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Masques, Mayings and Music-Dramas: Vaughan Williams and the Early Twentieth-Century Stage by Roger Savage (review)

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Interested parties may search for and identify concordant sources in the repertoire of Italian *partimenti* and solfeggi from approximately 1700–1850 and 1730–1830, respectively. Together with the companion Web sites, *Counterpoint and Partimento* is a laudable contribution to modern-day knowl-

edge of eighteenth-century Neapolitan musical practice. As contemporary views of historical musical training continue to build, Peter van Tour's study will remain a vital pillar.

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MUSIC FOR THE STAGE

Masques, Mayings and Music-Dramas: Vaughan Williams and the Early Twentieth-Century Stage. By Roger Savage. Woodbridge, Suffolk, Eng.: Boydell Press, 2014. [ix, 390 p. ISBN 9781843839194. \$99.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, appendix, index.

Ralph Vaughan Williams's reputation rests largely on his large-scale orchestral and choral works, and to a lesser extent on his solo vocal music and songs. His "nationalist" activities as a polemical essayist and activist on behalf of amateur music making have also attracted notice, focusing a certain amount of attention on the church music and folk song arrangements that he composed in fulfilment of this mission. Lost in most discussions, however, has been any real appreciation for his stage music. When it has been noticed at all, it has usually been to dismiss it as dilettantish, the work of a man who "was not a born musician of the theater" (as the critic Richard Capell famously put it in his *Daily Telegraph* review of the 1936 opera *The Poisoned Kiss*; quoted in Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* [London: Oxford University Press, 1980], 251). And yet, throughout his long creative life, Vaughan Williams was constantly engaged in theatrical projects. He completed six operas, another six ballets and "masques," and was forever contemplating more works in these genres (a number of which were left uncompleted at his death). He wrote well over a dozen scores of incidental music for stage and radio plays, and made major contributions to film music. Admittedly, not all the stage music matches the quality of the orchestral and choral masterpieces, but some of it, notably the opera *Riders to the Sea* and the score for the film *Scott of the Antarctic*, clearly does. And the 1930 ballet *Job* is one the outstanding works of the interwar period by any composer.

Roger Savage's new book is not exactly "about" Vaughan Williams's stage music.

Indeed, in some ways, it is not even—or at least, not always—"about" Vaughan Williams. Its true subject is the turn-of-the-twentieth-century English musical stage, aspects of which Savage explores in eight widely-varied essays. Thus, one chapter investigates the sudden vogue for the Jacobean Masque, both in new and revived forms, and relates it to the late-Victorian and Edwardian search for a newly non-naturalistic and ritualistic theater that exercised writers like W. B. Yeats and Arthur Symons. Another explores the writings and theories of Reginald Buckley, the North Country autodidact and visionary who conceived of an "English Bayreuth" at Glastonbury and wrote the librettos for a massive Arthurian cycle that was partially set to music by Rutland Boughton. A third examines the work of the avant-garde theater director and polemicist Edward Gordon Craig and his failed collaboration with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes on an "English ballet" entitled *Cupid and Psyche*. Vaughan Williams makes important appearances in these chapters—as the arranger of one of the masques, as an observer and wry commentator on Buckley, and as the projected composer of the Craig–Diaghilev ballet, respectively—but is not a leading player in them.

His role is significantly larger in other essays in the collection, however. A piece on the 1911 *Pageant of London*, a mammoth, multiday, open-air production that was itself the centerpiece of the "Festival of Empire" marking the coronation of George V, includes detailed discussion of the suite of folk tunes he arranged for the pageant's "Merrie England" scene. Another, on

“Gypsophilia,” the early twentieth-century literary and artistic enthusiasm for fantasized notions of the carefree life of the “traveling people,” places special emphasis on Gypsy elements discernible in various Vaughan Williams operatic projects, notably *Hugh the Drover*. A related essay on the turn-of-the-century literary “cult of the vagabond”—the essays, travel books, novels and poems extolling “the open road” that sprang up everywhere before World War I—focuses on the composer’s song cycle after Robert Louis Stevenson, *Songs of Travel*, and the opera *The Pilgrim’s Progress* that he fashioned from John Bunyan’s work of the same name.

Where the composer emerges as the undisputed “leading man” is in the remaining two essays. The first examines the 1929 opera *Sir John in Love*, the inspiration for which Savage traces back to Vaughan Williams’s two stints as musical director of Frank Benson’s theatrical troupe at Stratford-upon-Avon for several weeks during 1912 and 1913. The second explores Vaughan Williams’s role in the revival of Henry Purcell’s stage (and other) works, arguing somewhat surprisingly that, with Benjamin Britten, he was “perhaps the most committed” (p. 144) of a long line of Purcellians that included Charles Villiers Stanford, Bernard Shaw, Gustav Holst, Peter Warlock, and Michael Tippett.

The unsteady focus on Vaughan Williams is more apparent than real, as Savage, a distinguished music theater historian, works to show how the period’s variegated theatrical concerns all ended up involving the composer in some way. As such, he provides a valuable service in demonstrating that, however we may view him today, Vaughan Williams emphatically saw *himself* as a “musician of the theater.” Further, in writing a book that places the early twentieth-century English theater at the very center of the period’s artistic and cultural preoccupations, Savage demonstrates yet another way that we can assess Vaughan Williams’s centrality to the era. This is where the book’s seeming lack of focus emerges as a strength, for the freewheeling approach permits topics not normally part of the Vaughan Williams discourse—“vagabondage” and Gypsophilia, but also suffragism, futurism, racism and eugenics, spiritualism, “Merrie Englandism,” imperialism, Wagnerism, and ritualism, among

others—to come to the fore. Reading this book, it becomes clear that these topics are as vital to an understanding of the composer and his music as the many very well-trod themes (folklorism, revivalism, antiquarianism, paganism, etc.) that the book also covers. Future scholars neglecting this expansion of topics will do so at their peril.

Of course, it is not just in its thematic alusiveness that the volume compels, but also in the methodological sophistication by which themes are shown to intersect. Thus in the essay on vagabondage, Savage touches on German Romantic notions of wanderlust and its reemergence in turn-of-the-century Britain; the vogue for walking imagery in contemporary painting, music, and especially literature (where it surfaced in both “popular” and “highbrow” publications); the broadly liberal and even utopian aesthetics of the movement (a metaphor, basically, for escape from conformity and urbanization); and even the ways that older, somewhat intransigent literary texts such as *The Pilgrim’s Progress* were comprehensively reinterpreted according to its lights. All of this on top of a first-rate biographical and compositional explication of Vaughan Williams’s own involvement in the walking movement. The essay on Gypsophilia, meanwhile, is even more wide-ranging, touching not only on its appearance in the various artistic media of the period but also on its connections to contemporaneous developments in folklore (the Gypsy Lore Society), revivalism (song collecting work with Gypsies), and even classical scholarship (the theories of the so-called Cambridge Ritualists who were just then tracing the *agon* [struggle] of classical Greek theater back to ancient fertility rites). Savage, a longtime (now retired) member of the Department of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, is at his virtuosic best in linking the many different kinds of literary texts he invokes. He draws extensively on family and social networks, as well as on contemporaneous newspaper reports, to make unexpected but wonderfully apt connections, and he shows an amazing knowledge of small and often obscure details from Vaughan Williams’s life and works to drive these connections home. Savage, it seems, has read everything, and as he leaves no stone unturned, we are treated to an extraordinarily rich portrait of an entire milieu.

Savage's facility does occasionally push the material too far, especially in those moments when he poses hypothetical questions in the absence of hard evidence. Usually, these are firmly on target and help make valuable points that would otherwise be missed, as when he imaginatively pursues parallels between the Ritualists' ideas and *Hugh the Drover's* plot. Elsewhere, the surmises can seem forced, as when he speculates (pp. 62–63) that the 1905 masque *Pan's Anniversary* attuned Vaughan Williams to similarly pagan elements in Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (the proof somewhat tenuously adduced is that one of the themes in Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony possibly derives from Ravel's work). Nor does it help that the argumentation at these speculative moments is necessarily quite lengthy and involved. The elaborate hand-wringing over the whereabouts of Cecil Forsyth's lost orchestration of the *Pageant of London* music, itemized step-by-step in an extremely long footnote (pp. 294–95), seems unwarranted in view of the following discussion, which hardly hinges on matters of scoring. An appendix (pp. 365–69) discussing Vaughan Williams's and Virginia Woolf's shared belief in the "communal voice" lying behind individual masterworks—a passage principally given over to the review of earlier literary incarnations of this idea—adds very little to our understanding and seems chiefly designed to provide an opportunity to parade a virtuoso knowledge of disparate nineteenth-century writings. But as such virtuosity is also the means by which the author forges so many valuable and previously-unguessed-at connections, we can accept these (in any event very few) "misfires" as the inevitable consequence of a highly inventive and resourceful method.

Of slightly more concern is the heavy emphasis on "Englishness" that the book presents. Savage's interests naturally gravitate to native folk song and dance as well as to the revival of Elizabethan and Jacobean musical theatre, and while this results in many indispensable observations, as noted, there is a sense in which continental issues and influences, though mentioned occasionally, are given short shrift. Thus, in emphasizing the eighteenth-century "English ballad opera" qualities of *Sir John*, the author downplays Vaughan Williams's adaptation of mainstream European operatic

conventions, notably leitmotifs as well as ensemble structures and strategies, that are no less central to the opera's design. Similarly, the wonderfully apt and (to me) strikingly novel identification of Purcell as a model for Vaughan Williams's own functionalist philosophy of the composer as a "servant of the State" (p. 156) is somewhat vitiated by a failure even to mention the composer whom Vaughan Williams himself cited as his main inspiration in this matter: J. S. Bach. Savage does give generous space to the Ballets Russes and the large dose of continental modernism it brought to the English scene, but generally only when discussing Craig, not Vaughan Williams. In the latter connection, tellingly, it is chiefly the company's interest in folk anthropology that the author chooses to discuss.

Such concerns are ultimately unimportant, however, for there can be no question that, however much he took from the European mainstream, Vaughan Williams's chief interest *was* to build on and strengthen a uniquely English musical tradition. Personally, I believe that one reason for Vaughan Williams's subdued international presence today is his resistance to traditional conventions of genre—the splashy overture, the showy concerto, the full-throated opera. Even the symphonies, for all that they make reference to nineteenth-century teleological procedure, are chock full of eccentric departures from continental forms and methods. And all because, as he once quoted Mikhail Glinka saying about himself, he wanted to "make his own people 'feel at home'" (Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays*, 2d ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987], 57). Hence his abiding interest in native folk song and dance, "Jacobethan" musical theatre, Purcell, Bunyan, and English ballad opera. Hence, too, his involvement with the contemporaneous walking cult, Gypsophilia and the many other "isms" of the period reflected a wholehearted engagement with the society around him. In drawing attention to the depth of this engagement, in ways scarcely appreciated until the appearance of his book, we owe Roger Savage profound thanks.

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