

Ralph VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872-1958)

Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis [1910]

Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis [1910] Ralph Vaughan Williams spent many years searching for a distinctively English compositional voice, delving into the diverse musical traditions of his home country in the early 1900s. One of his discoveries was a hymn tune by the 16th-century Tudor composer Thomas Tallis, which he adapted to include in the 1906 edition of the English Hymnal. Written in an old church mode, Tallis originally intended it as a setting of Psalm 2, 'Why fumeth in fight,' which Vaughan Williams knew as 'When rising from the bed of death,' suggesting a more introspective and stoic mood which was subsequently carried into this Fantasia.

But just how much of a literary or biblical connection Vaughan Williams saw in this piece is questionable. Despite his respect for and affinity with English sacred traditions, he was not a Christian, but hovered between agnosticism and atheism. In this context he saw music as having a social purpose, allowing people to share in an emotional or spiritual (not specifically Christian) experience.

The Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis (its title also stems from Vaughan Williams' fascination with English musical tradition, Fantasia being a form favoured by Elizabethan composers) received its premiere in 1910 at the Three Choirs Festival. Here it was heard in Gloucester Cathedral, and its initial success was tempered by the fact that most of the audience were there purely for Elgar's popular oratorio, *The Dream of Gerontius*. There were, however, several discerning listeners who recognised that they were hearing the emergence of a distinctive and historically-informed English musical voice. The Times music critic, J. Fuller-Maitland, reflected that 'throughout its course one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new.'

Vaughan Williams takes the archaic sound of Tallis' theme as a starting point to build what was for its time a highly unusual harmonic palette, immediately noticeable in the opening chords. Also unusual is Vaughan Williams' splitting of the normal string orchestra into three groups - you will notice some of the players form a secondary orchestra behind the main ensemble, and a quartet of solo players is also used. This gives ample scope for the 'call and response' musical organisation found in early sacred music, and Vaughan Williams finds many ways in which to pass portions of Tallis' theme (and his own variations) between the three groups.

The Fantasia's antiphonal nature and reflective tone make this piece ideal for a Cathedral acoustic. Llewellyn Hall, while not quite a Cathedral, is bound to be better suited to the music than the Boston venue where Koussevitzky conducted a performance in 1932. At that particular concert, two elderly ladies were left feeling rather shaken, their row of loosely-fitted seats acting as a see-saw to a man who thumped down heavily with every musical climax. That man was none other than Ralph Vaughan Williams, so you need not worry that becoming physically involved in this serene music is in any way against the composer's intent!

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