

# philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS  
(1872 – 1958)

## **Pastoral Symphony**

- I. *Molto moderato*
- II. *Lento moderato* [originally *Andantino*]
- III. *Moderato pesante*
- IV. *Lento*

Why did Vaughan Williams call his third symphony 'Pastoral Symphony'? Certainly not to provide a comparison with Beethoven. There are no imitation bird-calls, no thunderstorms and no 'awakening of happy feelings on arriving in the countryside'. Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral* - perhaps his greatest and most original symphony - begins with flutes and bassoons playing oscillating triads in quavers, followed by a solo violin accompanied by *tremolando* chords. The mood is gently elegiac, and there lies the clue. The symphony is directly related to the First World War of 1914-18. Vaughan Williams, although forty-one when war was declared, enlisted as a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps and served in France. Like many others, he never spoke afterwards of the horrors he had witnessed there, but they left their mark. He began this symphony shortly after his return to civilian life and completed it by June 1921 (the scoring was slightly revised in 1950-51). The composer never publicly gave any clues as to what lay behind the music, leaving its title to mislead most commentators into portraying it as a kind of Cotswold rhapsody or a distillation of English folksong (partly true) and into making silly remarks about cows looking over gates or 'V.W. rolling over and over in a ploughed field'. To his future wife, Ursula, he confided in 1939:

It's not really lambkins frisking at all, as most people take for granted. . . It's really wartime music - a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance wagon at Écoivres and we went up a steep hill and there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset.

So the *Pastoral* label is explained: not the Cotswolds, but battle-scarred France. Ironic, perhaps. It is characteristic of Vaughan Williams that what might be called his 'war requiem' is not full of trumpets and drums, nor of angry harmonic dissonances, but looks above the battle to the transcendence of sunsets and Corot. Undulating woodwind chords and consecutive triads on lower strings establish a contemplative mood such as one hears in the *finale* of Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*. The rich scoring of *A London Symphony* has been left behind. In the second movement a horn solo precedes a poignant ascending melody for strings. A cadenza for E flat trumpet playing only natural notes was inspired by the wartime memory of a bugler sounding a seventh in mistake for an octave; its effect is of an ethereal Last Post and it provokes an anguished heart-cry before it returns on the horn.

Vaughan Williams described the *scherzo* as 'of the nature of a slow dance' although it ends with some fact and mysteriously quiet music. Some of the material was sketched before 1914 when Vaughan Williams was music director at Stratford-upon-Avon and was contemplating a setting of Falstaff and the fairies in the Windsor Forest scene of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The most overtly emotional movement of the symphony is its *finale*. Its unrestrainedly impassioned central outburst might be the Écoivres sunset, but it seems to me to represent the composer's reaction to the loss of friends - the musical counterpart to the words he wrote to Gustav Holst: 'I sometimes dread coming back to normal life with so many gaps'.

The *finale* begins and ends with a wordless vocalise for solo soprano, first heard over a very soft drumroll but unaccompanied when it returns. So the human voice intrudes upon the landscape, but it is an ethereal, transcendental voice. Is it a girl singing over the killing-fields, or something more mystical? Elgar, in the second of his wartime recitations with orchestra, *Une voix dans le désert* (1915), hit upon the same poignant device of a girl's song. It is unlikely that Vaughan Williams ever heard the Elgar, but it is nevertheless curious that two of the greatest English composers should have used a similar method of conveying wartime emotion recollected in a kind of tranquillity.

The first performance was in the Queens Hall, London, on 26 January 1922 at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert conducted by Adrian Boult.

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