

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

A Sea Symphony

- I. A Song for All Seas, All Ships *Moderato maestoso*
- II. On the Beach at Night, Alone *Largo sostenuto*
- III. Scherzo: The Waves *Allegro brillante*
- IV. The Explorers *Grave e molto adagio – Andante con moto*

In the early years of the 20th century, the sea was a popular subject for composers - Elgar's *Sea Pictures* (actually 1899), Debussy's *La mer*, Stanford's *Songs of the Sea* and Frank Bridge's *The Sea* being obvious examples. Another preoccupation for British composers was the poetry of the American Walt Whitman. Settings by Stanford, Charles Wood and others paved the way for Delius, Holst and Harty and especially for Ralph Vaughan Williams, who brought both these inspirations together in *A Sea Symphony*. He had been introduced to Whitman's work by Bertrand Russell while they were undergraduates at Cambridge. It was an enthusiasm that never cooled. In 1903 he began to sketch a Whitman choral work tentatively called *Songs of the Sea*, the start of the symphony's six-year gestation. Between then and its completion in 1909, he collected hundreds of folk-songs, edited *The English Hymnal*, wrote three *Norfolk Rhapsodies*, studied with Ravel, and composed the Whitman setting *Toward the Unknown Region*. The *Scherzo* and slow movement of what was for a while re-titled *Ocean Symphony* were sketched first, followed by parts of the first movement and finale. In 1906 he wrote a movement for baritone and women's chorus called *The Steersman*, but discarded it. He knew by now that he was no longer composing a cantata but a full-scale choral symphony (for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra) which at that date had few if any predecessors. Much of the music is descriptive of the sea, particularly *The Waves*, but in the other movements the sea becomes a metaphor for a voyage into eternity.

Vaughan Williams conducted the first performance (for a fee of twenty guineas) on 12 October 1910, his thirty-eighth birthday, at the Leeds Festival, where *Toward the Unknown Region* had been such a success in 1907. The symphony was included in an evening concert in which the other work was Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto with the composer as soloist. Its rapturous reception left no doubt that Vaughan Williams was now the leading English figure in the post-Elgar generation. Imagine the thrill for that first audience of hearing the work's wonderful opening - the fanfare on the brass followed by the full chorus's exultant 'Behold the sea itself'. Themes from this introduction recur in various guises throughout the work. The theme for the line 'and on its limitless heaving breast, the ships' was lifted from an early symphonic-poem, *The Solent*, and reappeared nearly fifty years later in the Ninth Symphony. This visionary passage is followed by jauntier, more obviously nautical music introducing the baritone's thoughts of ships, waves, flags and 'a chant for the sailors of all nations'. When the soprano enters, she too invokes the idea of flags and ship-signals but introduces a more sombre mood with her mention of the 'soul of man' and one flag above all the rest, 'emblem of man elate above death' and a 'token of all who went down doing their duty'. Here the music of the introduction underpins a great choral climax. It is this ideal of a 'pennant universal' waving over 'all sailors and ships' that brings the movement to a quiet ending with a reminiscence of the 'Behold the sea' theme by the soloists.

The slow movement is a nocturne for the baritone, accompanied first by the semi-chorus (an innovation borrowed from Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*) and later by the full chorus. Dark and ambiguous harmonies create a mystical atmosphere as the soloist, standing on the shore under the bright stars, ponders the clef of the universes and of the future, his words echoed by the semi-

chorus of women's voices. Horns introduce a quicker episode as the baritone and chorus contemplate 'vast similitude' interlocking all. At the thought of this, the music grows more ecstatic until the baritone's opening music returns and this poetic movement ends quietly like many another Vaughan Williams symphonic movement. Philosophical meditation is banished from the *scherzo*, which catered for the virtuosity of the Leeds chorus. The soloists are silent and it is left to the full chorus to describe the winds and waves 'laughing and buoyant with curves'. The fanfare with which the work opened is recalled and two folk-songs, *The Golden Vanity* and *The Bold Princess Royal*, are quoted. The trio section is a grand and broad Parryesque tune depicting the 'great vessel sailing' and the waves following in its wake. The last two bars of the movement, when the chorus shouts 'following' after the orchestra has stopped, were cribbed, on the composer's admission, from the end of the *Gloria* of Beethoven's Mass in D.

The *finale* is the longest, most ambitious and - sprawling and formless' as some have found it - most moving section of the symphony. It is heavily indebted - and no worse for it - to Elgar's *Gerontius* as Vaughan Williams specified, citing the phrase 'Thou art calling me' which can be heard in the rapturous orchestral passage (with organ) which concludes the introductory section, 'O vast rondure, swimming in space'. Next a modal episode takes us to the Garden of Eden and the creation of humankind. 'Wherefore, unsatisfied soul?' the semi-chorus ask, to be answered by the full chorus with its declaration that 'finally shall come the poet worthy that name, the true son of God shall come singing his songs'. This is the cue for the return of the soloists, excited at first but turning to a lyrical meditation on 'silent thoughts of Time and Space and Death'. This is the emotional core of the symphony. They are rejoined by the chorus, also in visionary mood. The end of the voyage is near. 'Away, O soul! Hoist instantly the anchor!' sets off an outburst of shanty-like rhythms but soon subsides into a calmer mood as the soloists sing 'O farther, farther sail!' and the music recedes from our hearing like a ship disappearing over the horizon.

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