

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

A London Symphony

- I. *Lento – Allegro risoluto*
- II. *Lento*
- III. *Scherzo (Nocturne). Allegro vivace*
- IV. *Finale – Epilogue*

The first mention of *A London Symphony* is in a letter from Vaughan Williams to Cecil Sharp in July 1911. "I am in the middle of a great work", he wrote, "& unless I get stuck in it I don't want to leave it". This suggests he may even have begun to compose it as early as 1910. His friend the composer George Butterworth had urged him to write a symphony, so some sketches for a symphonic poem about London were looked out and "thrown into symphonic form". The day after the first performance on 27 March 1914, Butterworth wrote to VW that he was "frightfully glad" that "you have at last achieved something worthy of your gifts... I really advise you not to alter a note of the Symph. until after its second performance (which is bound to come soon) - the passages I kicked at didn't bother me at all, because the music as a whole is so definite that a little occasional meandering is pleasant rather than otherwise. As to the scoring, I frankly don't understand how it all comes off so well, but it does all sound right, so there's nothing more to be said".

The general critical reception of the symphony was favourable but the composer himself - according to the critic A. H. Fox Strangways - went about "asking friends to tell him what to cut out". So it is clear that he was dissatisfied with it from the start (as he was with most of his works). Within a week of the first performance, he had an inquiry from Paris about a projected performance in a concert at the Théâtre du Châtelet. There was also mention of a performance in November in Edinburgh. Neither performance materialised. At some point in this period, the manuscript full score was sent to Germany, whence it never returned. Butterworth organised a reconstruction from the original parts with the help of Vaughan Williams, E. J. Dent, and Geoffrey Toye (who had conducted the first performance). It is on this score that tonight's performance is based.

This score was used on 18 February 1918, when Adrian Boult conducted and the composer was present. After this the long process of revision began. Boult planned a repeat performance for 18 March and Vaughan Williams wrote to him late in February: "I agree with you that the last movement & possibly the scherzo...are too long - but it is re-writing they want - I do not think that mechanical cutting, however skilfully done, wd. be satisfactory". Before going back to France before 18 March, Vaughan Williams made some cuts and changes for this fifth performance. More cuts and revisions were made for a performance conducted by Albert Coates on 4 May 1920. This was followed by publication of the score the same year dedicated to the memory of Butterworth who had been killed in action in 1916. Further revisions were made in 1933 ("some of the bad bits were cut out", V.W. said) and a few more in 1934. The revised full score appeared in 1936, but some of the 1920 orchestral parts continued to circulate in the United States, which is why Eugene Goossens's 1941 recording with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra contains passages which were no longer heard in Britain.

There can be no question of the original version supplanting the revision. The 1936 score represents the symphony as Vaughan Williams wanted it to exist for posterity. The cuts and re-scoring were his own decisions, not forced on him, like Bruckner's, by well-meaning friends.

Vaughan Williams would and did ask for advice, but never took it against his own inclinations. But that does not prevent our savouring and relishing the first version in all its sprawling glory. One can hear why Bernard Herrmann and Sir Arnold Bax mourned the loss of certain episodes. Undoubtedly the conciseness of the revision is a gain, but the work in its pristine form, if I may again make a comparison V.W. would have abhorred, is even more "Mahlerian" in its generous ability to "embrace everything". The cuts amounted to 20 minutes of music. The only movement which remained unchanged was the first. The second was condensed, the *scherzo* was given a new coda, and the *finale* underwent several changes, notably in the *Epilogue*, which was considerably shortened.

Despite its programmatic basis, the symphony remains acceptable as "absolute" music. The influence of Elgar is apparent and was admitted, but it is obvious that the symphony was contemporary with Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Debussy's *Nocturnes* and *La Mer*. Yet all these influences are absorbed into one of the most characteristic of Vaughan Williams's works - the symphony he himself liked best of his nine, as he confided to Sir John Barbirolli.

The slow, quiet introduction depicts dawn, with London "lying still", as Wordsworth saw it. Harp and clarinet sound the half-hour of the Westminster chimes, the music wakes to busy life and the main *allegro* section begins with one tune after another scurrying along. A declamatory second subject (woodwind and brass) leads into a high-spirited episode - Hampstead Heath on August Bank Holiday, perhaps - and this is followed, after a brief return to the material of the first subject group, by a quiet, delicately scored passage which perhaps depicts a church or one of London's parks. The movement ends with a grandiose restatement of the second subject.

Vaughan Williams likened the slow movement to "Bloomsbury Square on a November afternoon". Against a background of wide-spaced chords on the strings, the cor anglais plays a melancholy tune marked *misterioso*. This opening passage is repeated in E major scored for harps and trombones and with a horn taking over from the cor anglais and sounding the rising fourth which is a thematic feature of the introduction to the first movement. Viola and woodwind have a dialogue which quotes a lavender-seller's cry and the jingle of hansom-cabs is heard. The music now becomes restless and eerie and rises twice to a passionate climax. As this subsides, the main themes of the movement are heard again and in the original version there is a poetic passage the deletion of which Bernard Herrmann regretted, as well he might. The solo viola closes the movement poetically.

The *scherzo* is perhaps the most picturesque movement. It begins vivaciously with fragments of themes tossed about in the orchestra. A fugato section is more portentous. The *scherzo* section is repeated and a bassoon links it with the trio (in C major) in which a convivial Cockney scene, centred on a mouth-organ and piano accordion, is vividly evoked. Harps then introduce (in tonight's version) a more sombre and almost tragic treatment of the principal themes. Horn and violin solo continue this elegiac mood and the movement ends in reflective mood. This is where the original version differs most markedly from the revised version.

The *finale* opens with a tragic *appassionato* theme like a cry of despair. Cellos introduce a slow march theme which leads directly into an animated *allegro* section dominated by a solemn theme for strings and horns. Undoubtedly some grimmer aspect of city life - the hunger marches, the slums - is the inspiration of this part of the symphony. In the first version some earlier themes are now recapitulated in an agitated episode and there is a contemplative Andantino section for strings and woodwind, the loss of which is again cause for regret. The march theme is worked up to an impassioned climax, its final statement being crowned by a stroke on the gong. The Westminster Chimes sound the third quarter and the *Epilogue* begins with a rippling figure which tells us that the Thames is its subject. This section was heavily cut in the revisions but tonight we hear it in full. The composer said that this *Epilogue* was suggested by a passage in H. G. Wells's novel *Tono-Bungay* where London is described as seen from a ship sailing down the river towards the sea: "To run down the Thames so is to run one's hand over the pages in the book of England

from end to end. The river passes - London passes, England passes . . . " Fragments of earlier themes are recalled and after a final elegiac violin solo the music swells to a quiet end.

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