

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

The Pilgrim's Progress

From early in his career Vaughan Williams believed that an opera could be extracted from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. What appealed to him was the story's universal significance, no matter to which race or creed one belonged. For this reason he called the principal character 'Pilgrim' and not 'Christian'. In 1906 he wrote some incidental music for an amateur production at Reigate, Surrey. Then in 1922 a single episode, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*, was produced as a one-act opera. Between then and the mid-1930s he composed more of the music of Acts I and II of the final version, but again put it aside. Some of the themes were used in the Fifth Symphony, composed between 1938 and 1943. Incidental music for a BBC broadcast version with John Gielgud in 1943 was a stimulus for revision of the libretto and by 1949 the opera, or *Morality*, as he preferred it to be called, was finished. The first performance was given at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on 26 April 1951, as part of the Festival of Britain. It had no more than a *succès d'estime*. The principal critical objection was that it lacked dramatic shape and should be performed in cathedrals as a kind of pageant - an idea to which the composer was wholeheartedly opposed. He insisted that it was a stage piece or nothing.

The text of the libretto is chiefly from Bunyan, with additions from the Psalms and other biblical sources. The words of Lord Lechery's song at Vanity Fair in Act III are by Ursula Wood, who became the composer's wife in 1953. The adaptation of the book is very free. We do not see Pilgrim's wife, whereas Mr By-Ends gains one; Faithful and Hopeful do not appear, nor does Mr Valiant-for-Truth. Pilgrim's escape from Vanity Fair utilises his escape from Doubting Castle.

Musically the opera is Vaughan Williams at his most visionary, sustaining as he so well could a mood of exaltation and rapture and at the same time, as in *Vanity Fair*, giving us an earthly, bustling picture to remind us that he was, after all, the composer of the robust Fourth Symphony as well as of the meditative Fifth.

.

SYNOPSIS

Prologue and Act I

The prelude is based on the hymn tune *York*. Bunyan is in his cell in Bedford Gaol writing his allegory. To a theme representing distress, Pilgrim appears, as in a dream, crying "What shall I do to be saved?". He encounters the Evangelist (E flat minor and D minor chords) who sends him to the Wicket Gate to music well known as the second subject of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony. As he sets out, his neighbours bid him to turn back, but in vain. Scene II (The House Beautiful) is a choral tableau, and here the slow movement of the Fifth Symphony is heard in its original inspiration as the accompaniment to Pilgrim's aria "He shall give me rest". Pilgrim is greeted by Three Shining Ones who relieve him of his burden. He knocks on the gate of the House to which he is admitted after a symbolic robing ceremony.

Between the acts there is an Intermezzo in the form of a memorable baritone aria by Watchful, the porter, to the words "Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit".

Act II

After five solemn bars, a trumpet fanfare introduces a Herald who tells us that this is the King's Highway and asks who will go upon it. Pilgrim answers "Set my name down, Sir". There follows a dialogue between Pilgrim and the Herald into which, line by line, is interpolated the splendid setting of "Who would true valour see" (not the well-known V.W. hymn-tune but a new, related version). Pilgrim puts on the whole armour of light while the chorus sing and he joins them, declaring "I will not be afraid for the terror by night". He sets forth upon his journey to an orchestral interlude in which discordant elements, indicative of perils to follow, conflict with the sturdiness of the "true valour" theme. As Scene II (The Valley of Humiliation) opens, the music is chilly and menacing, with howls from the chorus of "doleful creatures". Pilgrim's way is barred by the monster Apollyon, whose utterances are reinforced by howls and snarls from his oppressed subjects. In the ensuing fight Pilgrim kills Apollyon. The scene ends in tranquillity. Pilgrim has been wounded and feels his strength ebbing away. Harp and strings preface the arrival of Two Heavenly Beings (soprano and contralto) who succour him with the Tree of Life and the Water of Life. They are joined by Evangelist who blesses Pilgrim and warns him of what awaits him at Vanity Fair but bids him be faithful unto death and he shall receive the Crown of Life. He gives Pilgrim his staff, the Roll of the Word and the Key of Promise, which he hangs round Pilgrim's neck.

Act III

A garish orchestral introduction sets the scene for Vanity Fair. Traders are selling their wares (chorus of "What will ye buy?"). Lord Lechery (buffo tenor) has a jaunty leering solo offering "dark girl or fair, soft limbs and sweet bosoms". The crowd suddenly notice a stranger (Pilgrim) in their midst and renew their calls of "buy, buy, buy". But Pilgrim is sales-resistant and replies "Turn my eyes lest they behold vanity". Demas offers him gold and silver, Judas Iscariot has a proposition, Worldly Glory offers the Kingdoms of the World, Lord Lechery, Madam Wanton and Madam Bubble also make their attractions very clear but Pilgrim stoically replies "I buy the truth". This is the last thing the crowd want to hear because they are subjects of Beelzebub, the father of lies, and when Pilgrim makes offensive references to their master he is prevented from leaving the town. Enter Lord Hate-good at this point. He orders Pilgrim to be brought before him and tries him for his offences on the evidence of some disreputable witnesses, among them Envy, Malice and Superstition (a fine passage this, essentially dramatic). Hate-good sentences Pilgrim to death on the morrow after a night in gaol. The crowd chant "Bind him, away with him" and the scene changes.

A cor anglais solo introduced Pilgrim lying in his cell. In a noble aria, he asks why God has forsaken him. Then he remembers the Key of Promise, unlocks the gate and sees the landscape under bright moonlight. He sings "Show me the way, O Lord, teach me Thy paths". To music in the vein of the *Serenade to Music*, the Pilgrim sings a paraphrase of the psalm about the wings of the morning before he goes through the gate and along the King's Highway.

Act IV

On the edge of a wood with the Delectable Mountains in the distance. A horn and woodwind evoke pastoral calm. The Woodcutter's Boy, sitting chopping firewood, sings "He that is down need fear no fall". Pilgrim enters and marvels at the boy's happiness, as well he might, for the tune is one of Vaughan Williams's loveliest songs. The Boy shows him the Delectable Mountains but is interrupted by the arrival of the jovial By-Ends couple, whose music is in a delightful humorous style. Mrs By-Ends defines their opportunist philosophy, but Pilgrim rejects their offer to accompany him. They for their part are unwilling to change their half-hearted views to accord with his sterner religion.

The Boy tells him of the beauties of the Mountains beyond which are the gates of the Celestial City. The orchestra quotes *York* again and the scene ends with the Boy singing his song, echoed by

clarinet, with a viola solo which leads directly into Scene II, The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains.

Three shepherds are praying just before sunset, and we are not only near the Celestial City but in the Vaughan Williams world of the *Pastoral Symphony* and *Flos Campi*. Pilgrim enters and asks if he is on the right road to the Celestial City. The Shepherds reassure him but ask him to rest awhile with them, where "the air is very sweet and pleasant, here you shall hear continually the song of birds and shall see every day flowers appear in the land". The Voice of a Bird sings the 23rd Psalm and Pilgrim and the Shepherds join in.

A Celestial Messenger arrives to tell Pilgrim that the Master calls for him to "stand in his presence this day in clothes of immortality". Pilgrim's heart is ceremoniously pierced with an arrow, the Shepherds anoint him and Pilgrim enters and crosses the River of Death.

A distant trumpet heralds the start of Scene III and the chorus, gradually getting nearer, sing "alleluia" and "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord" as Pilgrim ascends into the *lux perpetua* of the Celestial City. The orchestra solemnly plays *York* as the voices and bells ring out. Gradually the vision fades and we are back in Bedford Gaol with Bunyan bidding us to "lay my book, thy head and heart together". So ends a great spiritual experience in music.

© Michael Kennedy 2008