

philharmonia orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872 – 1958)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis
for doubled string orchestra with solo quartet

An astute critic who attended the first performance of this work conducted by the composer in Gloucester Cathedral on 6 September 1910 noted its “Englishness” but added: “Debussy, too, is somewhere in the picture and it is hard to tell how much of the complete freedom of tonality comes from the new French school and how much from the old English one”. The *Fantasia*, along with the incidental music for *The Wasps*, was the first large-scale piece Vaughan Williams composed after his period of intensive study with Ravel in Paris in 1908 and his first indisputable masterpiece. Perhaps the technical mastery shown in it can be attributed to Ravel, but the shape and the mood of the *Fantasia* come from earlier and more fundamental influences and impressions. When he was an undergraduate at Cambridge in the 1890s, Vaughan Williams formed his own choral society to sing Schubert’s then almost unknown Masses, and he would often walk to Ely on Sunday mornings to hear the chanting of matins in the great cathedral. Later, while a struggling composer in London at the turn of the century, he conducted for the Palestrina Society. So his knowledge of the antiphonal and contrapuntal procedures of church music was broadly based. Also at this period Vaughan Williams and his friend Gustav Holst, with other British musicians, were excited and enthralled by the revival of interest in the music of Purcell, Byrd and other English masters such as Tallis and Morley. Vaughan Williams encountered Tallis’s theme while he was editing the music for *The English Hymnal* (1904-6) in which this noble Phrygian melody occurs as No.92, set to Addison’s hymn *When rising from the bed of death*. Originally it was the third of nine psalm tunes composed by Tallis in 1567 to the words “Why fumeth in fight” for Archbishop Parker’s Psalter.

The theme had a special significance for Vaughan Williams because for some reason he associated it with John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. When he began his long musical preoccupation with this book by arranging music for a dramatisation in 1906, he used Tallis’s tune. Over 35 years later, when he composed incidental music for a wartime BBC adaptation, he quoted extensively from the *Fantasia* and in the stage *Morality* of 1951 a thematic reference to the work survives.

The *Fantasia* is written for two unequal string orchestras and string quartet. The magnificently spacious and sonorous use of spread chords, echo effects, dramatic pizzicato, high tremolandi and parallel fifths in the bass amounts to a musical representation of the architecture of Gloucester Cathedral. But the majestic cadences and extreme range of dynamics make a marvellous effect in concert halls. After the hauntingly poetic introduction, the theme is stated in full in Tallis’s harmonisation. Thereafter the two orchestras treat it antiphonally. Solo violin, solo viola and quartet weave a madrigalian texture in which the mastery of the writing can easily be overlooked, so naturally does the music flow, its essential serenity by no means untroubled by gusts of passion.

In the audience at the first performance was the composer Herbert Howells, then aged eighteen. He, like many others, had gone to Gloucester to hear Elgar conduct *The Dream of Gerontius*. But interposed between the audience and its Elgar was a new work, to be conducted by its composer, a tall, handsome, black-haired young man from Chelsea. From the very first chords of the *Tallis Fantasia*, Howells was spellbound and afterwards he and his friend Ivor Gurney walked the streets of Gloucester unable to sleep.