

**The Piano Music of
RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS** (1872-1958)

SOMMCD 0164

Mark Bebbington
Rebeca Omordia
Two pianos/Piano duet

Mark Bebbington
Solo piano

- | | | |
|----------|--|-------|
| 1 | The Lake in the Mountains for solo piano | 5:34 |
| 2 | Introduction and Fugue for two pianos
<i>First recording</i> | 17:22 |
| 3 | 'Ach bleib' bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ'
JS Bach BWV 649 arr. Vaughan Williams for solo piano | 5:49 |
| 4 | Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis
arr. Maurice Jacobson and Vaughan Williams for two pianos | 12:29 |
| 5 | Hymn Tune Prelude on 'Song 13'
(Orlando Gibbons) for solo piano | 4:44 |
| 6 | Fantasia on Greensleeves – Piano duet
adapted from the Opera 'Sir John in Love' | 3:53 |

- A Little Piano Book** (solo piano)
- | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------------|------|
| 7 | 1. Valse Lente | 1:31 |
| 8 | 2. Nocturne | 1:38 |
| 9 | 3. Canon | 1:04 |
| 10 | 4. Two-part Invention in F | 1:14 |
| 11 | 5. Two-part Invention in E flat | 0:57 |
| 12 | 6. Two-part Invention in G | 0:52 |

- Suite of Six Short Pieces** for piano solo
- | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 13 | 1. Prelude | 1:39 |
| 14 | 2. Slow Dance | 1:44 |
| 15 | 3. Quick Dance | 2:10 |
| 16 | 4. Slow Air | 3:07 |
| 17 | 5. Rondo | 2:38 |
| 18 | 6. Pezzo Ostinato | 2:21 |
| Total Duration: | | 70:55 |

**The Vaughan
Williams**
CHARITABLE TRUST

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The Piano Music of
RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

includes the first recording of
Introduction & Fugue for Two Pianos

Mark Bebbington · Rebeca Omordia
pianos

The Piano Music of RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

I – Vaughan Williams and the piano

Although Vaughan Williams composed prolifically for over sixty years, producing around 200 works, he wrote comparatively little for the piano. Because of his major achievements in symphony, opera, folk-song and choral music, many commentators have tended to dismiss his piano music as insignificant, but his compositions for the instrument contain two absolute masterpieces for solo piano, *The Lake in the Mountains* and the *Choral and Choral Prelude*, with the *Hymn Tune Prelude on Song XIII* and the *Suite of Six Short Pieces* being only just below this exceptional standard. Vaughan Williams's music for duo pianists is even smaller in output, but contains one demonstrably great work – the *Introduction and Fugue* for two pianos.

Vaughan Williams's longevity makes it relatively easy to divide his career into three periods, and, broadly speaking, the periods are separated by the two World Wars. His military service during the Great War forbade any serious composition from 1914 to 1918, but in the works of his pre-World War I period he wrote hardly anything for solo piano, although in recent years the release of his previously withheld *Fantasia for piano and orchestra* (1904) alongside two earlier Quintets with piano (1898 and 1903) have shown that his writing for the instrument was fully idiomatic.

The ten years prior to the outbreak of World War I saw Vaughan Williams's extraordinarily exploratory period, which included the *Tallis Fantasia* and *On Wenlock Edge, A Sea Symphony* and the first version of the *London Symphony*. Although other works are contemporaneous, the common denominators in such a disparate group are their formal originality and their concern with texture. *On Wenlock Edge* calls for a piano (as well as string quartet), and prior to 1914 Vaughan Williams composed almost forty songs, of which the piano parts give the lie to the suggestion that he was uncertain with the instrument. As with Mahler, Elgar or Richard Strauss, Vaughan Williams's piano music is idiomatic and sympathetic when called for – it was just not often called for.

One should not underestimate the effect the Great War had on Vaughan Williams's creative sensibilities: it affected him deeply, as it did all serving personnel. It was not until 1920 that the divarication it produced in his work first manifested itself. On the one hand, the more profoundly mystical and refined aspects of his art are to be found in *The Lark Ascending*, *A Pastoral Symphony*, *Mass in G minor* and *Flos Campi*, and on the other the ultimate revelation of vehemently disruptive characteristics, more obviously 'warlike' in inspiration, such as permeate the *Piano Concerto*, *Job*, *Symphony in F minor* and *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Perhaps significantly, these last works are closer in time to the Second War than to the First.

II – Music for Solo Piano

The *Suite in G major (Suite of Six Short Pieces)* dates from 1920. The original published title was changed to *Charterhouse Suite* following a later arrangement of the work for string orchestra by James Brown and the composer. The subtitle

'of six short pieces' may have misled some into thinking that it is an insubstantial work. It is not. It plays for a little under twenty minutes and so cannot easily be dismissed. The year 1920 was the first Vaughan Williams could devote fully to composition since 1913, and it is not fanciful to assume that in taking up his pen after such an absence he would first look to unfinished works he had begun six or more years before. This is true in the case of *The Lark Ascending* – the quintessentially English work of any composer – which, in its original form, dates from 1914, and in another work revised in 1920, the *Suite de ballet* for flute and piano. These revisions were sufficiently extensive for them to be catalogued as later compositions, whereas others, such as the *First String Quartet*, also revised during this period, retain their original dates.

The *Charterhouse Suite* has a somewhat archaic air, and may have been suggested by the comparatively large number of collections of early keyboard music that appeared in England during the first decades of the twentieth-century. For Vaughan Williams, whose art was rooted deep in the musical heritage of his country, the appeal of early English keyboard music must have been strong. Whatever the inspiration, the result is a work of more substantial qualities than might at first appear.

The *Prelude*, marked *Molto moderato, quasi lento*, is in two-part writing throughout. It is deceptively simple: by no means easy to play well, its tempo has to be judged exactly if it is not to appear too flippant or too slow. The look of the music appears to suggest a fast pace, but the tempo markings clearly imply the opposite. It cannot be hurried, no matter what the temptation. Tonally, although clearly in

G major, the music is ambiguous; the composer slips into other keys with easy sleights-of-hand, and the melodic material, although unremarkable on paper, is fashioned with considerable craftsmanship to create ideas which never do quite what one may think they are going to do. The implications are vast, and the ending, with the piano in its highest register, is another unforeseen aspect. The *Slow Dance* which follows, *Andante grazioso*, is in E minor with a gently-flowing 6/8 pulse. The texture is richer and warmer, in three parts with legato phrasing all over the page. Again, Vaughan Williams's imagination will not permit the obvious: the irregular bar-lengths are unusual but not perverse, the form itself crystal-clear. It is made more interesting in comparison with the following movement, the *Quick Dance*, for here the procedures of the *Slow Dance* are mirrored at speed. The tonality is the same, E minor, with a major close; the overall shape broadly the same, but the tempo, *Allegro molto*, is by no means easy to sustain given the nature of the material. In one sense, this movement is the least obviously 'pianistic' but in another it is certainly keyboard music – it would be fascinating to hear this Dance on the harpsichord. Once more, bar-lengths are unpredictable, with the E major central section introducing new material before the *da capo* returns to the opening. The fourth movement, *Slow Air*, is in G minor, one of those beautiful melodies, deeply expressive and full of latent emotion, which Vaughan Williams appeared able to construct almost at will. In context, it is easy to speak of a neo-classical mode of expression but this would also be misleading, for this stylisation looks back further than the 18th-century to the English Tudor masters. The *Rondo* in D minor is the most obviously 'modern' piece in the Suite: the title is not followed in the strictly classical sense, and indeed in formal terms the movement is somewhat tenuous. Nothing can be taken for granted as the

ebb and flow of this movement, the ambiguous tonal areas and the distinctive melodic contours, reveal a master composer at work. The finale, *Presto ostinato* in 3/8, is an astonishing *tour-de-force*. It is in three sections, the first also tripartite: an ostinato figure to which are added second and third voices; a middle episode *marcato la melodia* returning to the initial ostinato; and a concluding episode, marked 'three-bar rhythm' (as opposed to the original four-bar) produces a tightening effect. The main central section, *Andante* 2/4 (the quaver pulse is constant) presents the ostinato theme at half-speed in the tenor, and dies away over a long E pedal. The concluding *Presto* restores the 3/8 metre via A minor (!) before the home tonic, G, steals in gently, to end this fascinating work in the quietest possible manner.

The *Suite* was published in 1921 and during the following decade Vaughan Williams returned intermittently to the piano. The first two movements of the massively sonorous Piano Concerto date from 1926. The largely contrapuntal finale was completed in 1931 with Harriet Cohen, the work's dedicatee, giving the premiere of the three-movement Concerto in February 1933. Three years earlier, she had introduced another work written for her, the *Hymn-Tune Prelude* on Orlando Gibbons's 'Song 13'. This solo piano piece had been written in 1928 and its five-part texture clearly stems from the similarly-impacted Concerto's solo part. However, the emotional tenor here is worlds away from the powerful and vibrant Concerto: marked *Andante tranquillo* in 4/2, the *Hymn-Tune Prelude* unfolds in slow motion, calm and unhurried, initially in rich four-part counterpoint until, the mood and scene having been securely created, Song 13 itself is heard in the tenor register against the onward movement of the surrounding counterpoint.

The song is 'sung' once, fulfilling the function of a *cantus firmus*, and an extended coda, all four parts abundant and flowing effortlessly, sees the *Prelude* gradually losing all tension, gently moving towards a profound morphetic conclusion.

In 1930, the year of the premiere of the *Prelude*, Oxford University Press issued a publication in honour of Miss Cohen, *The Harriet Cohen Bach Book*. This unusual little-known volume was a double tribute, honouring her prowess as a Bach pianist and her championship of British music. The publishers invited ten British composers each to compose a solo piano piece, using a theme or work by JS Bach as the basis. Among the composers who contributed, apart from Vaughan Williams, were Bantock, Bax, Bliss, Bridge, Howells, Ireland, Lambert and Walton. It is regrettable that this important publication is so little-known, for it contains some remarkable pieces. Vaughan Williams's *Choral and Choral Prelude* on Bach's 'Ach, bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ' (*Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide*) is his contribution to the collection. The work is a masterpiece out of all proportion to its length. The piano writing is similarly full and rich, akin to the texture of the *Gibbons Prelude*. This is no technical ploy but the necessary counterpoint to the composer's vision.

The *Choral and Choral Prelude* is one of the most remarkable examples of 'recomposition' in musical history. It is described as a 'free transcription' but is much more than that implies. Vaughan Williams adds a tenor part to Bach's choral prelude and greatly elaborates the texture, producing an independent work. Bach's Chorale Prelude (the fifth of the six Schübler *Chorale Preludes*) is itself a transcription of his Cantata No 6, 'Bleib bei uns, den es will Abend warden'. In that work, the opening Chorale has a cello obbligato, the melody of the chorale being

taken from the alto part of *another* chorale, by Seth Calvisius (1594). There can hardly be further examples of a work undergoing at least three recompositions by two great composers, each recomposition resulting in a masterpiece. In few of Vaughan Williams's works is his love and veneration of Bach so apparent as here, the 'evening cantata' offering, in the Chorale, an opportunity for him to write an extended 'nocturnal' after the calm statement of the Chorale. Those familiar with Bach's Schübler Chorale Preludes will not be surprised at the nature of Vaughan Williams's recomposition.

The *Six Little Pieces* date from 1934 and were likewise intended for an Oxford University Press collection. They appeared in three separate teaching volumes but were written together. When confronted with Vaughan Williams's achievements in large-scale composition there can be few works in his output which reveal his mastery of miniature forms so well as these tiny pieces. Like the *Nine Little Pieces* of Edmund Rubbra's Opus 74 – also written for teaching purposes – Vaughan Williams's *Six Little Pieces* are gems, not always immediately recognisable as his, but on closer acquaintance his individuality is discernible. It would be foolish to read too much into these miniatures, but even within their tiny frameworks they cannot be dismissed. The three *Two-part Inventions* and the *Canon* are doubtless by-products of the contrapuntal *Fourth Symphony* on which he was engaged at the time but the gentle *Valse lente* in B flat has no such connection. The *Nocturne* in A minor is the finest: indeed, so good is it that one regrets that Vaughan Williams did not add more to piano literature. An extended set of Nocturnes, developed from this style, would have been truly fine.

In 1940, World War II having begun, Vaughan Williams celebrated his 68th birthday and in normal circumstances many would have expected his creative career to be drawing to a close. Those who knew him personally would have profoundly disagreed, and the remaining twenty years of his life saw an amazing outpouring of a great variety of music, some of it in forms quite new for him. The opening months of hostilities saw the first of his 'war' works, the *Six Choral Songs to be Sung in Time of War*, as well as his first film score, for the British film *49th Parallel*. The film afforded a further example of Vaughan Williams's capacity – at an age when most people would think of beginning to take things easy – for branching out into new fields. During the next ten years, he wrote the music for no fewer than eight further films, and a feature of all his film music is that it was often of such quality that it proved possible to refashion much of it into independent concert works. The most striking example, of course, is his Seventh Symphony (1953), *Sinfonia Antartica*, most of whose themes come from music for the 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic*, but the *49th Parallel* score eventually produced three independent pieces. The magnificent D major theme that begins the film is one of the composer's most completely inspired 'English' themes, a great arching span of melody showing a striking affinity with another (thirty years younger) English composer, William Walton. Vaughan Williams's *Prelude for Orchestra: 49th Parallel* and the choral song (with orchestra or piano) *The New Commonwealth* both utilise the theme.

In 1947, Vaughan Williams published a solo piano work dedicated to Phyllis Sellick, who, with her pianist husband Cyril Smith, had given the first performance on November 22nd 1946 of the *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, a revised

alternative version of the 1931 *Piano Concerto*. This solo piece, *The Lake in the Mountains*, is based on an episode from music from *The 49th Parallel*, and proved to be Vaughan Williams's last work for solo piano. The years have proved the composer right to have created the *Antartica* from material that might at first appear more descriptive than symphonic, and with the piano piece the result has a significance transcending the nature of the original material. *The Lake in the Mountains* is a masterly composition, distinctive and thoroughly pianistic. An unusual characteristic is that it begins in one key and ends in another, from D flat major to D minor, although when the main theme is first heard, it is in B flat major. Yet it is the beauty and profound impressionism of the music which enhances its haunting character, as a noble soliloquy, mysterious and lovable by turns. It is one of the most remarkable of Vaughan Williams's shorter pieces for any instrument.

III - Music for Two Pianos and Piano Duet

Vaughan Williams was a most practical composer, not hesitating to indicate alternative orchestrations – often printed within the score - should, say, a bass clarinet or third trumpet not be available. For him, the essence of the music was the thing, the instrumental colouration a secondary aspect. In the first decades of the 20th-century, coincidental with the growth in his reputation and before the gramophone became the primary source for music at home, it was customary for orchestral works to be published in arrangements for solo piano or for piano duet. Such an approach applied to the *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, from Vaughan Williams's opera *Sir John in Love* (1934), which, in its version for reduced orchestra, became one of the composer's most often-performed and recorded short works,

the combination of *Greensleeves* with the otherwise less-well-known folk-song *Lovely Joan* being a sure touch of creative genius.

Occasionally, piano arrangements of orchestral works would be undertaken by other hands, and whilst the demand for transcriptions has long passed, they often possess individual characteristics - rather more so if they were made by the composer concerned or by other noted musicians. Such transcriptions were part and parcel of Vaughan Williams's life, and in the case of those he made himself, or made jointly or otherwise supervised, there is a significance attached to them in the fresh distillation of the essence of his vision.

It may be thought that among Vaughan Williams's orchestral works, the *Tallis Fantasia* for large string orchestra would least lend itself to keyboard transcription. Certainly, the original instrumental colouration is no more, but in transcribing the music for two pianos (not piano duet), the spreading of chords and the individual contrapuntal lines can be more clearly divined, the recesses of dynamics unaltered, and the surrounding echoes of sustained chordal writing given new and significant timbres. Here, this great and original masterpiece is experienced in a new guise, no less moving or original, affording us – perhaps – a glimpse into the composer's creative growth as the theme of Thomas Tallis is heard on the keyboard, for which it was devised 450 years ago.

The transcription was by Vaughan Williams and the musical polymath Maurice Jacobson (1896-1976), long-time director of the music publishers Curwen, which he had joined following World War I. Jacobson, also a pianist and composer

himself (as a teenager, he could play any of Bach's '48' from memory), had been responsible for preparing the English version of the *Mass in G minor*, among other works of Vaughan Williams, and in 1947 composer and publisher prepared the *Tallis Fantasia's* two-piano version.

The Tallis transcription is broadly contemporaneous with Vaughan Williams's only original work for two pianos, the *Introduction and Fugue*, which was composed in 1945-46, overlapping another collaborative transcription, with Joseph Cooper, of the two-piano version of the *Piano Concerto*. As we have noted, the premiere of the retitled *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra* took place on St Cecilia's Day, 1946, eight months after that of the *Introduction and Fugue*, which is also dedicated 'To Phyllis and Cyril'. Clearly, the medium of two pianos was in Vaughan Williams's thoughts at that time and in the *Introduction and Fugue* he produced the most significant of all his keyboard works.

If one may discern homage to Bach, which surely infuses the *Introduction and Fugue*, the creative threads are not difficult to trace. Yet however Vaughan Williams came to write the work, the result is a most impressive study in two interconnected parts. The *Introduction* (4/4, Moderato) begins in the bass, a chordal progression centred upon the sequence G minor, B flat major, E major and G minor again (an octave higher). If there appears to be little connecting these keys, the repetition of G minor ensures its importance: the other keys are respectively a minor third above and a minor third below the 'home' key, the chordal bases implying root position. Within just three bars, therefore, Vaughan Williams has placed an idea capable of wide-ranging exploration.

The piano-writing, as the pulse halves from crotchets to quavers and again to semiquavers, explores the chords and figuration of the initial sequence in masterly, thoroughly idiomatic, fashion. The semiquavers become sextuplets in a burst of activity, before a sequence of high chords reveals the modality of much of what we have heard, falling to a G (major) chord as the fugue subject is now presented – G minor no longer as fully stable as at the beginning.

The fugue begins in four voices, the movement not in strictly linear writing – although no other word would accurately describe the contrapuntal mastery of this music, as the texture literally flourishes in impressive variety: brilliant key-changes, secondary- and tertiary- middle-entry sections, octave writing and harmonic fluidity. Here is the fulfilment of Vaughan Williams's command of large-scaled fugal writing, first demonstrated in the extended 'Amen' in his *Cambridge Mass* of 1899 (surely the longest 'Amen chorus' ever written), brought to fruition in his mature works – the finale of the *Symphony in F minor* especially – in various ways, if never so comprehensively as on this occasion. The music grows with almost Beethovenian surety as a double-fugue, the *Introduction's* chords punctuating the structure as organum, and – most remarkable of all – as the (now) *two* fugue subjects expand this remarkable work's journey to the final, emphatic low octaves on G, with a rare Bachian *terce de picardie* inverted at the end. No implication is left unturned in Vaughan Williams's working of those opening chordal bars, resulting in surely the greatest work for two pianos by a British composer of any generation.

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Mark Bebbington

Mark Bebbington is fast gaining a reputation as one of today's most strikingly individual British pianists. His discs of British music for SOMM have met with unanimous critical acclaim and notably, his recent cycles of Frank Bridge, John Ireland and Arthur Bliss have attracted seven consecutive sets of 5***** in *BBC Music Magazine*.

Over recent seasons Mark has toured extensively throughout Central and Northern Europe, the Far East and North America and has performed at major UK venues with the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic and London Mozart Players. As a recitalist, he makes regular appearances at major UK and International Festivals. Recently, Mark made a highly successful Carnegie Hall debut with Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra in the US premiere of Richard Strauss's *Parergon* and he returns to New York for his recital debut at Alice Tully Hall.

Dates during 2017/18 include London performances with the Royal Philharmonic and London Philharmonic Orchestras, with the Flanders, Buffalo and San Antonio Symphony Orchestras in the US and tours with the Czech National Orchestra and Israel Camerata.

'Truly a remarkable pianist...' *The Times*



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Rebeca Omordia

Born in Romania to a Romanian mother and a Nigerian father, Rebeca Omordia graduated from the National Music University in Bucharest in 2006 when she was awarded a full scholarship to study at Birmingham Conservatoire and later at Trinity College of Music in London.

Winning the Delius Prize in 2009 opened a collaboration with the world-renowned cellist Julian Lloyd Webber. They formed a three-year partnership performing in well-known venues including Wigmore Hall and Kings Place in London, Highgrove for the Prince's Trust and giving several live broadcasts for BBC Radio 3.

Described by Birmingham Post as 'a pianist willing to take risks', Rebeca Omordia has performed intensively as a soloist and with orchestras in prestigious venues in Europe and in the United States including Birmingham Town Hall, White Hall in Helsinki, Romanian Athaeneum and Radio Hall in Bucharest. In 2015 the John Ireland Trust sponsored her 'John Ireland' Tour of the UK and Romania which included highly-acclaimed performances of the composer's Piano Sonata, *Legend for Piano and Orchestra*, several outstanding miniatures and the Cello Sonata.

Rebeca is a great advocate of Nigerian classical music. In 2013 she formed a partnership with his Excellency Nigeria High Commissioner in London to promote Nigerian classical music to the UK audience. She has performed piano works by Nigerian composers at the 2015 Bradfield Festival (UK), at the 2013 African and African-American Music Festival in St Louis, USA and for the African Union's 50th Anniversary Concert in London.