

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS *Live*
 Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Vol. 4

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Arthur Whittemore, Jack Lowe *piano* ^a,
 New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra,
 Dimitri Mitropoulos *conductor* ^b,
 Hallé Orchestra, Sir John Barbirolli *conductor* ^c

1	Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis ^a	17:26
Concerto in C major for Two Pianos and Orchestra ^{ab}		[26:40]
2	I. Toccata: Allegro moderato	6:17
3	II. Romanza: Lento	8:15
4	III. Fuga chromatica con Finale alla tedesca	12:07
Symphony No.8 in D minor ^c		[27:33]
5	I. Fantasia (Variazione senza Tema): Moderato	10:45
6	II. Scherzo alla marcia (per stromenti a fiato): Allegro alla marcia	3:33
7	III. Cavatina (per stromenti ad arco): Lento espressivo	7:53
8	IV. Toccata: Moderato maestoso	5:20
Total duration:		71:56

Recorded at: Live in Carnegie Hall, New York on August 29, 1943 (Fantasia ^a Soloists uncredited); on February 17, 1952 (Concerto); in Free Trade Hall, Manchester on May 15, 1964 (Symphony) **Executive Producer:** Siva Oke
Audio Restoration/CD mastering/Producer: Lani Spahr
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VAUGHAN WILLIAMS *Live*
 Vol. 4

TALLIS FANTASIA

Concerto for
 Two Pianos and
 Orchestra

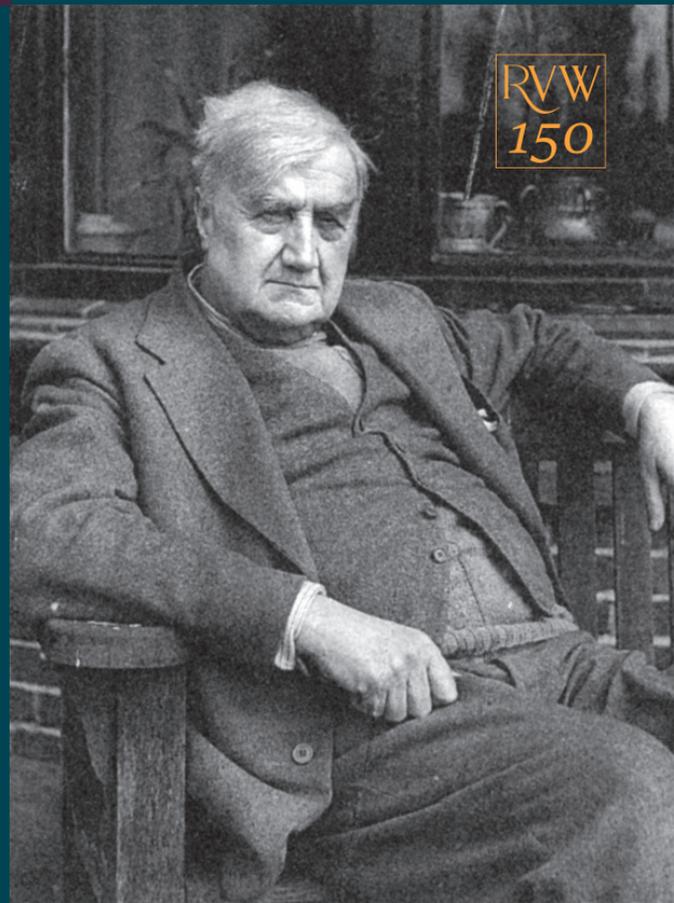
Arthur Whittemore
 Jack Lowe *pianos*

New York Philharmonic
 Symphony Orchestra
 Dimitri Mitropoulos
conductor

SYMPHONY NO.8

The Hallé Orchestra
 Sir John Barbirolli
conductor

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The year 1910 was something of an *annus mirabilis* for Ralph Vaughan Williams. On 12 October, on the evening of his 38th birthday, he conducted the first performance of his first symphony, *A Sea Symphony*, at the Leeds Festival. Mozart, who wrote at least 41 symphonies was dead by the age at which Vaughan Williams premiered his first; but then Vaughan Williams, with a private income, had never needed to earn his living by composition, and had been a slow developer (Elgar, two years earlier, had launched his First Symphony at the age of 51).

But on 6 September, a month before his triumph at Leeds, Vaughan Williams had conducted the first performance of his ***Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*** in Gloucester Cathedral as part of the Three Choirs Festival. Although Herbert Brewer, the Cathedral Organist, had rather dismissed it as “a queer, mad work by an odd fellow from Chelsea” (the composer had in fact been born nearby, at Down Ampney, in Gloucestershire), others instantly recognised the beauty and genius of a work for string orchestra that has since become one of the most loved and admired pieces of music not just in the English canon, but in the world. One of his biographers, James Day, memorably described the *Fantasia* as “unquestionably the first work by Vaughan Williams that is recognisably and unmistakably his and no-one else’s”. It was the work with which the composer finally announced his arrival as a major English composer, and was the platform from which he would, within 20 years, establish himself as the head of the profession of music in England.

Vaughan Williams had long taken an interest in Tudor polyphony, and in the particular soundworld of that period. The theme by Thomas Tallis (1505-85) is in the Phrygian mode and was one of nine tunes Tallis wrote for the 1567 Psalter of Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Tallis set the words that Parker rendered as “Why fumeth in fight: the Gentils spite, In fury raging stout? Why taketh in hond: the people fond, Wayne things to bring about?” Vaughan Williams had come across the tune four years earlier when editing *The English Hymnal*, “a collection of the best hymns in the English language” that proved a significant contribution to Anglican church music. This proces

often entailed his finding traditional tunes, whether from church music or from English folksong, and setting devotional words to them. In *The English Hymnal* Vaughan Williams used the tune to set the words of Joseph Addison’s hymn *When Rising from the Bed of Death*: but he had also used it in association with a work with which he had a lifelong obsession, John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The composer appears to have written his *Fantasia* with the space of a cathedral in mind. He specifies not a conventional string ensemble, but a string orchestra, a second, smaller one, and a string quartet that occasionally relate antiphonally to each other. The sounds coming from different directions and with different dynamics can, if the space allows, create an almost mystical air. Although the pace of the serenely-moving music at times becomes relentless, the inherent drama or passion of the piece is enhanced by regular changes of time signature; and although the listener feels at times as though he or she has been transported to the most stately Tudor setting, when the work reaches a thoroughly modern climax it provides a signpost towards the future of the composer’s melodic journey. In 1913, before the work had its London premiere, Vaughan Williams revised it, and shortened it a little: and he revised it again in 1919, shortening it further.

Herbert Howells, who would later be Vaughan Williams’s pupil and lifelong friend – and who, 40 years to the day after the *Tallis Fantasia*’s debut, would have his own moment of glory in the same cathedral with the first performance of his *Hymnus Paradisi* – was present that September night in 1910, aged not quite 18, with his friend, the poet and composer, Ivor Gurney. The effect on Howells of hearing this ground-breaking piece was life-changing. “I heard this wonderful work, I was thrilled, I didn’t understand it, but I was moved deeply. I think if I had to isolate from the rest any one impression of a purely musical sort that mattered most to me in the whole of my life as a musician, it would be hearing of that work not knowing at all what I was going to hear but knowing what I had heard I should never forget.” After the concert, which also included Elgar conducting *The Dream of Gerontius*, Howells and Gurney were so overcome by the experience that

they wandered Gloucester's streets all night trying to take it in: and in Howells's case at least, inspiring him to make his own mark in England's music.

This remarkable August 1943 live recording of the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* is of a performance given in Carnegie Hall, New York, by the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra under the Greek conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos (1896-1960), who had based himself in America in the 1930s and who immediately after the war became an American citizen. British classical music did not enjoy a great international reputation at the time, but Mitropoulos was noted for his championship of Vaughan Williams's music. He also conducted a notable recording of the Fourth Symphony in F minor of 1935, but his reading of another, less well-known work, is also on this disc.

In 1926 Vaughan Williams began work on his Piano Concerto in C major; he wrote two of the three movements that year, and completed the work with its last movement in 1930-31. The interruption was caused while the composer fulfilled the commission from Sir Geoffrey Keynes to write the music for *Job: A Masque for Dancing* (available on the second volume of this series, SOMM Ariadne 5018), which represented a notable development in his musical language. Some of that language is apparent in the opening movement, in music that has caused critics to describe the concerto as "percussive", which is not usually meant as a compliment: the composer with whom Vaughan Williams is often compared in this work is Busoni, though it is also reminiscent of Bartók, who was an admirer of the concerto. That unusual technique, and mood, is revisited in the finale, and all the more so in its original form. In 1939 the composer added a new conclusion *alla Tedesca*, in the German style, that was far more reflective and beautiful, and to an extent diminished the percussive nature of the work.

The Concerto in its original form had been given its premiere in February 1933 by Harriet Cohen, its dedicatee. Miss Cohen had a mixed reputation as a pianist, and the work did not benefit from a series of poor performances – she was reluctant to let other

soloists perform it, despite the composer imploring her to do so. He seldom made claims for his own works, but seemed to have strong feelings about his piano concerto, and became frustrated at the lack of regard in which it was being held. The work had effectively disappeared from concert halls during the Second World War, which prompted the composer, on the advice of friends and with the help of Joseph Cooper, the pianist, to arrange it for two pianos: this version became known as the **Concerto in C major for Two Pianos and Orchestra**, and several recordings of the work were made in this form before the original version came back into fashion in 1980s, when at last there was a cadre of virtuosos equal to playing it and who recognised its exceptional quality.

The two-piano version, like the expanded 1939 revision of the original concerto, has three movements. The work opens with an exuberant passage by the soloist, a *toccata marked Allegro moderato*. It could as easily be interpreted as dramatic as percussive, and has a modernity quite unlike anything Vaughan Williams had written before – though his subsequent work on *Job* echoes it to an extent. The movements are played without a break, and the second, a *Romanza marked Lento*, counts amongst the most beautiful episodes the composer ever wrote. The last movement is an *allegro, a fuga chromatica* with the 1939 *finale alla Tedesca* rounding it off. The revised ending closes the piece in serenity rather than drama, which suits it far better. The two soloists on the recording, in which Mitropoulos also conducted the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra in February 1952 in Carnegie Hall, were Arthur Whittimore (1915-84) and Jack Lowe (1916-96), who had teamed up as pianists when still at the Eastman School of Music at Rochester, New York in 1940, and toured America and the world playing as a duo.

Vaughan Williams's **Symphony No.8 in D minor** was his penultimate work in this genre, written between 1953 and 1955 when he was in his early 80s. He dedicated the symphony to his friend and long-time collaborator Sir John Barbirolli (1899-1970) – who conducted his Hallé Orchestra in the first performance of the work at Manchester's Free Trade Hall on 2 May 1956 – inscribing the manuscript "For glorious John, with love and

admiration from Ralph". Barbirolli and his orchestra gave the live performance of the work on this disc in the same concert hall in May 1964. The composer believed Barbirolli had the most perfect understanding of the components of the work, and of its overall message: this can only add to the value of having his account of the work on this disc. Vaughan Williams began the symphony in the year of his second marriage, to his long-time mistress Ursula Wood, following the death of his first wife, Adeline, in 1951. It is a work of joy, optimism and at times exuberance, remarkable for a man of his age, and a testament to the new direction of his life in its last phase.

The work is in four movements. The first, marked *Moderato*, is described as *Fantasia (Variazione senza Tema)*, or variations without a theme. It has seven variants of the opening tune, with numerous changes of tempo and mood, but conveying a sense of calm and peace that ends with a great proclamation of happiness. In the second movement, a *Scherzo alla marcia*, the composer uses only brass and woodwind in a brief and genial passage that demonstrates his mastery of orchestration. The third movement, *Cavatina*, is a sumptuous and meditative interlude for strings only, displaying the assurance of the man who wrote the *Tallis Fantasia*. Analysts have remarked on a similarity between the main tune in the movement and in Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, one of the composer's favourite works.

The whole orchestra is brought back into use in the *Finale*, a *riotous toccata* that Vaughan Williams claimed deployed "all the 'phones and 'spiels known to the composer". The gong strike that opens it was said to have been inspired by a visit the newlyweds had made to a performance of Puccini's *Turandot*, in which it had also been used. At the end of the first performance the entire audience in the Free Trade Hall stood up and cheered: hearing this one, from eight years after the 1956 premiere, one can all too easily detect why.

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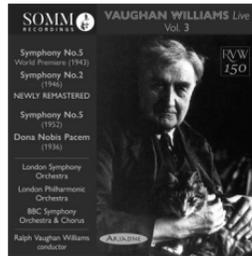
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