

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS and the Renaissance of British Music (1993)

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I have no hesitation in saying that Ralph Vaughan Williams, or RVW as he is called, is, by far, the finest British composer of diatonic music. Coupled with this, is his use of modes and the glorious harmonies he produces which often elevates his music to an ethereal beauty.

His music is not turgid, pompous and nauseating as is the music of Elgar. His music is not arid as is that of Britten. His music is progressive as shown, for example, in his nine symphonies, all of which are different from each other and, at least, two of them are probably masterpieces.

Purcell has often been called the greatest British composer but there are those who wrongly pontificate that Elgar gave birth to the renaissance of British music.

In England we have Elgar thrust on us relentlessly. We are saturated with articles about him. His Cello Concerto is played on the BBC more than any other piece. Once it was played three times in twenty four hours. Most musicians think it politically correct to always bring Elgar into the conversation.

Vladimir Ashkenazy talks about people in Russia who are dedicated Scriabinists who visit the Scriabin Museum in Moscow every day. He refers to this as Scriabinmania.

There is, in England, Elgarmania and it is spreading like a cancer. He is portrayed as not only the greatest British composer but the greatest composer of all time and that Bach is only second best. This nonsense was started, or advanced, by Sir John Barbirolli who said that no one could be a musician or a music lover unless they adored everything about Elgar. The birth of English music, its renaissance, is due exclusively to Elgar it is falsely asserted.

Apart from the fact that Elgar's music is seriously defective, there were British composers before him who wrote finer works than he ever did, and put British music on the map. Hamish MacCunn wrote *The Land of the Mountain and the Flood* in 1887 and it is a superb piece composed three years before Elgar's *Froissart*. Earlier still was Sir Frederick Cowen who was born in 1852 and wrote six symphonies and several operas. We backtrack another five years to the birth of Sir Alexander Mackenzie to find accomplished concert music written before Elgar was born, and, if we go back to 1813, we arrive at the year of the birth of Sir George Macfarren who wrote his first opera, *Don Quixote*, in 1846 and had written eight symphonies by 1885 and may have written more had he not been overcome by blindness. One of his pupils was Sir Hubert Parry who wrote his *Symphony no. 1* in 1882 and by 1889 had written three more.

The problem was that most English music was influenced by the German tradition. Macfarren could be mistaken for Mendelssohn and Parry's music shows the clear influence of Brahms. But Elgar's music is also Germanic for the most part. Vaughan Williams's music is decidedly English.

The renaissance of British music, however, probably started with Cipriani Potter who was born in 1792 and had the privilege of knowing Beethoven. He introduced British audiences to Beethoven's Piano Concertos numbers 1, 3 and 4. Potter composed at least nine symphonies including the *Enigma Symphony* or *Enigma Variations* which information Elgar would have had. Potter's work is really *Variations* in the style of five eminent artists pictured within. Potter was highly thought of, and Wagner conducted Potter's *Symphony in G minor* in 1855. Potter died in 1871. Elgar's *Enigma Variations* are not original in concept.

Sir Adrian Boult often said, "If Elgar's music is played badly you blame the orchestra; if it is played well, you blame Elgar". He also said, "Every composer is greater than Elgar!". He was being serious.

Elgar is the only composer to have had an official deprecation society in which Stanford and Beecham were two of its many members. It was not a society born of prejudice, jealousy or spite, but of a careful and intelligent examination of Elgar's scores and the serious mistakes, flaws and errors contained in them.

One of the greater composer was Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. He had written four splendid symphonies



before Elgar presented Froissart. RVW was a pupil of Stanford.

Stanford was born in Dublin in 1852 and was Irish. He studied at Cambridge from 1870, and was the organist at Trinity College, Cambridge from 1873-92. He later studied in Leipzig and Berlin. Unlike Elgar, he was both a great musician and a complete musician. He gave the first performances in England of many works of Brahms. Tennyson adored him and begged him to set some of his work to music. Sir Charles was professor of composition at Cambridge from 1883 to his death in 1924 and among his pupils were Bliss, Howells, Ireland, Holst (who was a poor student), Gurney (a superb composer of songs) and RVW. Stanford also conducted the Bach Choir from 1885 - 1902.

The musicologist Michael Kennedy, who writes utter rubbish and furthers the Elgar myth, is dismissive of Stanford's orchestral and chamber music saying his finest music is in his operas and choral works. While his choral work is very fine and his chamber music second to none, his orchestral music is quite superb. There are the popular Irish Rhapsodies, expertly written and orchestrated, which show up the inferiority of Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance Marches. Stanford's symphonies are all very competent and accomplished but the anti-Irish prejudice has been used to suppress and extinguish his work and to promote the two Elgar symphonies. Politics should have no place in music.

Stanford wrote pure music not music weighed down by patriotism, flag waving and the embarrassing vanity of Edwardian tedious music. Stanford wrote real concertos, three for the piano, two for the violin and one each for the cello and clarinet respectively. Among his output are eight very fine string quartets and his choral music and operas are of a quality that is unrivalled on these shores.

Stanford was a honest man and not a today or creep. There is that wonderful account of his talking with Parry after a performance of Elgar's Dream of Gerontius. One said, "It stinks of incense" to which the other replied, "Oh no...it just stinks!"

There is the famous letter that Stanford wrote to Elgar in which he said that he was sitting in the smallest room in the house with a copy of Elgar's Cello Concerto before him but, thankfully, it would soon be behind him. This story has been attributed to other composers about other works.

RVW was born on 12 October 1872 in Gloucestershire. His father, Arthur, was the vicar of Down Ampney. His mother was a Miss Wedgewood who was a niece of Charles Darwin the man who blamed God for the death of his young daughter Emma in Easter 1851 and, consequently, set out to discredit the Almighty with his theory of evolution which, when examined, is a means to deny creation and the existence of God making human beings out to be merely animals and, therefore, unaccountable for their conduct.

Arthur died suddenly in 1875. He was only forty. His widow took RVW and her two other children to the Wedgewood family home at Leith Hill Place in Surrey. His aunt, Sophy, taught him the piano and, at the age of seven, he began to have violin lessons. He went to Rottingdean School and then entered Charterhouse in 1887.

Living with the Wedgewoods, and with their famous relative being in the news with his theory of evolution and gaining celebrity attention, caused RVW to become an atheist which is the outcome of imbibing this heresy. When he left Charterhouse in 1890 he openly declared that he was an atheist. He enrolled at the Royal College of Music and later studied with Parry. But it was Wagner who fascinated him.

He went up to Cambridge to read history but kept up his musical studies now with Charles Wood. Wood was born in Armagh in 1866 as was also a pupil of Stanford and taught at Cambridge University. He wrote some fine choral music and three splendid string quartets.

History being RVW's chief subject, he befriended the brilliant historian George Trevelyan and, as the Labour Party was mainly atheistic, and welcomed the heresy of evolution, RVW joined the Fabian Society. On a positive note, RVW befriended Holst who, with his wife, was usually hard up and benefitted from RVW's wealth.

Holst was interested in the Orient and the religions of India and elsewhere, being another atheist. RVW did not share that interest but was drawn to Tudor and renaissance music and wanted his music to be English.

Parry was not a good teacher. He would say to a student, "Oh, that is very characteristic of you" and other semi-laudatory things but never any helpful suggestions. And so RVW went to Stanford who was very strict and this did not endear Stanford to RVW who described him as fierce and hard to please.

Stanford was a mercurial and plain-spoken man and rigid in expecting student's adhering to musical form and correct grammar.

Despite RVW's unfortunate views he took up the post of organist at St Barnabas in South Lambeth although he certainly did not need the income.

On 9 October 1897, he married Adeline Fisher and they went to Berlin for their extended honeymoon which included a brief trip to Italy over Christmas. In Germany, RVW studied with Max Bruch who encouraged him greatly and RVW's dream came true in that he heard Wagner's Ring.

On his return to Lambeth the new vicar insisted that the organist take communion, which RVW, as an atheist, could not do and so he resigned.

By now he was composing and successfully took his BMus. He wanted to increase his knowledge of music and made the mistake of applying to Elgar for lessons in orchestration but, thankfully, was turned down as Mrs Elgar said her husband was too busy. RVW briefly studied Elgar's scores and wrote to my great uncle Sir Ivor Atkins saying how glad he was that he did not go to Elgar for lessons since Elgar's orchestration was very poor, which it is.

RVW's first success was the song Linden Lea of 1901 which Michael Kennedy foolishly describes as halfway between a folk song and an art song. What the song does is convey real Englishness. A year earlier he had composed an Heroic March for orchestra given at RCM which won approval including that from Stanford despite RVW's complaints about him. In 1903 yet another beautiful song appeared, Silent Noon. His Songs of Travel to texts by Robert Louis Stevenson were a great success from 1904 and remain so to this day.

RVW wrote for journals and gave lectures which usually majored on whether music should be national and what is nationalism in music. RVW was not a snob. He would say that what England wanted was real music even indicating the value of music hall songs. He believed that national music was founded on folk music. In this he was following Stanford and Parry who had helped found the Folk-Song Society in 1898. RVW began to collect folk songs in his travels as a lecturer. He had discovered the tune Dives and Lazarus in 1893 and that had inspired him to his research. In fact it became an obsession. Holst helped him from time to time as did the composer George Butterworth. Elgar, insolent as ever, was not interested and made one of his innumerable stupid remarks when he said, "I am folk music!" He always kept saying that his was so very important that any letter addressed to him as "Elgar, England" would find him without difficulty.

Elgar resisted national music ruthlessly. He was only interested in himself, being narcissistic and arrogant. He was a Pharisee, a self-righteous arrogant man and a hypocrite. He would not lower himself to folk music or music hall songs.

Years later Benjamin Britten said that he had an interest in folk song and pestered RVW for funds to enable him to carry on the older man's research into British folk music. RVW was generous in his financial support for Britten but the money was used by Britten for other purposes and most unworthy ones

RVW began to compose occasional pieces such as the Symphonic Rhapsody premiered by Dan Godfrey in Bournemouth in 1904 but his heart was set on a choral symphony on a grand scale. It was not to be like Beethoven's Ninth or Mahler's Two or Three for they were not real choral symphonies whereas Mahler's Eight was. The initial title for the proposed symphony was The Ocean.

RVW's interest in folk music had caught the attention of the Rev Percy Dearmer who saw the need for a new Anglican hymn book and wanted to commission The English Hymnal. RVW was now saying that he was an agnostic and he had the idea that to preserve some folk songs they could be put to words that had no existing tune. RVW worked under the name anon and also wrote his famous hymn tune Sine Nomine which goes to For all the saints.

RVW jumped at this project for it was a way to promulgate national music and have it used in education. It was not a religious undertaking but a cultural one.

Around this time he set up the Leith Hill Music Festival which centred on competitions between choirs. It was not like the Three Choirs Festival where Elgar had to be prominent and worshipped, or like Aldeburgh where Britten was to be adored. Fortunately, RVW was a far more decent man.

Also in 1904, he composed In The Fen Country an impression for orchestra. He revised it twice. It beautifully captures the sombre landscape it represents. Holst was to take up this idea in 1927 when he composed Egdon Heath which is, undoubtedly, his finest work.

RVW's trips to Norfolk were rich in his discovery of folk songs and some of the songs became the basis of his Norfolk Rhapsody of 1906. Originally he had considered a Norfolk Symphony.

Many people in Britain were looking further afield for literary inspiration and the availability of the poetry of the American Walt Whitman made an impact. In 1907, RVW set Toward the Unknown Region which may be the first work to reveal RVW's mysticism. It has a refinement you find in Parry and sounds very English because of the folksy style.

RVW felt that the French composer Vincent D'Indy would be the ideal composer to study with although he had been a pupil of Franck who was 'a poor composer and only good at repetition as seen in his D minor Symphony', a view I share with RVW. However, he went to study with Ravel in 1908 who was three years younger than he was. Ravel was not really known outside France but had a reputation for being a radical.

Next to Roussel, Ravel was the finest French orchestrator. He was a first class musician and works like *Daphnis et Chloe*, *Sheherazade* and the *Introduction and Allegro* for flute, clarinet and string quartet are masterpieces. He taught RVW how to orchestrate in colour. Ravel also pointed out the horrendous orchestration of Elgar which was an accurate assessment. Ravel had heard *The Dream of Gerontius* and hated it immensely and said that Elgar was trying to be a Mendelssohn but that he had no chance since Mendelssohn was a great composer. When Ravel was working on his *Piano Concerto in G* in the early thirties he was depressed having heard Elgar's *Cello Concerto* and he complained to Marguerite Long about the piece as a self-indulgent wallow, extremely nauseating and, therefore, vomit music.

Perhaps the first great work of RVW was the *Fantasia* on a theme of Thomas Tallis for string orchestra written a few years after Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* for string orchestra. The *Vaughan Williams*' is far more original and inventive and it is not pompous or sickly.

Around this time RVW wrote his *String Quartet no. 1* in G minor which he revised in the early twenties. Again it succeeds over the Elgar Quartet of ten years later in that it has a fluidity and clarity although one would be hard pressed to call it a great work.

The poet A E Houseman appealed to RVW and so he set six poems from *A Shropshire Lad* and entitled the work *On Wenlock Edge*, scored for tenor, piano and string quartet but it was later orchestrated. It is a beautiful work capturing the very Englishness of the texts whereas Elgar's songs and choral music lacks originality and is still rooted in the German tradition with its dull Teutonicism. There is no way that Elgar can be the originator or a contributor to the British renaissance.

RVW continued collecting folk songs, working on his *First Symphony* and Trinity College asked him for some incidental music for a production of Aristophanes's *The Wasps* on which he worked during the winter of 1908 and 1909.

It must also be mentioned here that Parry wrote some fine chamber music omitted from my copy of Michael Kennedy's *Concise Dictionary of Music* (third edition). There are some fine Piano Trios and an exceptional Nonet for woodwind. Parry studied with Sterndale Bennett and Macfarren, RVW also studied with gifted composers and teachers but Elgar never had any mentors. Parry was the first important British composer to write a Piano Concerto. His choral work *Blest Pair of Sirens* of 1887 is, probably, the greatest choral work since those of Tallis.

The Wasps was a great success and the *Overture* is quite superb. It shows the combined influence of Parry and the fluency of Ravel but his distinctive Englishness is there as is the mysticism from *The Pilgrim's Progress* of which he has already written some scenes. It took him forty years to complete *The Pilgrim's Progress* as an opera.

It was in 1910 that the *Sea Symphony* appeared. It is a great work. It is exciting and predominantly cheerful and engaging. It must have been a shock to the English public who may have been expecting something pretentious like *The Dream of Gerontius*. But there is nothing dull or laborious about this tremendous symphony and it has one of the most exciting openings one could imagine and the exclamation *Behold the sea itself*. It was the first British choral symphony and put all other choral works in the shade. Sir Adrian Boult spent days with Sir Hugh Allen on this symphony and championed it with evangelical zeal. It is difficult to play and perform if it is to be done well. Boult said, "Of all British symphonies and British choral music it is this one alone that reaches the most elevated heights. It is fresh, vital and exuberant. What Elgar always failed to do, Vaughan Williams has done and in his first major work making us proud to be British without writing pompous music. He has provided real majesty in his portraits of the seas. It is a confident and amazing work."

Of special mention must be the sublime slow movement opening with the words, "On the beach at night alone."

The composer George Butterworth, who had been a schoolmaster at Eton, but became a mature student at RCM, was transformed by this masterpiece as were many others. Elgar was profoundly jealous and insolent, as he usually was. Butterworth told RVW to write another symphony and was probably the inspiration between the *Symphony no. 2* known as the *London Symphony* written between 1911 and 1914. It was

premiered on 27 March 1914 at the Queen's Hall and was a magnificent triumph. It is a work of originality and invention, sometimes beautiful, sometimes sensitive and very distinctive.

Elgar was furious. His Overture: Cockaigne (In London Town) of 1901 was shown to be inferior. Parry rightly said that the Elgar was overscored whereas RVW's Symphony showed no such fault.

The influence of folk song is here. The second movement is called Bloomsbury Square on a November afternoon and the scherzo take us the Westminster Embankment. Stanford said that Cockaigne was clumsy whereas the RVW revealed a perfect technique.

Butterworth who was extremely well versed in current British music said that RVW and his music was head and shoulders above all other composers born in Britain and that he was a giant compared with a lot of dwarf pygmies. Because RVW had not the time, Butterworth wrote out a copy of the score of The Sea Symphony as a second copy was essential. War was looming and RVW was working on his opera Hugh the Drover and the glorious Lark Ascending based on the poem by George Meredith where the British countryside was captured with all its rural delights, something no other British composer has done.

Although he was 42, RVW joined the Army in the Medical Corp and stationed in England for about two years. He played the organ for church parades and left these shores for France in 1916 to work with the Field Ambulance Service. Later he and the service went to Greece. Later still he took gunnery training and was in charge of 200 horses. What he saw in the war, especially in Flanders, troubled him deeply.

George Butterworth had died at Pozieres at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and was posthumously awarded the Military Cross. He was a great friend of RVW and helped in the collecting of folk songs and was an excellent folk dancer himself. His orchestra idyll The Banks of Green Willow is a splendid piece and he wrote many fine songs of which Loveliest of Trees is best known. RVW dedicated his London Symphony to his memory.

Another sadness was the death of Parry at Rustington, Sussex shortly before Armistice in 1918. Parry is still not valued as a composer and musician and while some of his music seems a little derivative there is much of his music that deserves to be known. His English Lyrics are beautifully written. He had a gift for composing unaccompanied choral pieces, that is to say a capella works. Boult regards his final symphony, number 5, to be a very important work. Parry set William Blake's weird poem Jerusalem in 1916 and while it is popular, it is not a great work hindered by the ridiculous text. There are many works, even short ones, which are vastly superior to Jerusalem which are never performed. There are three substantial oratorios all deserving revival. Parry wrote some important books including Studies of Great Composers and a detailed account of J S Bach.

Although Elgar was not in the same class of composers as Butterworth or Parry and was a loathsome person, the death of his wife in 1919 touched RVW. Boult, who only conducted Elgar because he was expected to, said after the Great War that music had to be shorter, more terse and that we have to say goodbye to the Elgarian longeurs and pompous indulgence. However Boult did not approve of RVW's excisions of his London Symphony. "It is perfect as it is," he said.

Elgar wrote his Cello Concerto which was originally a failure and received with great hostility. It lacks rhythmic variety and is repetitive and wallows in self pity to an excruciating degree. It treats the cello as a spoilt brat wrote one famous cellist who are among many that refuse to play it. The fast music does not suit the instrument and this weakness is also found in Tchaikovsky's Roco Variations and, in the Elgar. The finale is really a slow movement of turgid music.

All these valid criticisms has only served to cause people to be sympathetic to this work and falsely herald it as a good piece. This was enhanced by Jacqueline Du Pre's championship of it but the appeal was in her beauty not in the beauty of the music.

Parry had been director of RCM from 1894 and many wanted RVW to succeed him, but RVW wanted to concentrate on composition. Parry was devoted to RCM and put it and the students before his own career and health and it was hard work that killed him. Oxford University made RVW a honorary doctor of music. What was clear that RVW was regarded as the leader of British music.

Holst had completed The Planets which is another enigma. Many consider it a great work but it is a hotchpotch of accumulated ideas from other composers. It has its moments of real satisfaction for listeners and should not be subject to too harsh a criticism.

The British renaissance now suffered a blow in that it began to take on European influences particularly from France. It was all the rage to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. The bond between Britain and France had developed during the 1914 -18 war and, in addition, Britain had imported European conductors

so that, for example, the German, Hans Richter, had been conducting the Halle Orchestra having taken over from Sir Frederick Cowen in 1895. Richter had conducted the first concert given by the London Symphony Orchestra in 1904.

The British composer John Foulds did not conform. He had been a cellist in the Halle Orchestra under Richter from 1900 to 1910. He experimented with microtones and felt that British music was too backward-looking and that it could not live permanently in the dark ages. He was very gifted as a colourful orchestrator.

But the English school of RVW was in decline. It has been said that Michael Tippett's Concerto for double string orchestra tried to keep it alive. Some people assert that English string orchestra music was exemplified by Elgar, as well as RVW, but Elgar's music is Germanic ; it does not have the Englishness of RVW.

The Lark Ascending is a gem. It speaks of a rural England now past. It is now dark and sinister as Holst sometimes is and, thankfully, it lacks turgid Edwardian pomposity. The Lark Ascending encapsulates the green and pleasant land which Blake and Parry could not do. It is sunny but not scorching. It is spontaneous and translucent.

During the war RVW had been contemplating his Symphony no. 3, which is subtitled Pastoral, another work devoted to the beauty of the British countryside. It was first performed at the Queen's Hall under Boult on 26 January 1922. The work was an instant success. In fact, all of his three symphonies were. The Third Symphony is devoid of folk song influence. All three symphonies were different from each other which shows the composer's progress and inventiveness. Some have said that this latest symphony was RVW's coming to terms with the war but anything can be read into anything. The lovely subdued tone throughout is convincing. It has one or two signposts such as a deliberate misquote from The Last Post and a scherzo which some see to be akin to a Spanish dance. The finale uses a wordless soprano soloist. It adds to the colour, and the human voice is still the most beautiful instrument in the world and its use here seems to encourage we mere mortals to value the beauty that is around us in the countryside. But we now have made motorways and changed this beauty for ever.

RVW and Adeline went to North America in 1922 where RVW, having seen Niagare Falls and the Woolworth building in New York made the famous remark, "The works of man terrify me." He completed a ballet Old King Cole and the English Folk Song Suite for military band.

He then turned to the oratorio form and composed Sancta Civitas (Holy City) with words from the book of Revelation and Taverner's Bible and this is scored for tenor, baritone, chorus, boys' choir and orchestra. At the time (1920 -1927) he was the conductor of the Bach Choir.

During this time Stanford died in London in 1924. He was the greatest composer of his day and for over forty years was a true servant of music. He was professor of composition at RCM from 1883 to his death, conductor of the Leeds Festival for many years and encouraged all his students. RCM put on orchestral concerts and operas which he conducted. He excelled in all forms of composition and in every area of music and of music-making.

In the 1920s RVW courted some modern ideas and in 1925 went to Prague and heard Janacek's Cunning Little Vixen which impressed him deeply. Although he was a great friend of Holst, some of Holst's music left RVW confused. The Choral Symphony was one such example. Nonetheless this work and the Janacek caused RVW to consider a radical style in his own work. But it did not show in his next work the amazing Flos Campi for viola, chorus and orchestra. It is inspired by the Song of Solomon the Biblical book that has caused so much controversy. Some believe that Solomon typifies Christ and if that interpretation is so then Christ is as lecherous as Solomon, which idea is both absurd and blasphemous. Flos Campi has been criticised and by people who are not musicians such as one well known journalist who describes it as unsubtle and unsatisfactory and that the wordless chorus is meaningless. The trouble is that such stupid remarks are often believed.

The Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Aranyi undertook the premiere of RVW's Violin Concerto in 1925. She was the great niece of Joachim. It is set in D minor with only a string orchestra as an accompaniment. It is sometimes known as the Concerto Academico. It is not a good work and RVW was not a concerto man. This is also shown in his Piano Concerto in C which occupied him from 1926 to 1931. It is a dreadful work and RVW knew so in that just after the Second World War he rewrote it as a Concerto for two pianos adding some new material. It is still awful. It has no direction or form and painfully tries to imitate Bach.

1924 saw the final revision to Hugh the Drover, although he altered it again in 1956.

The political unrest and the General Strike of 1926 was only relieved by the premiere of Sancta Civitas

wrote one newspaper. It is important work showing some indication of RVW wanting to be modern yet sadly thinking, as many do, that dissonance is the evidence of a modern piece. It is a disturbing work wider in range than Elgar's *The Kingdom* or *The Apostles*, and the austerity in RVW's work does not overcome its beauty. This darkness is also found in his short opera *Riders to the Sea* (1932) and the cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem* of 1936. This modernism was to culminate in his greatest work the magnificent *Symphony no. 4 in F minor* of 1931-5.

In 1928 RVW edited the *Oxford Book of Carols* three years after the completion of the *English Hymnal*.

Many English composers felt some sort of obligation to set Shakespeare and so RVW took the *Merry Wives of Windsor* as the basis for a new opera *Sir John in Love*, *Sir John* being Falstaff, which occupied five or six years until 1931. During this time he was also working on his ballet *Job*.

This ballet has its critics. To some it is a masterpiece. To others it is incoherent and a collection of mismatched movements. Others feel that such a Biblical story does not lend itself to ballet and the employment of a saxophone in the score does not gel with the story. These are all valid comments.

Others felt that RVW's music was no longer the glorious rural and bucolic impression but was now becoming cosmopolitan. He was being concerted to urbanism. He felt this himself and so moved out of his Chelsea home for 25 years to lease a bungalow near Dorking in 1929.

In 1932 RVW set off for America for the second time giving lectures at Bryn Mawr University in Pennsylvania. He introduced some ideas about music. For example, he disapproved of the comment that music was a universal language and, of course, he is right. There are some people who will never warm to the music of India for example or to the music exclusive to the hill tribes of Thailand. Conversely those musicians may not respond to the greatness of Beethoven.

The *Symphony no. 4 in F minor* was premiered in April 1935. Someone wrote that this symphony is far from being the first example of great music written by RVW. This is a ridiculous remark which merely shows that the writer does not realise or want to realise the greatness of this masterpiece. The shackles of folk music have been broken. It is not music inspired by anything. It is absolute music. People have said that it is a war symphony or rather a symphony that predicted the war with Germany. It may be a symphony reflecting the contemporary times. Someone has said that it is work depicting terror. What it is is RVW's most original and stunning score, an absolute cracker, a winner all the way.

RVW had sent up the Leith Hill Festival and felt obliged to perform British works that he was not in sympathy with. In the year that Elgar died, 1934, RVW was preparing to perform *Gerontius*. He felt that this was unnecessary as the Three Choirs Festival had unfairly become the Elgar Festival. The two composers were poles apart and Elgar was a skinflint never taking his turn in buying the beer.

Delius died a few weeks later. At his graveside Sir Thomas Beecham declared that 'Delius had been, without question, the leading composer in British life since 1885 and that, in the last decade and certainly now RVW had that distinction.'

Holst was also very ill. RVW had taken over some of his duties at St Paul's School. Holst underwent an operation to remove his duodenal ulcer but his heart was weak and failed.

In the initial stages of the Fourth Symphony, Holst had advised RVW who said, "You must take out all those big tunes in the finale. You don't want to sound like bloody Elgar!"

RVW took this advice.

The death of Holst really distressed RVW who was also concerned about the developments in Europe. He had recently broken his leg but still conducted at the Proms with The London Symphony Orchestra with his *Running Set* both conducted from a stool.

William Walton's *Symphony no. 1* had its premiere to great acclaim and a few months later he attended a rehearsal of RVW's Fourth. Walton said to Arthur Benjamin, "This is the greatest symphony since Beethoven. "And this from a man whose own symphony had just broken new ground.

This raises an interesting point. 'The music lover may praise an Elgar symphony but a real musician will extol the greatness of RVW's fourth,' said Boult who conducted the premiere with the BBC Symphony Orchestra on 10 April 1935. Boult also said that this symphony was 'a magnificent gesture of disgust against the idea of war'.

When RVW was asked, "What is this symphony about?" he would answer, "it is about F minor!"

He also said, "I don't know whether I like it but it was what I meant!"

There is also the apocryphal story that RVW is supposed to have said, "Gentlemen, if that is modern

music you can keep it!" But that story has not been verified by anyone and is part of the Elgar lobby trying to disparage RVW in favour of Sir Edward.

King George V invited RVW to join the Order of Merit to fill the vacancy left by Elgar. RVW rightly refused. He did not want to be compared with Elgar or step into Elgar's shoes. Sir William Walton, who originally had some regard for Elgar, said in 1960 that he was sick of being called the successor to Elgar since he was not. He also said that the greatest composer of the last 100 years was Shostakovich and the farthest opposite end of the spectrum was Elgar.

RVW was offered a knighthood and told, "Elgar had one!" to which RVW replied, "That is bloody well why I don't want one!"

The concerto form was never suited to RVW and, in my opinion, neither was opera. However, he turned to operetta with *The Poisoned Kiss* which was not a success on its first performance in 1936. Around this time he was working on *Dona Nobis Pacem*. It is an anti-war work and revealed RVW's disgust at the Socialism of Nazi Germany. Unlike all of Elgar's work, RVW's work is sincere. It is also dramatic and certainly not pompous.

The Five Tudor Portraits was his next major work. Again it shows that RVW was progressing in his style and all his works now had originality, and originality is essential for any composer. Here he combines his love for old English music with a changing voice. He was also at work on his *Symphony no. 5 in D major*.

In 1937 the University of Hamburg wanted to confer on RVW a prize for his conspicuous achievement in the arts. He was hesitant about this since he was distressed at what was happening in Germany. Eventually he accepted the award but with the proviso that in doing so, he did not support the political conditions in Germany. When war broke out, RVW campaigned against Nazi Germany and the Third Reich banned performances of his work.

In 1940 RVW relinquished his post as professor of composition at RCM which post he had held since 1919. His wife was now disabled and housebound and he could not concentrate on composition. Sir Henry Wood asked RVW to set some lines from *The Merchant of Venice* and the result was the sublime *Serenade to Music* for sixteen soloists and orchestra first performed on 5 October 1938 and recorded the next day. In the score RVW named the soloists and there is no doubt that this piece is serene and a masterpiece of the highest order.

Just before the war, RVW met the 27 year old Ursula Wood who had written to him with some ideas on texts that he could set to music. She collaborated with him on *The Bridal Path* but the premiere was hindered by the outbreak of war.

During the war RVW became a keen gardener, supported Dame Myra Hess, a pianist of very limited talent, as shown in her recording of the Schumann Piano Concerto which is simply atrocious. He had earlier composed his *Variants on Dives and Lazarus* for string orchestra and harp based on an ancient English folk song and therefore it was 'national' music. It had been commissioned by the World Trade Fair in New York and premiered at Carnegie Hall in June 1939 by Sir Adrian Boult. RVW premiered his *Mass in G minor* at St Paul's Cathedral.

In 1940 the Home Office appointed him to be the chairman of a committee dealing with the release of interned alien musicians most of whom were anti-Nazi or Jews. His former pupil, Muir Matheson was employed to conduct music for films and asked RVW to write the music for *The 49th Parallel*. He also wrote the score for *Coastal Command*. Ursula Wood's husband died of a heart attack while still young and she often shared RVW's study working on texts and further artistic projects.

The 24 June 1943 was the date for the premiere of the *Symphony no. 5* conducted by the composer. This symphony is dedicated without permission to Sibelius. It is probably his most mystical symphony and a work of peace having an ethereal beauty.

RVW was a fundamentally a good character. He worked hard to try to prevent Michael Tippett being sent to prison because, as a conscientious objector, he also refused to undertake agricultural work to help the war effort. RVW argued, and rightly so, that Tippett stayed in England during the war and was not cowardly like Britten who, with his lover Peter Pears, had run away to North America to escape the hostilities and only returned to England when the worst of the war was over and the US Army were to call up all residents including foreign residents. RVW vehemently supported Tippett and compared his fortitude with the abject cowardice of Britten.

His next work was the *Oboe Concerto* written for Leon Goossens a pleasant work with the same atmosphere

as the Fifth Symphony. The Symphony no 6 in E minor was in progress and RVW invites some of his friend to his house, The White Gates, in Dorking to hear Michael Mullinar to play it through on the piano. Such was his splendid advocacy of the piece that RVW dedicated it to him.

The premiere was a sensation. Many were emotionally overcome by its language. As it was written between 1944 and 1947 and has been called a war symphony but this preoccupation that some have to classify and pigeon-hole works is a foolish and useless task. Some say it is influenced by jazz but the third movement is entitled Homage to Henry Hall of the BBC dance orchestra and uses his theme tune Here's to the Next Time. The snobby English establishment objected to a composer sinking to this level but the fact remains that there are good musicians in other walks of life.

The premiere took place on 21 April 1948 in the Albert Hall and was said to be nothing short of cataclysmic. It is a strong piece, sometimes violent, restless, dark and powerful. RVW objected to the work being described as a war symphony. What is clear is that it is a shattering symphony and was a milestone in British music. Sergeant opined that it was the work of a man in his seventies looking back over decades of observing suffering.

His most famous film score was Scott of the Antarctic of 1948 which music was later used for the Symphony no. 7, the Sinfonia Antartica completed in 1952 the year after his wife, Adeline, died. The new symphony was to given to Sir John Barbirolli to conduct who had just performed the previous six symphonies but he was certainly not a good conductor and his performances were insignificant compared to those conducted by the composer or by Boult.

The previous year, 1951, RVW was awarded the first ever honorary doctorate of music from Bristol where Sir Winston Churchill was the Chancellor.

RVW went on holidays with Ursula and in January 1953 proposed to her. They were married on 7 February and set up home in Hanover Terrace in London. He worked on his Christmas cantata, Hodie, premiered at The Three Choirs Festival in 1954 the year of the first performance of his Tuba Concerto. He and Ursula travelled extensively and they visited New York, a city he enjoyed, and Toronto. He gave lectures at Cornell University.

RVW completed two more symphonies. The Symphony no. 8 in D minor was completed in 1952 and dedicated to glorious John namely Sir John Barbirolli. It is surprising that RVW admired Barbirolli but, as someone has pointed out, by now RVW was very deaf and dependent on hearing aids. The Symphony no. 8 is not a good piece and neither is the Symphony no. 9 in E minor completed in 1958 the year of his death. Much of it was written in Majorca in 1956 and was affected by the death of Gerald Finzi. Finzi had been ill for a long time but it was about of chicken-pox that eventually took him. That year also saw the setting up of the RVW Trust which put all the income from performances of RVW's music into a Trust to help other composers.

Finzi was an outstanding composer and despite the nonsense that Kennedy writes he was not influenced by Elgar, but there is some influence of RVW. Finzi was born in London in 1901 and studied with Bairstow at York and with R O Morris in London. R O Morris was RVW's brother-in-law. There is no doubt that Finzi's songs are truly superb and the song cycle Die Natalis must be the most beautiful song cycle ever written by an Englishman.

It has been said, and, perhaps, with some truth that RVW's last two symphonies were composed for the sake of it.

In his last year he and his wife visited the Waltons on Ischia and Walton confirmed that RVW's Symphony no. 4 was still the best symphony since Beethoven. In June 1958 the Vaughan Williams travelled around Britain

On the evening of 25 August 1958 he was looking forward to the recording of his Symphony no. 9 the next day, but died during the night.

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