

RVW150 Ambassador, Tasmin Little, gives the opening address at the launch of RVW150

BRIDGEWATER HALL, SATURDAY 26TH FEBRUARY 2022

"It is necessary to know facts, but music will enable you to see past facts to the very essence of things in a way which science cannot do."

These words, written by Ralph Vaughan Williams to pupils of a primary school just before he died, offer a glimpse into the mindset of a composer who believed that music should be felt, rather than described or analysed. Often thought of as the father of modern British music, his works remain a firm fixture on the concert stages of the UK, as well as abroad.

But *why* is his music so enduringly popular, resonating with people of all ages and nationalities? Is it perhaps because there's an emotional honesty to his writing which audiences respond to? I remember, as a young girl, being intensely drawn to his music – the distinctly personal style, the imagination, power, beauty. His language is one which can be appreciated on so many levels.

Few pieces of music have achieved such consistent popularity worldwide as *The Lark Ascending*. And *The Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* is another



evergreen favourite. Yet during this 150th anniversary we should celebrate the extraordinary *range* of his 60-year creative output - and what a range there is:

- nine searching symphonies, recorded by leading orchestras and conductors, and frequently programmed in our concert halls each season...
- great works for chorus and orchestra...like the magnificent *Sea Symphony* and, one of my absolute favourites "*Serenade to Music*"
- there's works for the opera house, ballet, and the theatre,
- song cycles... music for schools and, of course
- the church music which so many of us have sung at some point in our lives

And, alongside all of this, there's the influence of English folk songs, eight hundred of which he collected across 19 counties. This surely is Music of the People. The sound and feel of folk song fashioned his views on how Britain could have its own 'national music', rooted in our culture and landscape. The programme given by the BBC Philharmonic to open *Toward the Unknown Region* [Pastoral Symphony, On Wenlock Edge, Symphony No. 5] bears witness to that underlying folk song influence.

Whether it's a *Sea Symphony* highlighting modern shipping or another depicting Edwardian London, Vaughan Williams's music reflects the world in which he lived his long life. He may have written in 1957 *'I feel very angry with certain critics who will have it that my 4th symphony 'means' war, and my 5th 'means' peace.'* But there's no doubt that his music bore emotional witness to the often turbulent times in which he was writing. Among much else, he laid bare the ravaging effects of war, as well as raising hopes for a peaceful future.

It mattered hugely to Vaughan Williams that he related to people of all ages and from all walks of life. He believed that quality music should be available to everyone and that, for many, the music that the Church gave them each week was the only music in their lives. However, it was often inadequate and unworthy so, when he was approached in 1904 to edit a new book of music for worship, the

result was *The English Hymnal*. This collection of over 650 hymns, with a giddy breadth of sources, changed the face of church music.

And then there's Vaughan Williams, the dedicated teacher, always encouraging and generous. Ahead of the curve, at a time when it was unusual for women to be taken seriously as composers, he had many female students whose names are notable today: Elizabeth Maconchy, Imogen Holst, and Ruth Gipps amongst them.

Vaughan Williams never stopped exploring new ways to communicate with his audiences. Even at the age of nearly 70, he was reinventing himself as a composer of film scores. And he died — in 1958, aged 85 — still full of music.

Vaughan Williams's own words speak eloquently of his life's work:

"The composer must not shut himself up and think about art, he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community."

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