

A Sea Symphony

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)



PROGRAMME NOTES

by John Bawden

A Song for All Seas, All Ships: Andante maestoso

On the Beach at Night Alone: Largo sostenuto

Scherzo: The Waves: Allegro brillante

The Explorers: Grave e molto adagio

After the death of Purcell in 1695, English music went into a long period of decline that lasted until the late 19th century. Eventually, the tireless efforts of Charles Stanford, Hubert Parry and others brought about the long-awaited English musical renaissance, which reached its full flowering with the emergence of Edward Elgar. He was followed by a whole new

generation of talented composers, the leading figure of which was Ralph Vaughan Williams, who for half a century remained one of the most influential figures in English music. Like Elgar, he too was a late developer, reaching his mid-thirties before attracting serious attention as a composer.

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th the work of the American poet Walt Whitman seemed to many to capture the essence of the new age, portraying an optimistic vision of a world inspired by human and scientific endeavour and the spirit of adventure. As well as Vaughan Williams, several other British composers - notably Holst and Delius - turned to Whitman's groundbreaking collection, *Leaves of Grass*, for inspiration. The radical, humanistic philosophy of Whitman's verse held a particular appeal for Vaughan Williams. He had already produced some songs to Whitman texts when in 1903 he began to think about writing something of an altogether larger scale. First came *Toward the Unknown Region* (1907), also a setting of Whitman. Then in 1909, after a gestation of nearly six years, he completed *A Sea Symphony*, the great choral and orchestral work which, more than any other, put Vaughan Williams firmly on the musical map when it was first performed in October 1910 (only a few weeks after his *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*).

The *Sea Symphony* is a remarkable achievement. Vaughan Williams was not blessed with the natural talent of a Holst or a Britten; his success was due in large part to his single-minded determination. Though in his thirties, he was still a relatively inexperienced composer and had so far made only a modest impression on the musical world, yet for his first symphony he chose to write a choral symphony, a hugely ambitious project and one with almost no precedent. True, Beethoven and Mendelssohn had both produced choral symphonies, but these are essentially orchestral works with the

addition of soloists and chorus in the last movement. The closest parallel is Mahler's monumental 8th symphony. However, since this was premièred only a month before the *Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams must have been unaware of it for most if not all of the time that he was composing his own work.

Vaughan Williams proved more than equal to the challenging task he had set himself. British choral music had enjoyed a long and distinguished tradition, from Purcell and Handel through to Stanford, Parry and Elgar, but the striking originality of the *Sea Symphony*, the masterly handling of the orchestral and choral forces, its boldness, energy and vivid orchestration, set it apart as a wholly new and important addition to the choral repertoire. Even more significantly, it hailed the triumphant arrival of a new and powerful voice in English music. Vaughan Williams had succeeded in creating a definitive musical style drawn from genuinely English roots, rather than continuing, as his immediate predecessors had chosen to do, in the Austro-German tradition that had dominated European music since Beethoven's time.

The composer selected verses from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for the first three movements and from his *Passage to India* for the last. Whitman uses images of brave sailors exploring the vast oceans as a colourful metaphor for the voyage through life of the human soul, a universal message that must have held considerable personal significance for Vaughan Williams, who at that time was still striving for recognition.

The first movement, **A Song for all Seas, all Ships**, opens with a brief but dramatic brass fanfare in B flat minor, immediately reiterated by the choir to the stirring words, 'Behold, the sea itself', and arrestingly transposed to the tonic key of D major at the word 'sea'. These two devices - the fanfare itself and the harmonic juxtaposition of major and minor tonalities a third apart - recur throughout the work as unifying features. This opening section of the symphony vividly evokes the immensity and primal force of the sea. A change of mood is introduced with the appearance of a shanty-like theme depicting the 'dashing spray' and 'winds piping and blowing'. The fanfare returns for the soprano soloist's dramatic appearance, when the focus of attention shifts to the 'soul of man'. A moving lament for those who have lost their lives at sea then leads to the final section, an extended passage beginning with the words 'Emblem of man elate above death', culminating in a powerful climax, after which the waves subside and calm is restored.

The slow movement, **On the Beach at Night Alone**, is an atmospheric nocturne introduced by the orchestra, whose alternating tonalities of C minor and E major evoke the lapping of waves on the shore. The baritone soloist ponders humankind's place in the 'vast similitude' that encompasses and unites all time and space. He is joined by the full chorus, and the music gradually increases in intensity. The reflective mood then returns, the soloist's meditations soon dissolving into a tranquil orchestral epilogue.

The third movement, **The Waves**, is purely pictorial, and is a virtuosic scherzo for choir and orchestra. Beginning with a modified version of the fanfare motif, Vaughan Williams brilliantly depicts the sea in all its fearsome power, with an exhilarating portrayal of wind and waves and the great vessel ploughing its way through the ocean.

The finale, **The Explorers**, opens with the majestic phrase, 'O vast Rondure, swimming in space', set to a melody which the composer later acknowledged was strongly influenced by Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. This expansive introduction prepares the way for further development of the metaphysical concepts explored in the first two movements. The climax of the movement, and of the symphony, is reached at 'Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, the true son of God shall come singing his songs'. There follows a sublime duet for the soprano and baritone soloists, after which an urgent cry of 'Away, O soul, hoist instantly the anchor' is heard to a shanty rhythm, and the ship is made ready. The concluding section of the work is serenely radiant, as the anchor is weighed and both ship and soul set sail on their quest, eventually disappearing from view as they voyage into the great unknown.

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*(Through his lifelong involvement with choral music as a singer, conductor and writer, **John Bawden** has accumulated an extensive knowledge of the choral repertoire. His choral programme notes are freely available online.)*