Introduction

ALAIN FROGLEY & AIDAN J. THOMSON

There can be few composers who have ridden such a reputational roller-coaster as Ralph Vaughan Williams. Lionized as a revered national figure, and across the English-speaking world in the latter part of his life, within a decade of his death in 1958 he seemed in danger of being consigned to little more than a historical footnote: a Spohr or Telemann, perhaps. His hymn tunes, songs, shorter orchestral pieces and some choral and band works did continue to be staples of the repertoire – Vaughan Williams has, in fact, always been one of those rare beasts, a popular twentieth-century composer. Yet such popularity soon became confined largely to the amateur realm, and while this would surely have offered some comfort to Vaughan Williams, a passionate advocate of the music-making of ordinary people, it was inevitably overshadowed by the precipitous decline of his standing in the world of elite performance and critical opinion. As for new research into his life or music, by the early 1980s musicological neglect was almost total. In 1996 one of the editors of the present volume introduced another book of scholarly essays on Vaughan Williams, the first of its kind, with the reflection that even a decade earlier such a project would have seemed 'to belong strictly to the realms of futuristic fantasy'.[1] Though there may been a touch of rhetorical hyperbole in that judgement, it was only a touch.

But by the mid-1990s the tide was finally turning. As the introduction to that book went on to argue, a variety of forces helped propel this revival in Vaughan Williams's fortunes. Perhaps most significant – and reaching well beyond this one composer – were the breakdown of a monolithic narrative of twentieth-century musical modernism, and a historical reassessment of the cultural politics of British nationalism and imperialism (the latter crucial for a figure who had become so associated with a particular version of national identity); in both cases, these concerns arose at least in part from the application of poststructuralist and postmodern approaches to a discipline, musicology, that had hitherto rejected them.[2] A new wave of interest in Vaughan Williams quickly gathered pace, and in the first decade of the new millennium continued to grow, spurred in part by the approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the composer's death in 2008. A wealth of ground-breaking research has now

appeared, including two further volumes of scholarly essays, several monographs, a number of important doctoral dissertations, and numerous periodical articles; this work has explored a wide variety of topics, including compositional processes, cultural contexts and reception history.[3]

In the perhaps more immediately influential realms of performance and recording, the Vaughan Williams revival has also borne very rich fruit, especially with performances of neglected or in some cases previously unknown works that have deepened and significantly changed our perceptions and understanding of the composer's development. The Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, founded in 1994, has been a vital agent of activism and fund-raising for a number of these projects, some of which have appeared on disc under its Albion Records imprint (the Society also publishes a lively journal). Vaughan Williams's music for the stage, the most neglected part of his output, has fared particularly well, with the opera *The Poisoned Kiss* and the complete incidental music for Aristophanes' *The Wasps* recorded for the first time ever, and even traditionally ephemeral genres such as film scores and incidental music for radio finding a home on disc. At the time of writing the Coliseum stage is still warm, as it were, from a historic production of the composer's most ambitious stage work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, not given a full professional production since its premiere run at Covent Garden in 1951. *Sir John in Love* and *Riders to the Sea*, similarly neglected by professional companies, have also been produced by English National Opera in the last few years, in 2006 and 2008 respectively.[4]

The 2008 anniversary was celebrated in a number of ways, but the most significant landmark was arguably the appearance of a major collection of Vaughan Williams correspondence, edited by Hugh Cobbe, which has yielded innumerable new perspectives on the composer and his work. Also important, in part because of the extent of the press coverage they received, was the release of two highly contrasting documentary films, Tony Palmer's *O Thou Transcendent: The Life of Ralph Vaughan Williams* and John Bridcut's *The Passions of Vaughan Williams*. Particularly notable in the Palmer film is the inclusion of interviews with contemporary composers, including John Adams and Mark-Anthony Turnage, both of whom pay warm homage to Vaughan Williams; this reflects a broader reassessment of Vaughan Williams's legacy as a living force in twenty-first-century music.

Palmer also interviewed pop musician Neil Tennant, reminding us that Vaughan Williams's impact has always been felt well outside the realm of classical music. Frank Sinatra, for instance, who had a wide knowledge of classical music, revered Vaughan Williams and the composer's *Job* in particular, and musicians as diverse as the progressive rock band

Genesis, jazz-rock fusion pioneer Wayne Shorter, and, most recently, alternative rock singer PJ Harvey have all acknowledged his influence.[5] And in the domain of film music, salient markers of Vaughan Williams's style remain as reliable a point of reference, particularly for evocations of landscape, as the music of Copland. His continuing potency as a symbol of British national identity in the cinema was underlined in 2003 by the use of the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* in the Oscar-nominated film *Master and Commander*. In this context it should be noted that Vaughan Williams has in recent years attracted attention from historians and other writers outside musicology, e.g. Peter Ackroyd, Jeffrey Richards, Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, as part of an increasing recognition of the crucial role played by music in broader constructions of British national identity.[6]

Yet some old attitudes die hard, as two recent and vexing inscriptions of them in the broader literature make clear. Richard Taruskin's monumental *The Oxford History of Western Music* ignores most British twentieth-century music except Britten's, and in a survey of almost 4,000 pages grants Vaughan Williams barely 6, as part of a chapter on nationalism and the nineteenth-century symphony.[7] Alex Ross's bestseller *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* likewise focuses on Britten and passes quickly over the rest of British music (though to be fair to Ross his book is a much more obviously personal view, which frees him in part from the responsibilities imposed by Taruskin's title).[8]

Both because of, and to some extent despite, all these recent developments, a volume on Vaughan Williams in the Cambridge Companion series seemed extremely timely. No comprehensive study of the composer's output has appeared since the 1998 revised version of James Day's 'Master Musicians' volume, originally published in 1961; Michael Kennedy's seminal 1964 study has not been significantly revised since 1980[9] (we are on that account doubly pleased to include here his reflections on more recent developments in Chapter 13). This Companion thus represents the first opportunity to incorporate into a comprehensive assessment the major findings of the more specialized research of the last twenty years, along with consideration of recently rediscovered or revived works that have been published and recorded during the last decade or so.[10] And while there has been a great deal of progress in our understanding of Vaughan Williams and his music, given the exceptionally long and rich life that he lived, and the sheer size and diversity of his *oeuvre*, it should come as no surprise that much work remains to be done.[11] To take just one example from the present volume, Julian Onderdonk's chapter on Vaughan Williams's hymn tunes, folksong arrangements and 'functional' church music is the first thoroughgoing survey of this part of the composer's output – despite the fact that it includes some of his most

widely performed pieces. We hope, therefore, that this book will both consolidate recent advances in our knowledge of Vaughan Williams and suggest new avenues of investigation. As with other volumes in the series, the intention has been to provide a comprehensive survey of the composer's achievement that will be accessible and appealing to a broad non-specialist readership, but also to include new information and fresh perspectives, particularly in areas such as music analysis, cultural politics and reception history, that will be of value to students and more advanced scholars.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part establishes the foundations of Vaughan Williams's musical and broader cultural attitudes and his place in British music, by examining the emergence of his beliefs and values, musical style and critical reputation in the period up to *c*. 1925 (about the midpoint of his career as a composer). The second part addresses his musical output according to the major genres in which he worked. The third broadens the scope to explore Vaughan Williams's wide-ranging role in British musical life, as an active writer and public figure (e.g. working for the release of interned Jewish refugees during World War II), his relationship with the BBC, and the vagaries of his critical reputation, both during his life and since (this section includes discussion of Vaughan Williams's considerable and often overlooked impact outside Britain, especially in the United States). Finally, building on the kind of perspectives suggested only by sound-bites in the Palmer documentary, we conclude the volume by opening up the discussion to the world of contemporary music, engaging in sustained dialogue with four leading composers of our time.

A volume of this kind clearly requires the support of many individuals, and it is possible to mention here by name only a few. Vicki Cooper at Cambridge University Press encouraged and advised us in the initial stages of the project; Rebecca Taylor, Rachel Cox, Gill Cloke and Fleur Jones steered it through a rather protracted gestation, and we are extremely grateful for their patience and professionalism. The University of Connecticut Research Foundation provided travel funding and, most importantly, support for an editorial assistant: Heather de Savage transcribed audio recordings of the composer interviews, compiled the chronology and bibliography, copy-edited chapters, and assisted in numerous other ways with the preparation of the manuscript. We are enormously grateful to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Piers Hellawell, Nicola LeFanu and Anthony Payne for agreeing (and taking the time) to be interviewed for Chapter 14. Hugh Cobbe of the Vaughan Williams Charitable Trust and Nicolas Bell of the Department of Manuscripts at the British Library offered generous assistance in a number of matters. We are grateful to our colleagues and students at the University of Connecticut and Queen's

University Belfast, who supported and stimulated us in the preparation of the book, sometimes unwittingly.

Finally, all those who work on Ralph Vaughan Williams and cherish his music owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to Ursula Vaughan Williams, who died in October 2007 at the age of ninety-six. Ursula was the complete opposite of the kind of obstructive surviving relative who sometimes complicates – and on occasion outright blights – the legacy of a great artist in the years after their death. She was unfailingly generous, most obviously in the bequest of the composer's manuscripts that she made to the British Library just a few years after her husband's death, but also in countless other ways in the help, hospitality and friendship that she offered to so many who were interested in Vaughan Williams's music. Her death just a few months before the beginning of the 2008 celebrations, albeit after a long and full life, inevitably cast something of a shadow over those events. No one could have known that before 2008 came to an end, a more shocking and quite unexpected death would rob British music, and Vaughan Williams in particular, of another one of their greatest champions: in late November the conductor Richard Hickox died suddenly, barely twenty-four hours after speaking to a joint meeting of the Elgar and Vaughan Williams Societies, and a few days before he was due to conduct the opening night of English National Opera's production of *Riders to the Sea*. This volume is dedicated to the memory of Ursula Vaughan Williams and Richard Hickox.

Notes

1 *VWS*, xi.

2 Both these factors stimulated the study of British nineteenth-century and twentieth-century music more broadly, a development reflected by the institution in 1997 of the biennial Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain conference and the foundation in 2003 of the North American British Music Studies Association, to take just two examples of the burgeoning of this sub-field of musicology.

3 See Bibliography for further information.

4 2008 also saw the release of the first commercially available DVD of a Vaughan Williams opera, a production of *Riders to the Sea* by NVC Arts in association with RTÉ in Ireland (Kultur DVD D4390), originally recorded for VHS in 1988.

5 See Charles L. Granata and Phil Ramone, *Sessions with Sinatra: Frank Sinatra and the Art of Recording* (Chicago University Press, 1999), 93, and Will Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 680; interview with ex-Genesis keyboard player Tony Banks conducted by Christopher Thomas in 2004, www.musicwebinternational.com/classRev/2004/Apr04/banks_interview.htm, and Edward Macan, '"The Spirit of Albion" in Twentieth-Century English Popular Music: Vaughan Williams, Holst, and the Progressive Rock Movement', *The Music Review* 53/2 (1992), 100–25; interview with Wayne Shorter in the *New York Times*, 24 December 2004, at www.nytimes.com/2004/12/24/arts/music/24shor.html?_r=0; interview with PJ Harvey in *The Sunday Times*, 23 September 2007, at www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/music/article71954.ece (Harvey included the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* in her playlist for Radio 3's 'Private Passions' programme, presented by Michael Berkeley, broadcast on 20 April 2008).

6 For instance, Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), Chapter 53; Christopher Norris (ed.), *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), specifically the essays by

Meirion Hughes, Robert Stradling and Paul Harrington; Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876–1953* (Manchester University Press, 2001); Bernard Porter, 'Elgar and Empire: Music, Nationalism and the War', in Lewis Foreman (ed.), *Oh, My Horses! Elgar and the Great War* (Rickmansworth: Elgar Editions, 2001), 133–73; Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance 1840–1940: Constructing a National Music*, 2nd edn (Manchester University Press, 2001); Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press 1850–1914: Watchmen of Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

7 *The Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford University Press, 2005), vol. III, 811–16.

8 New York: Picador, 2007.

9 James Day, *Vaughan Williams* (London: Dent, 1961), 3rd edn published by Oxford University Press, 1998. An updated version of the catalogue portion of Kennedy's book was published in 1996.

10 That said, the pace of developments in the latter area has been such that even this volume was not able to take into account the so-called 'Cambridge Mass', premiered in 2011, or the recordings and published scores of the *Bucolic Suite* and other early orchestral works that have appeared within the last year, though the latter were at least examined in manuscript for Chapter 4.

11 The world of high-level international performance also seems to exhibit some residual resistance to British music. Despite the sterling work of Richard Hickox, Vernon Handley and other British conductors, it is unfortunate that Vaughan Williams performance tends to be so thoroughly dominated by specialists in British music. Colin Davis's advocacy has been encouraging, but it remains disappointing that Simon Rattle has not taken up Vaughan Williams in any significant way, especially in Berlin (though Roger Norrington has performed Vaughan Williams in Berlin with the Deutsches Sinfonie-Orchester and other ensembles on the continent). Most tellingly, there are no leading foreign-born conductors, even among the various Finnish, Baltic and Russian conductors working in Britain, ready to take up the mantle of Bernard Haitink or Leonard Slatkin (who himself may be said to have succeeded André Previn). One wonders why Vaughan Williams's symphonies, at the very least the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth, should not have a similar place in the international repertoire as that enjoyed by those of Sibelius and especially Shostakovich. Why should we not have, say, a Gergiev cycle of Vaughan Williams symphonies? Vaughan Williams is perhaps hampered by the fact that his symphonies and shorter orchestral works are not complemented by traditional virtuoso concertos, or a cycle of string quartets or piano sonatas – still the linchpin genres of classical music programming – which puts him at a disadvantage in relation to composers such as Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

PART I

'Who wants the English composer?': forging a path, 1890–1925

1 The composer and society: family, politics, nation

JULIAN ONDERDONK

Assessing the social, political and religious views of a composer like Vaughan Williams is no easy task. He was a philosophically complex artist whose outspoken dedication to society and to the needs of musical amateurs coexisted with an intense privacy about the sources of his musical inspiration and a metaphysical belief in music as a spiritual force often far removed from worldly issues or concerns. A political radical and acknowledged atheist from early years, he cooperated with the most powerful political and cultural institutions of the day, including the monarchy and the Established Church. Further complicating the picture is the fact that these apparent contradictions have been flattened out and simplified at the hands of a 'nationalist' reception and historiography whose one-sided image of the composer has promoted conflicting interpretations of his work and influence. On the one hand, he has been hailed as a kind of populist hero whose determination to establish a national school of music, founded on the firmly democratic principles of folksong and musical amateurism, led to the establishment of a genuinely English compositional style that liberated native composers from foreign domination. On the other, he has been attacked as a cosy 'establishment' figure whose parochial focus on folksong and early English music resulted in the enshrinement of a genteel and reactionary pastoral musical idiom that exercised a generally harmful influence on British musicians who followed him.[1] So wide is the gulf separating the two images, and so acrimonious the debate between the two 'camps' forwarding them, that it is scarcely surprising that a coherent picture of his political beliefs and social assumptions has yet to emerge.

It helps that recent scholarship has begun to straighten out the tangled strands of the reception history. This work has shown that the competing images of the composer outlined above hinge on ideological attitudes towards nationalism and Vaughan Williams's associations with it. In this analysis, the

My thanks to Alain Frogley, Oliver Neighbour, Abe McCarmy, Nathaniel Lew, Peter Mondelli and Jeffrey Osgood for their generous assistance with this essay. Special thanks to Hugh Cobbe, whose monumental *Letters* have greatly expanded our understanding of Vaughan Williams's political views; and to Stephen Banfield who many years ago unknowingly inspired the direction of the research presented here.

composer's iconic identification with 'Englishness' was less of his own creation than socially constructed – the product of an unprecedented cultural chauvinism that promoted an intense focus on the 'national' features of his style while generally ignoring his cosmopolitan grounding in continental music, including his obvious links to twentieth-century modernism.[2] This was a development of the 1920s and 1930s, when the cataclysm and aftermath of World War I, abruptly awakening Britain to the reality of its decline on the global stage, prompted the wistful embrace of the nation's pre-industrial past. While the resulting focus on Vaughan Williams contributed to the enormous acclaim he enjoyed from the 1920s to the 1950s, the backlash against nationalism after World War II, compounded by a newly triumphant avant-garde musical aesthetics, ensured the lasting decline of his critical reputation among musicologists and cultural taste-makers from the mid-1950s on. Such judgements made little headway among non-specialists and amateur enthusiasts, however, whose admiration for the composer continues even today to rely on the attitudes and arguments of his mid-century peak. The result is the deadlock between popular and critical opinion characteristic of the 'pro' and 'contra' groups described above – ample proof, if any were needed, of nationalism's continuing ability to polarize public debate.

Recently, scholars have sought a way around the problem by shifting attention away from Vaughan Williams's nationalist legacy to his cosmopolitan interests and eclectic influences. This corrective approach is richly merited and has already uncovered important aspects of his work that have been too long obscured.[3] Yet there is a danger that this redirection can go too far to the opposite extreme. Clearly, Vaughan Williams was not the narrow nationalist claimed by advocates and detractors alike, but neither was he the rootless internationalist valorized by twentieth-century theories of modernist art. This is a man who entitled his most important book of essays *National Music* and who declared: 'I believe that all that is of value in our spiritual and cultural life springs from our own soil'.[4] Even allowing for the possibility that popular acclaim prompted him to exaggerate his English influences and downplay his continental ones, his lifelong devotion to England's musical heritage as composer, conductor and teacher cannot be disputed. He may well have been co-opted by the chauvinistic mood of the interwar years, with the consequences traced above, but we must not lose sight of the fact that he himself helped determine the framework by which that co-option took place.

For Vaughan Williams's embrace of 'Englishness' dates to the two decades *before* World War I, when the intense focus on the national past that later reached its climax in the culture of the interwar years actually began. From the late 1870s, a focus on the 'eternal' values of the English countryside and a vogue for the English past, notably the Tudor and

Elizabethan periods, became an increasingly dominant strain in the national culture. Rural preservation societies, designed to protect commons, footpaths and historical buildings, emerged around this time, while agrarian communes and farming cooperatives joined with the rise of the wild 'English' garden, 'alternative' rural schools and planned 'Garden City' suburbs in extending these ideas to the population at large. The Arts and Crafts movement, with its embrace of pre-industrial processes, flourished in this period, while the dominant theme among many writers and artists became that of the countryside.[5] Here were the true beginnings of the cultural shift in the national image described above, one which, in a few short decades, had replaced the mid-Victorian celebration of Britain as 'the workshop of the world' with its polar opposite. That Vaughan Williams was caught up in this cultural shift is suggested by his youthful enthusiasm for Elizabethan and Jacobean poets – his first settings of Herrick date from 1895, those of Shakespeare possibly from 1890 – as well as his early efforts at musical landscape painting – *Happy Day at Gunby* (1892), *Reminiscences of a Walk at Frankham* (1894) – and his interest in native folksong. He discovered Stainer and Bramley's *Christmas Carols New and Old* (1871) in the late 1880s, began arranging folksongs in the 1890s, and started the lecturing that would lead directly to his first efforts at collecting folksongs 'in the field' in December 1903. His engagement with early English music, likewise, quickened around this time with commissions to edit Purcell's *Welcome Songs* (1905/1910) and *The English Hymnal* (1906). The latter, in particular, was a labour of love that took up two years of creative work and brought him into contact with Tudor and Jacobean sources that remained a source of inspiration to the end of his life.

The pre-war origins of this nationalism, both in Vaughan Williams's case and in that of English culture generally, are significant, for failure to place it in its correct historical context explains some of the errors of interpretation that surround discussions of his politics and beliefs. These are obvious with respect to the egregiously ahistorical judgements of modernist writers who, following a left-wing tendency traceable to T. W. Adorno, tend to lump all manifestations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism together with that which led to Hitler.[6] They also colour the attitudes of those supporters of Vaughan Williams who view his democratic embrace of folksong and musical amateurism, somewhat sweepingly, as a latter-day manifestation of the political liberalism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nationalist movements, or as an extension of the 'traditional English freedoms' handed down from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 if not the Magna Carta of 1215.[7] (A qualified defence of individual rights remained central to his political philosophy,