

# philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS  
(1872 – 1958)

## Symphony No. 8 in D minor

- I. *Fantasia (variazioni senza tema)*
- II. *Scherzo alla marcia*
- III. *Cavatina*
- IV. *Toccata*

This is the shortest and least serious of Vaughan Williams's symphonies; one hesitates to say 'lightest' since it is not without moments of vision of a more sombre character, but generally it is optimistic in mood. It was composed between 1953 and 1955 when Vaughan Williams was in his eighties. It was one of a series of late works in which he seemed to be making a point of enjoying the exotic instrumental combinations and extravagances that he had eschewed in earlier years. In this case it is the percussion section, with vibraphone, xylophone, tubular bells, glockenspiel and three tuned gongs that dominate the sound in the first and last movements - "all the 'phones and 'spiels known to the composer", he said. The symphony is dedicated to Sir John Barbirolli, who conducted the first performance at a Hallé concert in Manchester on 2 May 1956.

It would, however, be a mistake to regard the symphony as wholly or merely a *jeu d'esprit* of freakish scoring. The first movement is among the most highly and skilfully organised he wrote, with rich and diverse thematic material. Vaughan Williams called it 'seven variations in search of a theme', declaring that 'there is no definite theme' - and variations 2 and 5 were the first part of the work to be composed. In fact there are three principal closely related motifs: two rising fourths for trumpet, answered by vibraphone; a phrase for flute; and another for strings. The variations illustrate facets of this composer's style. The second, *presto*, plays around with all three motifs; the third is a chorale-like tune in A minor for strings and harp with a subsidiary theme for oboe and cello. Both these themes are derived from the initial trumpet motif, as is variation 4, an *allegretto* in 6/8 for oboe and clarinet. In the fifth variation, the trumpet figure is lengthened out by cellos and harp, joined by other instruments; No.6 is in quicker tempo and develops the flute motif in bassoons, cellos and basses. For the seventh variation the chorale tune of the third is presented *largamente*. The movement ends with the opening motif returning on the trumpet, with a final shimmer on vibraphone and strings.

The Hindemithian *scherzo* is scored for wind instruments alone. It too has three themes, or motifs - one (very perky) for bassoons, the second for trumpet and the third for flutes and other high woodwind. A *fugato* section develops, followed by a short trio (mock-pastoral?) and a brief return of the *scherzo*. In the slow movement it is now the strings' turn to hold the stage alone. Cellos play the long and sinuous principal theme in E minor, "a mix-up in my mind" (to quote the composer) with the theme of the Passion chorale "O sacred head". The second subject in A flat is given to the first violins. A rhapsodic middle section, with violin solo, does duty for development; and a solo cello dominates the coda when first and second subjects are combined. If Delius had not appropriated the title *Late Swallows*, it would have been a good choice for this beautiful old-age reverie of farewell to Tallis and larks ascending.

Vaughan Williams described the opening of the *finale* as "rather sinister" and although much of it is joyfully exuberant its opening theme, as Oliver Neighbour has pointed out, resembles Holst's melody for the Remembrance Day hymn "O valiant heart". Perhaps, therefore, this masks another tribute to human heroism. Another important theme is given to strings and horns. Four episodes

follow in which the percussion - chiming, glissando or vibrating - is to the fore, but there is time for a moment or two of repose before the first subject is emphatically re-stated. This is the only Vaughan Williams symphony besides the Fourth to end loudly.

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