

# philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS  
(1872 – 1958)

## **Symphony No. 9 in E minor**

- I. *Moderato maestoso*
- II. *Andante sostenuto*
- III. *Scherzo: allegro pesante*
- IV. *Andante tranquillo*

Vaughan Williams's last symphony, dedicated to the Royal Philharmonic Society, was composed in 1956-7, revised in 1958 and first performed at one of the Society's concerts on 2 April 1958, when Sir Malcolm Sargent conducted. It was performed again at the Proms four months later, under Sir Adrian Boult, only a short while before the composer's death in his 86th year. Since then, although it has been recorded several times, it has not achieved the place in his canon that many of his admirers think is its due. It is the music of a still vigorous and visionary mind. Naturally there are echoes of earlier works, re-workings of ground he had previously explored, but the final impression is of a new phase in his work, a vision of something beyond, seen 'through a glass darkly'. The mood of the symphony is enigmatic; its texture and tone-colouring are strangely luminous, despite sombre hues. There is no conscious leave-taking or intimation of mortality: as soon as he had completed it he began work on a three-act opera. But British music entered a new phase in its evolution about 1960. This Ninth Symphony is one of the last monuments of a liberating and fruitful epoch, an old order giving place to new.

It is scored for large orchestra, including three saxophones and a flügel horn. The latter instrument is usually encountered in brass bands; Vaughan Williams called it 'beautiful and neglected' and he emphasised that he had allowed the saxophones 'to be their romantic selves'. To the poetic use of these two instruments can be attributed much of the mellow and distinctive timbre of this score.

It should also be mentioned that the Ninth originally had a programme which, to quote the composer, 'got lost on the journey'. Inscriptions on the sketches include "Wessex Prelude" and "Salisbury". Two in the second movement are "Stonehenge" and "Tess" and this movement, as Alain Frogley has shown in detail, is an evocation of the arrest of Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles at Stonehenge.

In the first movement the opening theme, inspired by the organ part at the opening of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, establishes the semitone interval F–E which is to be an organic feature of the symphony. The saxophones' cadence over the divided strings' E minor chord and the Tallis-like violin solo accompanied by harps and pizzicati are highlights of this movement. The "Tess" movement is related to the scene in Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* where Tess, after murdering her lover, flees across Salisbury Plain with her husband and rests for the night at Stonehenge. Police surround the monument at dawn and arrest her. Later her husband and sister climb a hill above Winchester to watch for the black flag above the gaol which will signify that Tess was hanged at 8am. The opening theme on flügel horn, 'Stonehenge' in this instance, was taken from an unpublished tone-poem of 1903, *The Solent*, and is also similar to a passage in *A Sea Symphony*. A 'barbaric' march-theme follows, which is then alternated with the opening theme - perhaps a symbol of Tess's impending fate. There is a tender central episode for strings which is based on the theme marked 'Tess' in the sketches. Later this occurs on tremolando strings in conjunction with the 'Stonehenge' theme, while in the background bells toll seven times. The

barbaric march returns and then we hear the eighth bell stroke, after which the 'Stonehenge' theme ends the movement.

A discord on the brass and a tapping side-drum open the bizarre *scherzo*. Its main theme, dominated by the tritone, is played by saxophones and then on the xylophone. The trio is a choral for the saxophone trio, alternating with a percussive rhythmic phrase. After the *scherzo* theme has returned, the side-drum taps the movement into silence. The *finale* is in two sections, beginning with a long cantilena for violins, followed by a horn melody accompanied by 'Verdi-like arpeggios' on woodwind. The second section starts with a lyrical melody for violas which is extensively developed and is eventually re-stated *largamente* in two-part harmony. Three waves of unearthly sound (E major chords for full orchestra) recede into the saxophone chords from the first movement. These chords are ambiguous. Are they bleak and cheerless? Or do they suggest that "the light we sought is shining still"? Either way, they end a great symphony and one of the towering cycles of symphonies composed in the 20<sup>th</sup> or any other century.

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