nationalism derived from eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century conceptions of nationhood as a force for social and political progress, and had virtually nothing in common with the aggressive xenophobia that emerged in full force only in the twentieth century. And yet, it is precisely in these latter, pejorative terms that his nationalism has come to be viewed—aided, again, by a selective, not to mention highly politicized, reading of his prose writings. Here, the modernist hijacking of the moral high ground, whereby "advanced" styles have become associated with musical internationalism and "conservative" styles with musical nationalism, is particularly at fault.

Admittedly, Vaughan Williams is himself partially responsible for these misunderstandings. A polemicist of the highest order, he frequently overstated his case to make a point. This is especially true of the later essays when, as Alain Frogley and others have suggested, his iconic status as the personification of English music seems to have clouded his judgment. Nor does it help that the one collection of his essays that has long been available in print—*National Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), later editions (London: Oxford University Press, 1963 and 1987) are supplemented by other essays—draws on writings that principally come from this later period (the 1930s through the 1950s). All the more reason, then, to welcome this new publication, edited by David Manning, which reprints in an easily accessible form a wide range of the composer's essays and commentaries, many of them from early in his career. All 102 readings in the book have been printed before, but mostly in obscure British periodicals that are accessible only to the specialized scholar; a few appeared among the occasional essays on

music reprinted in *Heirs and Rebels* (ed. Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst [London: Oxford University Press, 1959]), the published correspondence between Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst. The rationale has been to include writings that do not appear in the various editions of *National Music*, with the result that fully forty percent of the readings date from before 1930. A number of these come from around 1900—before Vaughan Williams had made his name as a composer—and we read with interest of his early engagement with the music of Johannes Brahms, Robert Schumann, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss and others, as well as of his strong opinions about the importance of self-expression and the need to avoid conventional “good taste.”

As these early writings show, Vaughan Williams was from the first steeped in German romantic music and aesthetics. This alone helps to dispel notions of his supposed insularity and xenophobia, and opens up new critical perspectives on his music. For example, essays written between 1897 and 1910 focusing on the symphonic poem reveal a typical German idealist suspicion of the “literalness” of the “program” even as a softening of his attitudes towards the subject, also discernible over the course of those essays, reflect a growing compositional interest in the genre. (Vaughan Williams’s first symphonic poems date from 1903.) Similarly, his distaste for empty virtuosity and his insistence on “sincerity” of expression, also expressed in these early essays, testify to an unwavering advocacy of the principles of generative process and classical economy long central to the German tradition. By thus reminding us of the composer’s thoroughly continental training and practice, the early writings invite a more circumspect reading of the more overtly “nationalist” later essays. And indeed, read in tandem with the early essays, *National Music* does emerge as possessing many of the same assumptions and arguments—expressed with less nuance and subtlety, perhaps, but observable nevertheless.

But it is not the early writings alone that convey Vaughan Williams’s wide-ranging interests. Many late essays, including those on Giuseppe Verdi and Jean Sibelius, testify to this, while others fill in important gaps in our understanding of the composer—for example, his ambivalence towards Arnold Schoenberg, his fierce defense of public

arts funding, and his continuing advocacy of folksong and amateur music making into very old age. Especially interesting are program notes from his Bach Choir and Leith Hill performances in the 1920s and 1930s, which offer revealing commentary on the music of Bach, Antonin Dvořák and Carl Maria von Weber. The many program notes on his own works, mostly reprinted from Michael Kennedy’s *A Catalogue of the Works of Vaughan Williams* (2d ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996]), provide ample evidence of his complex attitude towards his own music. Even those essays that duplicate topics found in *National Music* offer something new. The writings from and about *The English Hymnal* (London: H. Milford: Oxford University Press, 1906), the essays on his teachers Hubert Parry and Charles Stanford, and his loving commentaries on Gustav Holst all amplify engagingly on his previous pronouncements. The numerous writings on folksong are especially useful in this respect, for they demonstrate that Vaughan Williams had a more flexible idea about the role of the individual singer in the creative evolution of folksong than scholars of traditional music have assumed. Here and elsewhere, *Vaughan Williams on Music* serves to challenge received notions of the composer.

David Manning’s editorial hand is deft. He has organized the items into six broad thematic sections—on English musical life, continental composers, folksong, British composers, and program notes on his own and on other composers’ music—in each of which the items run chronologically. The thematic table of contents is supplemented by a chronological table of contents, a useful reference device by which all 102 items are rearranged by date of publication irrespective of their content. Manning nicely distinguishes his own footnotes from Vaughan Williams’s original footnotes by using Arabic numbers for the latter and lower case letters for the former (though this practice is nowhere explained in the editorial apparatus). These footnotes elucidate literary and musicological references to and quotations from writers as diverse as Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Cecil Forsyth and Oscar Schmitz, among many others. Most of these citations are wonderfully informative and thorough, and testify to the editor’s knowledge and research skills. There are, however, odd in-

consistencies in the amount of detail given—some notes are full of information while others are scanty—and in the failure to comment on or even identify certain quotations, like those from Robert Browning's poem "Abt Vogler" (p. 19) and Phillips Barry's *The Maine Woods Songster* (Cambridge, MA: Powell Printing Co., 1939) (p. 290), among others. Small, if understandable, lapses of this sort are echoed by the selection of items for the volume. Vaughan Williams was never one to shy away from reusing material—the same passage from Virginia Woolf appears in four separate essays printed here, for example—and if Manning is sometimes sensitive to this issue, as when he wisely omits a 1911 essay on folksong published in the *Musical Times* (p. 185), he includes perhaps too many occasional pieces that add little to the overall picture (chapters 20, 23, 24, 37, 55, 56, 66 and 75 come especially to mind). These items are far from worthless, but they are easily less valuable than some important writings they may have supplanted—notably Vaughan Williams's 1956 letter to *The Listener* in which he takes Michael Tippett to task for blithely aping Bernard Shaw's gibe against the "academic clique" at the Royal College of Music, or his very positive 1943 review, in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, of Benjamin Britten's first volume of folksong arrangements.

But these are minor complaints, inevitable in the face of such an overwhelming mass of material, that do not seriously detract from the usefulness of this volume. And they are more than compensated for by the inclusion of such wonderful discoveries as the transcript of the Howland Medal Lecture, a talk Vaughan Williams gave at Yale University in 1954. (A version of this lecture appeared as part of "The Making of Music," itself now included in *National Music*, but without the delicious asides and extra commentary found here.) Above all, *Vaughan Williams On Music* makes readily available some of the composer's most important prose writings—writings that need to be better known if we are to take the true measure of this profound musician. For this, David Manning is greatly to be thanked.

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Edmund Rubbra: Symphonist. By Leo Black. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2008. [xiii, 242 p. ISBN-13: 9781843833550. \$60.] Illustrations, bibliographic references, index, discography.

"Like yards and yards of brown linoleum." This unappealing image was applied to one of the British composer Edmund Rubbra's symphonies by his compatriot, Arthur Bliss. As cold as this judgment may seem, Bliss was hardly alone in his equivocal estimation of Rubbra's symphonic scores. Howard Ferguson wrote to Gerald Finzi, "I was very disappointed by [Rubbra's Third Symphony]—as a work, I mean—at first hearing." Finzi defended Rubbra's symphony privately by writing at the bottom of Ferguson's letter, "Well, he won't after a few more hearings." Finzi, who was often an astute critic of the work of his contemporaries, wrote to a friend that he admired Rubbra's individual profile as a composer, declaring that "from the word go everything he has ever written has been Rubbra" (Stephen Banfield, *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer* [London: Faber and Faber, 1997], 99).

Surveying the whole of Rubbra's symphonic achievement suggests, however, that Finzi's assessment of his colleague's work may have been overgenerous. In fact, Rubbra took a relatively long time to work through the varied influences that contributed to the formation of his idiom. That Rubbra is relatively little performed today, even in Britain, is hardly the result of a lack of industry, intelligence, or invention; Rubbra composed eleven symphonies, as well as a substantial body of chamber music and some of the loveliest choral music written during the last century. The currently low value of Rubbra's shares on the stock exchange of musical opinion is due in part to the unevenness of his output allied to the very models upon which he predicated his work. Few, if any, twentieth-century composers were as resolutely indifferent to fashion as was Edmund Rubbra.

Astonishingly, the main currents of twentieth-century modernism left Rubbra's music largely untouched; there is no discernable trace of the influence of Stravinsky or Schoenberg in his symphonies. Rubbra took as his principal models the