

These were very expensive to obtain, and so Spain only recorded special performances, sometimes on behalf of friends. For instance he received two requests for recordings of the two broadcast Festival Hall concerts by Toscanini and the Philharmonia Orchestra in September and October 1952. He was only able to supply a single evening's recording to each friend, one of whom was the executive producer on this disc, who also asked Spain to record Vaughan Williams's Prom performance on 3 September. The transfer of that performance on this CD is taken directly from the two original long-playing acetates.

That should be the end of the matter, but in a national archive there exists a donated recording which is said to contain the same September 1952 performance, and copies of this have found their way into private hands. The sound quality of this second recording indicates a date of around the same time as the genuine article, but it does not contain the same performance - in fact it is markedly different and interpretatively quite unlike what we know about Vaughan Williams's conducting style from his other recordings. Even if the origin of Eric Spain's recording was unknown there could be no doubt as to which was the real thing. The genuine recording has extraordinary and unique qualities of concentration, eloquence and beauty that put the spurious version into limbo. A leading Vaughan Williams scholar has simply declared it to be "the best recorded performance of any Vaughan Williams symphony". This remarkable document is now at last made available for us all to hear.

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Ralph Vaughan Williams

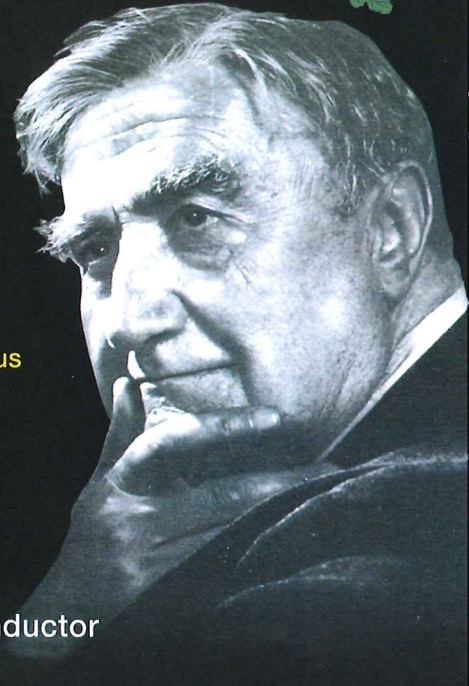


Vaughan Williams

Symphony No. 5 in D
London Philharmonic Orchestra
 (Premiere CD Release)

Dona Nobis Pacem
BBC Symphony Orchestra & Chorus
Renée Flynn, Soprano
Roy Henderson, Baritone

Ralph Vaughan Williams Conductor



During the course of his long musical career Vaughan Williams made just three commercial recordings of his own music. In 1925 he recorded the *Old King Cole* ballet and the *Wasps* overture for the Vocalion company. These discs were made by the old acoustic process and were almost immediately rendered obsolete through the introduction of electric recording. In October 1937 VW was invited to record his two-year-old Fourth Symphony for HMV with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. As many readers will know, this is a performance of extraordinary rhythmic strength and power.

Towards the end of his life the modest composer compared all of the then recorded versions of the Fourth Symphony and concluded that his own was the best. Yet HMV's Fred Gaisberg, who had recorded Caruso against his company's instructions; who had master-minded all of Elgar's recordings, and was usually a musician of keen perceptions, relied on the evidence of his eyes rather than his ears when he supervised the sessions. In his autobiography *Music on Record* (Robert Hale, London, 1946) Gaisberg wrote, "When recently he recorded his Fourth Symphony I noticed how gently and unobtrusively he indicated his wishes to the men. His movements were rather awkward and he employed a minimum of gesticulation. Self-effacing and silent to a degree, he had not the equipment for a good conductor..."

For the rest of his life Vaughan Williams diligently attended recording sessions of his music conducted by such well-known figures as Sir Henry Wood, Boyd Neel, Sir John Barbirolli and Sir Adrian Boult. But he himself made no more recordings. After his death a friend asked his widow Ursula why this was so. "Because nobody asked him", she replied. And yet as the three published recordings and a few precious live documents indicate, VW was a revelatory conductor who produced direct, unvarnished and highly expressive re-creations of his own music. As a composer performer he took the creative process a step further than the printed score and presented his work in its natural medium, that of sound.

In fact he was quite an experienced performer. As a student at Cambridge he directed a small choral society which met on Sundays to sing Schubert choral works, learning to conduct by "trying it on the dog", as he put it later. In 1905 he became involved in creating the Leith Hill Festival and conducted performances at the festival over a period of 50 years. During the First World War he was made Musical Director of the British Expeditionary Force's First Army in France. By the end of the war he had founded nine choral societies, an orchestra and a military band. After his return to England he conducted the Bach Choir for a number of years. Entirely self-taught as a conductor, he recalled that he had received just two important pieces of advice. One was from a violinist friend who taught him how to start an orchestra on an upbeat, and the other was from an orchestral musician who told him that if he gave his players a good strong beat they would do the rest.

Vaughan Williams began work on his Fifth Symphony in 1938. For some years he had been working on his opera *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and had come to doubt his ability to finish the work. He incorporated some of the opera's material into the new symphony, which he completed in 1943. He himself conducted its first performance at a Promenade Concert in June of that year.

Dona Nobis Pacem was first performed on 2 October 1936, with the soloists Renée Flynn and Roy Henderson, the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Albert Coates. The recording heard here is of the first broadcast performance, given from a studio a month later, with the same soloists and the BBC Chorus and Symphony Orchestra under the composer. This performance was recorded by the BBC, and is one of the Corporation's few pre-war music recordings to have survived. It was issued unofficially on CD in 1989: this is the first authorised release.

The work is a five-part plea for peace. It opens with a setting of the "Agnus Dei", and this leads into "Beat! Beat! Drums", a commentary on how war overwhelms all normal human activity in its path. This movement and two others, "Reconciliation" and "Dirge for Two Veterans" all use words drawn from Walt Whitman's Civil War poem *Drum Taps*. In "Dirge for Two Veterans" the chorus describes the funeral of a father and son to an accompaniment dominated by trumpets and drums, and in the finale the baritone declaims John Bright's words concerning the Angel of Death, originally heard in a House of Commons debate during the Crimean War.

In the summer of 1952 the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts season contained ten works by Vaughan Williams, including the six symphonies written up to that time, in celebration of the composer's forthcoming eightieth birthday in October. On 3 September Basil Cameron was the main conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra in a programme that commenced with Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*, followed by Rawsthorne's Second Piano Concerto with the soloist Louis Kentner. The third item in a long first half was a special event; a performance of Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony, conducted by the composer. Years later a member of the orchestra's viola section recalled that even hardened players felt a particular magic about the occasion; while a promenader who attended the concert recalls that the burly figure on the rostrum seemed to be doing very little but somehow inspired playing of extraordinary eloquence and commitment.

At this time Eric Spain, a talented engineer, had constructed a machine that could record radio performances off-air on to acetate blanks. What was unusual then about this machine was that it used long-playing acetates.