

## MAY VIDEO PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

### **Peter Fry:**

Hello, welcome to the May podcast. I'm Peter Fry, and I'm a percussion player in the Philharmonia Orchestra.

2008 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Vaughan Williams, and to commemorate this great composer's work, the Philharmonia is going to be performing a series of concerts with the conductor, Richard Hickox.

Most of Vaughan Williams' music is often associated with pastoral scenes - but some of his more serene music was actually a reaction to the First World War. So I've come to the Imperial War Museum, on a rather rainy Thursday, to find out more.

### **Terry Charman:**

It was high explosive: the effects of it on men's bodies were so horrific and shocking that undoubtedly it affected the lives of men who saw that for the rest of their lives.

### **Meyrick Alexander:**

Letter from Vaughan Williams to Gustav Holst:

"I sometimes dread coming back to normal life with so many gaps, especially of course George Butterworth. Out of those seven who joined up together in August 1914, only three are left. I sometimes think it is wrong to make friends with people much younger than oneself because soon there will be only the middle-aged left."

### **Terry Charman**

I think the first thing to point out that he's comparatively old in 1914 to have volunteered for military service at that late age of 42. It's a war of attrition that's taking place, and there's the new inventions of poisoned gas, flame throwers, fighting in the air, all these attendant horrors of modern warfare are used really for the first time.

Well, I think perhaps one ought to explain that he was a member of a field ambulance. I think an ambulance conjures up I think in people's mind sort of a motor vehicle, that wasn't in fact the case. They were really the sort of the medical troops of a division, they dealt with the day to day diseases, illnesses and wounds of a division.

### **Stephen Connock MBE**

But the experience of carrying bodies with all the dead weight cutting into your shoulders as you carry a stretcher with one other person, in the middle of the night,

that experience turned him into something more solitary, more austere, and that's reflected in the music. Up to 1914, relatively unremarkable, like many people of his generation, with his privileged financial position, it was a happy period, and you've only got to listen to the Lark Ascending to understand the innocence that pervades music pre-war.

### **Meyrick Alexander**

The Lark motif is very reminiscent of both round here and also the Somme area. The countryside that had been created by the first world war, it was absolute devastation, there wasn't a tree standing anywhere. There was a sea of mud and bodies, we've all seen the pictures, and you can hear this in his later music. But the Lark Ascending is of course a reaction to that, it's an idyllic picture.

If you look at the black clouds behind me you get some idea of what was going on in his mind after the First World War with the fourth symphony which is dark and angry; and then the fifth symphony has a strange visionary quality, an other-worldly quality. And then you get to the sixth symphony, which is one of the bleakest pieces of music ever written.

### **Stephen Connock MBE**

He lost some very close friends in the war, particularly George Butterworth, who could have been as great a composer as Vaughan Williams if he had not been killed on the Somme in 1916. There's still a trench there now called Butterworth's Trench, marking the place where he was shot. That loss was dreadful for Vaughan Williams and the fourth movement of the Pastoral Symphony is an elegy to lost friends. The depth of emotion that Vaughan Williams allows to come through this rather understated, detached way, suddenly there's this warmth, suddenly there's this surge of melody in the fourth movement that captures his feeling of these lost friends. And that moment is unforgettable, and it makes that particular symphony one for me of the greatest poignancy, and the one I would take with me to any desert island.

### **Peter Fry**

As part of this series of concerts the Philharmonia is going to be performing performing a complete cycle of Vaughan Williams' symphonies. We asked clarinettist Mark van de Wiel and flautist Paul Edmund-Davies to guide us through two of the most famous.

### **Mark van de Wiel**

This is probably nearby to the place on Westminster Embankment where Vaughan Williams was thinking when he was giving some sort of programme note for the third movement of his London Symphony. He talks about Westminster Embankment, he talks about the great hotels behind, he talks about the hustle and

bustle of the Strand. Probably a lot more traffic noise from this part of the area than there was then.

A wonderful piece to listen to with its grandeur, quite a lot of almost warlike marshal moments but a lot of tenderness, a lot of menace, a lot of hustle and bustle, a bit like that, and noise too, so a wonderful wide ranging piece.

Although the Westminster chimes only appear for a few seconds at the beginning and near the end of Vaughan Williams' London Symphony, Big Ben, which you see behind me, would have been very important as a symbol of London to Vaughan Williams. He did say that this was a symphony by a Londoner as a guide to listen to it and it's a great and colourful symphony about a great and colourful city.

### **Paul Edmund Davies**

Now this is an absolute epic of a work. It was written at the beginning of the last century and it was written at a time when England had an incredible Navy and of course, all travel happened on the sea.

It's also got a lot of mysticism attached to it. It's not just a journey across the sea or through the sea but it's also a journey through life and a journey to the afterlife. It's an incredible display of textures and techniques that Vaughan Williams has explored. At the very beginning there are some incredible brass chords. That's followed by the chorus coming in, and within literally a couple of bars of the piece there's this sort of knee-jerk key change, so it's an incredibly exciting opening.

And then throughout the piece we've got shimmering strings, we've got swirling woodwinds, we've got pounding brass and crashing percussion. This is the kind of work that people should just come and listen to and be part of really, because nothing like this had ever happened before in this symphonic world. Mahler had written big works but something that had involved these kind of scales and the proportions: the big orchestra, big chorus and the soloists had never really been explored before so it was a landmark composition.

### **Peter Fry**

First published in 1678, this book is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of English literature. It has been never been out of print since and has been translated into over 200 languages.

John Bunyans "*The Pilgrims Progress*" forms the basis for Vaughan Williams' rarely staged and opera, which took him over forty years to write.

I don't know a thing about *The Pilgrim's Progress*, so we went to find out more

### **Stephen Connock**

It's a very large scale opera, for twenty solo parts. It's not easy to put on. It's a demanding piece and I congratulate the Philharmonia at finding the resources and the will, and the belief in this work to put it on.

### **David Edwards**

I got a phone call from the Philharmonia Orchestra back in January saying they were going to put on this large and very important festival, and doing a semi-staged production of Pilgrims Progress was part of the planning and would I like to be involved, and I leapt at the opportunity, because it's not an opera I'm familiar with, and indeed, very few people I think are familiar with it. So this is a huge opportunity for me and for the public to explore a piece which has been, I think, unjustly neglected.

The piece is, in a sense, like a survey of his entire output, and I think that's rather fascinating. It's as if he was feeding his ideas backwards and forwards throughout his compositional life.

### **Reverend Christopher Damp**

Pilgrims Progress is an allegory of a journey, a spiritual journey, and I suppose in many ways it reflects Bunyan's own spiritual journey. I think he was quite a troubled young man, he was a bell ringer at Elstow, and he was convinced that God would punish him. Pilgrims Progress itself, in a way reflects something of Bunyan's own spiritual journey, from non-belief to belief in Christ.

### **Stephen Connock**

Bunyan was the inspiration here and Vaughan Williams was inspired by Whitman. Whitman saw God in every blade of grass, and Bunyan has this sense of the salvation of the soul. Christian, Pilgrim as Vaughan Williams renamed it, has got this burden on his back; and how is he going to get rid of this burden, and of course the burden is removed by the discovery, the realisation of salvation through God, and the celestial city beckons.

### **David Edwards**

I try to look at every piece on its own merits. Where does it fit in a tradition? I suppose in a tradition of spiritual operas, it's somewhere between Parsifal and Satyagraha. It's like a long spiritual meditation and that makes it very particular in the whole operatic genre.

### **Stephen Connock**

And anyone who fought in the first world war related to Bunyan, because you had the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the Slough of Despair. All these images that Bunyan created from the seventeenth century were so relevant to the soldiers fighting in the war, in the battlefields of the Somme. Vaughan Williams carried Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress with him when he was on Vimy Ridge in 1916, so it had this personal relevance as well as this spiritual relevance.

## **David Edwards**

He loved the book and he read it, he adapted the text himself for the opera. He digested it very carefully over a very long period. This piece was as you know, in gestation for over forty years. It was clearly a labour of love for Vaughan Williams and it clearly represented his own pilgrimage in some sense through the first fifty years of the twentieth century.

## **Stephen Connock**

With all the struggles people have, we all have our burdens on our backs symbolically, I think for people today the spirituality and the sense of desire for answers and a solution to the burdens that we face, is as relevant today as when Bunyan wrote it in Bedford jail and when Vaughan Williams set it in the 1940s.

## **Peter Fry**

The Philharmonia performs a semi-staged production of *The Pilgrim's Progress* with Richard Hickox at the Sadler's Wells Theatre on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June at 7.30pm, and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June at 4pm.

Mind you we're not just performing Vaughan Williams in May, there are lots of other fantastic concerts on as well.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> we have a wonderful concert of choral music with the Philharmonia Orchestra and the Bach Choir in the Royal Festival Hall, including Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* and Fauré's *Requiem*.

Tugan Sokhiev conducts Chopin's piano concerto number 2 with Emanuel Ax and Prokofiev's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony in concerts on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of May in Norwich and London.

The orchestra travels across the country for a series of concerts with Sir Andrew Davis including symphonies by Mahler and Dvorak, overtures by Glinka and Berlioz, and Boris Berezovsky performing piano concertos by Brahms and Medtner

May also features one of the Philharmonia Orchestra's free Music of Today concerts. The concert takes place in the Royal Festival Hall on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May at 6pm and features the music of Philippe Leroux. The concert is unticketed so why not stop by on your way home from work?

Next month we'll take a closer look at the Music of Today series and prepare for a series of concerts with Lorin Maazel by discussing Brahms' four fantastic symphonies.

Well I hope you've enjoyed this months' podcast and I hope you enjoy coming to our concerts. Goodbye.

