

Richard Hickox Interview

When I'm conducting a piece for the first time I start with the music, the absolute music and with the score. I might listen to one recording once just to give me a very quick entrance into that sound world. And then as you start to prepare the music you try and read around its background: the background to the composer and the background to how that piece was written. So you need to do your research but I like to start from the score and make my own mind up about the kind of piece I think it is. And I think when I'm studying the score I'm trying to be very conscious of the structure of a piece so you find out where the peak of a movement is. Otherwise, if you have peak after peak, it's boring. You need to see where is the one moment that is greater than all the others, and you are aiming for that one. So you are finding the architecture, and there's no shortcut to that, you can't do that through listening to records, you have to study.

I try and make my own judgments, but it's always very heartening when you do hear a recording and you hear the things that you've been thinking about confirmed one way or the other. I mean sometimes you'll hear a recording and you know that's exactly how not to do it, and sometimes it's an absolute model of how to do it. I think the early recordings of Sir Adrian Boult, not the later ones for EMI but the early ones on Bellards, are revelatory because the composer was present at all those sessions and they'd obviously worked so closely together: they had such life, such vigour.

I think for many years that Vaughan Williams was misunderstood as a pastoral, very English, very reserved composer: very reserved man. We know now that he was a passionate, angry man. He had so many things in his life to make him angry. I mean he had the First World War where he was a stretcher carrier in the trenches. You know the Fourth Symphony which was a really angry piece: some people say it's about the war, some people say it's about his emotional life and some people say he just wanted to write a damn good symphony.

You know I think that Vaughan Williams and Elgar particularly; our speech has lots of rise and fall, and our countryside where they knew so well has lots of rise and fall: I think the landscape of England really did affect them, particularly Elgar actually, and I think that rise and fall of our language and our spoken language comes from that and therefore the leaps of the melodic lines come from that.

I think one of the things about the Fourth Symphony that was so angry that we've been talking about was his realisation that England would never be the same again after the war, and of course things have changed. No I don't believe that the symphonies are about England as they are today, or even as England was really, I think it was how he was, I think it's far more autobiographical. It's just music that he had to write.