

## The Reluctant Symphonist

This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this country's leading symphonic composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams (b.12 October 1872). I know of no other composer since Beethoven who has written nine symphonies that are so different from each other and yet so unlike the work of any other composer. And yet originally he had no ambition to compose music of that genre. When his younger friend, George Butterworth (1885–1916), called upon him one day in 1911 he found VW in a state of some consternation surrounded by loose leaves of scores. Asked what the problem was VW told Butterworth that he had been writing sketches based on his impressions of London and didn't have a clue what to do with them; could Butterworth have a look and see if he could make anything of them? Butterworth did so and suggested that he should write a symphony. VW's scornful riposte was: "No! That won't do at all. I don't do symphonies! Not that sort of symphony anyway!" (or words to that effect). Later, when they met again, VW was quite changed and told Butterworth: "You were quite right, you know. You've solved the problem." And that is how the *London Symphony* came into being.

VW had, of course, already produced *A Sea Symphony* – the first fully choral symphony – with great success at the Leeds Festival of 1910 following the success of his Parry-inspired cantata *Toward the Unknown Region* at the previous. Each of these works was a setting of words by the American poet Walt Whitman. The *Tallis Fantasia* soon followed and established him as an up-and-coming composer – he was already forty!

But this was different. It took a lot of work with much help from Butterworth. When finished in 1913 it was over an hour in duration. The first performance took place at the Queen's Hall in London (where else!) conducted by Geoffrey Toye, and was well received. Other performances soon followed. In August the manuscript score was apparently sent to Germany for a prospective performance: it was never seen again! For the next scheduled performance on 11 February 1915 the score was reconstructed from the orchestra's parts with the help of Butterworth, Toye and Edward Dent. With some somewhat sprawling passages, the symphony was clearly in need of some drastic revision. VW recognized this and did not stint in the task. The first movement was left virtually untouched, but he excised some twenty minutes from the three remaining movements. There were further revisions in the next twenty years before the symphony as we know it now was published in 1936. Richard Hickox's superb recording of the near-original 1913 version show just how much very fine music had to be left behind. But what London might have lost the symphony's structure gained. As Geraint Lewis has said: "...his cutting creates a masterpiece out of a potentially great work – quite an achievement."

Ten years after the completion of the original version, when the world had changed beyond all recognition, Vaughan Williams said to another friend (perhaps Gustav Holst): "I've written a new symphony. Four movements. All of 'em slow." All of 'em quiet would have been a more accurate description. It was deceptively called *A Pastoral Symphony*. But that is another story – and another masterpiece.

[With acknowledgements to Laurence Green: *George Butterworth, Soldier and Composer*; published in 2018 by Fighting High Ltd. A highly recommendable biography.]