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The Development of English Choral Style in Two Early Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH CHORAL STYLE IN TWO EARLY WORKS OF RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

An Honors Thesis
presented by

Currie Huntington

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and for the
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ABSTRACT

The late 19th century was a time when England was seen from the outside as musically unoriginal. The music community was active, certainly, but no English composer since Handel had reached the level of esteem granted the leading continental composers. Leading up to the turn of the 20th century, though, the early stages of a musical renaissance could be seen, with the rise to prominence of Charles Stanford and Hubert Parry, followed by Elgar and Delius. By 1910, the work of Ralph Vaughan Williams—particularly, the large choral works *Toward the Unknown Region* and *A Sea Symphony*—was beginning to be performed in England. Vaughan Williams had studied composition at the Royal College of Music, was in constant correspondence with Gustav Holst, and had even studied in Paris with Maurice Ravel in 1908, but composed in a style that was quite different from that of his teachers. The young Englishman was forthright and personable, both traits that are consistently manifested in his music. He wrote music for the people—art music, yes, but for general consumption, not for a handful of musical elite. Rather than biblical texts, he preferred poets like Walt Whitman, whose use of language demonstrates the same honesty and humanism that characterizes Vaughan Williams' music. He collected folk tunes and edited the 1906 *English Hymnal*, and took both tasks seriously; he believed in the importance of folk music that came from the people, and of congregational singing. His choral works, when compared to those of composers working earlier and in parallel, showed a significant shift in style, treating the choir with a new kind of musical seriousness. This newer music did not follow accepted continental guidelines, instead forging a new democratic aesthetic in which the music and the text held equal value, and the work was to be appreciated by all.

*For my family, for teaching me to think, ask questions,
and love music.*

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Introduction

Vaughan Williams and the Choral Idiom

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was not what we think of as the archetypal “master composer.” Though he could hold his own, he was not an exceptionally good pianist, nor was he particularly talented on his primary instrument, the violin. He learned about music not because his family thought he was particularly talented, but because doing so was customary and expected of well-raised middle-class English youth. The compositions that he wrote early in life do not survive; they were written mostly as exercises for his teachers. Always modest, he felt for a long time that he needed more training before he could be a “serious” composer. When in 1899 he passed the examination for the Doctorate in Music at the Royal College of Music, he did not assume the title until two years later. Before bringing any large work to completion, he embarked on tangential projects, editing the *English Hymnal* and researching folk music during the first years of the century.

Throughout that time, he knew that he wanted to be a composer. His education in music had been directed at composition, and he actively sought out teaching and advice from his professors and other composers whose music he liked. Following that education, he began his efforts at composition slowly, and started in the medium with which he was most comfortable: the voice. He was interested not just in music but also in poetry and philosophy, and his easiest entrée into composition was through the setting of text. Although from our perspective in the 21st century his facility with instrumental composition is obvious, he was unsure of his own abilities. His teachers in school had chuckled at what we now know as his characteristic musical devices, such as the incorporation of folk tunes or the use of the flattened leading tone. In the conservative environment of English musical academia, he had been roundly discouraged from

pushing any musical boundaries. This discouragement left him with, if nothing else, a clear view of where the boundaries lay.

Vaughan Williams saw that the English musical environment had stagnated for a century and a half, since Handel's death. He intended to push past the mold that the music of Handel and Mendelssohn had imposed on English music, and to be a part of the renaissance that had begun with composers like Hubert Parry and Charles Wood, and was then perpetuated by Edward Elgar. Vaughan Williams was always nationalist in his musical outlook, and felt that the most honest music he could write was that which sprang from his country and his heritage. As much as he admired music from the continent, he did not try (as Elgar did) to imitate those styles. At the same time, he had no interest in imitating previously successful English styles, in the vein of the rampant Handelian imitations that constituted a large portion of English music from the early 18th century through the end of the 19th. Though he had no use for the melodrama of some of the music of the late Romantic, he was interested in transcending the strict harmonic and formal rules of tonality. When he embarked on his post-academic compositional career, he no longer needed to follow the rules of the conservative English establishment that had granted him the title of Doctor of Music. In the first part of this paper, I will discuss Vaughan Williams' upbringing and education, and how his education and musical training led, sometimes indirectly, to the idiosyncratic style in which he ended up composing his two early choral works *Toward the Unknown Region* and *A Sea Symphony*.

Working at first with the voice allowed him some flexibility in the name of adapting the music to the drama of the text. His early song cycles established his trademarks of using flattened sevenths and looking to folk tunes for melodic inspiration, if not the entire melodic content of a song. He corresponded with Gustav Holst throughout this time; they shared scores

and pushed each other onward in their experimentation. His first work to garner major popularity was *Toward the Unknown Region*, written in 1906, when he was 34 years old. *Toward the Unknown Region* was received with enthusiastic praise. Conservative appetites for the familiar were satisfied, as were progressive appetites for something that sounded fresh and new. The work broke ground in its treatment of the choir as a body with a great expressive potential, a group that could realize intimately human expressiveness. In this study, I will move from the biographical section to a discussion of the genesis of *Toward the Unknown Region*, and the ways in which this work shows an evolution from earlier styles. The most significant example of a predecessor is *Blest Pair of Sirens*, a similar work composed by Hubert Parry in 1887.

After the completion of the twelve-minute-long *Toward the Unknown Region*, Vaughan Williams' next major piece was on a much larger scale: a seventy-minute choral symphony. The *Sea Symphony* expanded on the choral genre in a way that is almost unique in the history of western music. The work is a true symphony in four movements, with cyclic use of unifying themes. The choral parts cannot stand alone, and nor can the orchestral parts; the musical and textual elements work together in the construction of a large, dramatic work. He built on advancements in style that he had begun in *Toward the Unknown Region* and brought them to their fullest potential in the *Sea Symphony*. Never again would he write a choral-orchestral work on this scale, and so a discussion of the *Sea Symphony* will constitute the final chapter of this paper. I will examine the basic elements of each of the first three movements, and then focus on the culmination of the work's musical and textual themes in the final movement.

The reason that Vaughan Williams is such an interesting and important figure for historical study is the consciousness with which he took on the task of effecting change in English music. As much as he was a proponent of writing music that came honestly from the

individual, he also studied and thought about music; he was sought after as a lecturer, and spoke and wrote on various musical topics. He saw what he considered to be a musical culture that did not live up to the innate musicality of the people comprising it, and so he set out to write music that moved the style forward. None of his change was radical; he did not start a new school in the way that Schoenberg did. His goal was not to create a revolution, but rather to evolve the English style to become more modern.

Vaughan Williams combined his interest in the advancement of the English style with his interest in the voice to create advancements in choral style. He was a composer whose musical sensibilities were shaped by the word, and so he wrote brilliant choral music on a scale not previously attempted. In doing so, he set a new precedent for the genre of choral-orchestral music.

Part One

Early Life, Education, and England

Early Life and Education

Vaughan Williams' own *Chapter of Musical Autobiography*, written for Hubert Foss' 1950 book *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study*, tells us much about the composer's upbringing in music. His first music teacher was his maternal aunt Sophy Wedgwood, from whom he learned his first lessons in theory. He began studying the violin, which he calls his "salvation," on a whim at the age of seven, when his mother asked him if he wanted to play as they walked past a storefront. When he went to boarding school, he learned of Bach for the first time, upon receiving the Novello *Bach Album* from his piano teacher. The Bach revival had, evidently, failed to reach the Vaughan Williams family, and the young Ralph and his siblings were reared on a musically restricted diet. "Bach had never been part of the home curriculum—Handel, Mozart, Haydn and some early Beethoven was what we were fed on at home," he writes. "Of Bach I then knew nothing and I imagined vaguely that he was like Handel but not so good."¹ Once he was introduced to Bach, though, Vaughan Williams would always hold the baroque composer in high esteem, in "a niche by himself."²

He tells of asking the headmaster at Charterhouse—the boarding school he attended—for permission to use the hall at the school to give a concert of his own works and those of a friend.

After the concert, he received unexpected words of praise:

I remember that after the concert James Noon, the mathematical master, came up to me and said in that sepulchral voice which Carthusians of my day knew so well, 'Very good, Williams, you must go on.' I treasured this as one of the few words of encouragement I ever received in my life!

¹ Ralph Vaughan Williams, "A Chapter of Musical Autobiography," in *National Music and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Kennedy (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1987), 179.

² Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 179.

This concert was likely the first public performance of any of his works, and the piano trio he used as a centerpiece for the occasion no longer exists. After graduating from secondary school, he went to Munich during the summer of 1890, before starting at the Royal College of Music in the fall. Though he had heard some of Richard Wagner's music before, that summer he first heard a Wagner opera in its full glory, when he saw *Die Walküre* at the Munich opera house. That was his first introduction to Wagner, and he writes of experiencing a "strange certainty that I had heard it all before. There was a feeling of recognition as of meeting an old friend which comes to us all in the face of great artistic experiences."³ Writing about his first experience with Bach, Vaughan Williams describes the same sensation, and he held throughout his life a certain fondness for both composers.

Two years at R.C.M. were followed by three at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he received a Bachelor of Music in 1894 and a Bachelor of Arts in history in 1895. He started his undergraduate studies with a clear goal of becoming a serious English composer. He was unsatisfied with the English musical scene at the time, and knew that in order to effect any change, he had to pursue as prestigious an education as he could manage.⁴ What Vaughan Williams sought during his undergraduate years was to be taken seriously, and so he worked hard. He studied under Hubert Parry and the church composer Charles Wood, neither of whom offered any immediate praise. Vaughan Williams describes himself as a careless and "unteachable" student, observing and absorbing but often executing in his own idiosyncratic way. The personalities, philosophies, and music of his teachers are important, nevertheless, in discussing the development of his style.

³ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 180.

⁴ Hugh Ottaway and Alain Frogley, "Vaughan Williams, Ralph," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/42507> (accessed May 5, 2011).

Hubert Parry was exactly the teacher that Vaughan Williams needed early in his compositional career. He treated Vaughan Williams as he treated any other unexceptional student and offered constructive criticism at every turn. Parry himself had high musical ambition; he aspired to write in a large, dramatic, Wagnerian style. His early music demonstrates some late-Romantic experimentation, reminiscent at times of a fusion of Liszt and Brahms. However, the work that brought him widespread popularity, *Blest Pair of Sirens*, is hardly chromatic at all, even when paraphrasing Wagner. As a scholar, Parry's fundamental philosophies appealed to Vaughan Williams. He entered the R.C.M. determined to study with Parry, having heard that Parry believed that a composer "must write music as his musical conscience demands." Vaughan Williams heard, also, something "peculiarly English" in Parry's music.⁵

According to Vaughan Williams, Parry was a dedicated, understanding and patient teacher, and lent his students valuable scores of Beethoven, Wagner and Brahms for study. He looked always to discover each student's "characteristic" sound, regardless of the quality of the music his students produced. Unsatisfied with the time allotted to each individual composition lesson, Parry would take his students' exercises home and look at them on his own.⁶ He offered little outright praise to Vaughan Williams; despite any natural talent the aspiring composer may have had, Parry's attitude seems to have been that of a teacher teaching any normal student. Perhaps most interesting to this discussion is Vaughan Williams' final comment on his time with Parry:

Parry once said to me, 'Write choral music as befits an Englishman and a democrat.' We pupils of Parry have, if we have been wise, inherited from Parry the great English choral tradition which Tallis passed on to Byrd, Byrd to Gibbons, Gibbons to Purcell, Purcell to Battishill and Greene, and they in turn through the Wesleys to Parry. He has passed on the torch to us and it is our duty to keep it alight.⁷

⁵ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 180.

⁶ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 182.

⁷ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 182.

Vaughan Williams inherited from his first teacher a respect for the English musical, and particularly choral, tradition, and a reverent fascination with his potential place in that history.

From lessons with Parry, Vaughan Williams left the R.C.M. for Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied with Charles Wood, from whom he gained a solid technical foundation that he would value throughout his life. Wood was primarily a composer of Anglican church music, and Vaughan Williams says of him that he did not seem to “have the gift of inspiring enthusiasm or of leading to the higher planes of musical thought...but for the craft of composition he was unrivalled, and he managed to teach me enough to pull me through my Mus.Bac.”⁸ Wood, he said, did not believe in “artistic ideals,” and saw composition as a trick that anyone could learn who tries hard enough. Regardless of Wood’s lack of inspiration, though, Vaughan Williams appreciated the technical grounding, and after a short time taking lessons with Wood he completed the requirements for an undergraduate education in music.

In 1895, after receiving his two undergraduate degrees from Trinity College, Vaughan Williams began working at his first and only organ post, at St. Barnabas Church in South Lambeth, a borough in greater London. He writes that though a great deal of work was involved in being organist, as he had to train and accompany the choir as well as play the organ for services, he valued the “insight into good and bad church music”⁹ that he acquired out of sheer proximity. That experience, which he saw as a view of music “from the performer’s point of view,” was valuable for Vaughan Williams; he believed in hard work and practical study, and had no use for the idea of a natural genius. He was uncomfortable performing on the organ, though, and had little use for organized religion, so his position as organist was short-lived, lasting less than two years. Following his undergraduate degrees, he craved further educational

⁸ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 183.

⁹ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 186.

experience, and so he returned to the R.C.M. for further study in the autumn of 1895. He spent a year there, concurrent to his position as organist, making progress toward his eventual Doctorate of Music. By that time, Parry had been promoted to Director of the R.C.M., and so Vaughan Williams began lessons with Charles Villiers Stanford.

Stanford was rather opposite of Parry, though a comparison of their music might not show it. He was not known as a promoter of new music, or any significant advancement in compositional style. Called the “last of the formalists,”¹⁰ he was strictly traditional in many of his views, and though his students appreciated him for his kindness, he was intolerant of any opposing viewpoint and his judgment was final. He composed in a generally diatonic style, and openly criticized what he called the “crushingly chromatic” idiom of the music of Wagner.¹¹ His thorough technical knowledge meant that his diatonicism was not simplistic, but refined and polished. Though Vaughan Williams’ early works show roots in Stanford’s music, when he studied with Stanford he did not see himself conforming to a style. He was inspired by Stanford’s kindness, and by the strength of his teacher’s mind and opinions. He calls himself “unteachable,” and writes that what he got out of his teachers had not so much to do with technical instruction, but, in the case of Stanford, being in the presence of a “lovable, powerful, and enthralling mind.”¹² He recalls his lessons, with typical candor, in his autobiography:

The details of my work annoyed Stanford so much that we seldom arrived at the broader issues and the lesson usually started with a conversation on these lines: ‘Damnably ugly, my boy, why do you write such things?’ ‘Because I like them.’ ‘But you can’t like them, they’re not music.’ ‘I shouldn’t write them if I didn’t like them.’ So the argument went on....¹³

Whatever cues he might take from Stanford’s music later on in his career, the inspiration he gleaned from his lessons with the headstrong Irishman was far more valuable in its moment.

¹⁰ Jeremy Dibble, “Stanford, Sir Charles Villiers,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/26549> (accessed May 5, 2011).

¹¹ Dibble, “Stanford.”

¹² Dibble, “Stanford.”

¹³ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 185.

Only someone with as strong a musical vision as Vaughan Williams could be inspired by someone who frequently told him that his music was “damnably ugly”!

Two years after his return to the R.C.M., in 1897, he decided to study abroad. Stanford wanted him to travel to Italy, saying that he was “too Teuton” already and that he should go to Milan to hear opera at La Scala. Headstrong as ever, Vaughan Williams decided instead to spend time in Berlin, for the sole reason that Berlin was the only place he could hear Wagner’s *Ring* cycle without cuts. He married his first wife, Adeline Fisher, on October 9th of that year, and then left for Berlin, a trip that served also as their honeymoon.¹⁴ He wound up studying with Max Bruch, and writes that what he got most of all out of his time with Bruch was encouragement. “I worked hard and enthusiastically and...[Bruch] encouraged me, and I had never had much encouragement before,” he wrote in *A Musical Autobiography*.¹⁵ He spent his months in Berlin composing with Bruch and hearing all the music he could with Adeline, and returned to England in 1898 prepared to devote his full efforts to composition.

Once he had passed the examination for a Doctorate in Music from the R.C.M. in 1899, he spent his time working and traveling—the years surrounding the turn of the century were musically productive both in England and on the continent. Debussy, Sibelius and Strauss were beginning to appear on concert programs on the continent and in England. Vaughan Williams, interested always in the music of his native land, paid keen attention to Edward Elgar. He attended one of the early performances of the *Enigma Variations* in 1899, and felt that he had finally found an English masterpiece.¹⁶ The following year, he attended the premiere of *The Dream of Gerontius* at the Birmingham Festival. He wrote to Elgar to ask for lessons at some

¹⁴ Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 43.

¹⁵ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 187.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *Works*, 45.

point during that year,¹⁷ but was politely denied, and instead spent time studying, on his own, the original scores for *The Dream of Gerontius* and the *Enigma Variations* at the English Museum.

During these same years, Vaughan Williams was also absorbed in folk song. He writes of experiencing the same feeling of familiarity upon hearing new folk songs that he felt when he heard Bach and Wagner for the first time. To say that folk music was important to Vaughan Williams' music would be drastic understatement; his study of what he felt to be the true manifestation of the music of his culture informed every composition he wrote from that point on, which is to say, every major composition he ever produced. His melodic style, whether in his small songs or his large symphonies, is defined by the constant infusion of a distinctly "English" folk music sound. Parry saw his tendency to flatten the seventh in folk style and chuckled at his "unteachable" pupil; Stanford and Wood argued that the flattened leading tone was strictly theoretical, and not viable in serious music. Bruch fixed on the flattened sevenths at once, cautioning Vaughan Williams to write "Ohren-musik" (music for the ears) and not "Augen-musik" (music for the eyes). Ravel, unconcerned with the function of harmonies, viewed the idiosyncrasy as merely curious. All noticed, though, and were surprised; the flattened seventh, and other elements descending directly from English folk music, became part of Vaughan Williams' characteristic compositional style.

Though he is hardly criticized now for his use of folk tunes, he was at the time part of a musical culture that prized "originality" over all else, and thought the use of folk tunes constituted "cheating." He defended himself by writing in his autobiography that "as long as good music is made it matters very little how it is made or who makes it."¹⁸ The duty of the composer, he wrote, is to "find the *mot juste*. It does not matter if this word has been said a

¹⁷ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 188; Vaughan Williams does not specify a date.

¹⁸ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 189.

thousand times before as long as it is the right thing to say at that moment.”¹⁹ In practice, he went much further than simply quoting the correct folk tune at the correct time. He layered folk tunes with original melodies in a context that was thoroughly his own, and certainly not borrowed from anywhere else. Critics of his music were keen to fix on any fault, and his inclusion of “lowbrow” folk music made for an easy target. The critic who wrote the review of the first of the *Norfolk Rhapsodies* in *The Musical Times* in 1906 began to get at the point, though. “[By treating folk tunes, the composer had] shirked a great part, perhaps the greatest part, of the composer’s responsibility...[or] at any rate the part at which most composers fail,” he wrote. “But the conception of the piece is quite his own...the result sounds like a piece of music and not a patchwork.”²⁰ When Vaughan Williams borrowed from folk music, he did not simply insert tunes wholesale; he took what he felt were great tunes and adapted them to new situations. That adaptation, the process of constructing a piece of music, involved serious compositional skills, even if he had not come up with the original tune. Clearly, any critics unconvinced of the enduring quality of his music have been proven wrong, given the composer’s secure place in the canon of great English music.

His acquaintance with and fondness for English folk tunes led to, and was then enhanced by, his being selected as editor of the 1906 *English Hymnal*. Again, here arises the question of Vaughan Williams’ religion: in 1906, he had drifted somewhat from the fervent atheism of his college years, and was in a place of content agnosticism. Unmoved though he was by the organized religions, he was not at odds with their existence, and he himself was never devoid of a certain spirituality. His willingness to work on the hymnal was not a testament to his religion, but to his belief in the importance of the church as a venue for common, congregational music-

¹⁹ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 190.

²⁰ Kennedy, *Works*, 87.

making. The quality of English hymn-books before he took on the editorship of this publication was, in his view, not what it could be. His goal became to strip out any hymn that did not represent the best of music, and include every tune that did. Indeed, though the book was originally intended by its editors to be a supplement, Vaughan Williams' desire to create a "thesaurus...of all the finest hymn tunes in the world"²¹ and his fervor toward achieving his goal were strong enough to convince them to publish an entirely new book. Vaughan Williams used his knowledge of folk music to pick out the most suitable tunes; he also wrote some of his own and solicited tunes from some of his contemporaries. His intention, however, was not just to include folk music, or to compose tunes for the text at hand; his goal became to include as many fine melodies as he could, from all realms of music. One of the editors, the Rev. Percy Dearmer, had to write text to accompany the chorale tune from *Die Meistersinger*²² so that it could be included.

For two years, from 1904 to 1906, a great portion of Vaughan Williams' musical energy was used on the hymnal. He completed a few works that he had started earlier and worked on sketches of the two large works to come, but did not start or finish any large projects. Despite his initial hesitation upon being asked to participate in the editorship of the hymnal, he became thoroughly devoted. In keeping with his general feelings on music, he worked to create a book that would be musically accessible to every member of the congregation, without mistaking accessibility for simplicity. The quality of the music in the hymnal was his primary consideration, and the harmonizations he created were intended to be engaging and interesting, not just easy.

²¹ Kennedy, *Works*, 65.

²² Vaughan Williams does not specify, but this is likely the opening chorale.

Chief among the characteristics of Vaughan Williams' compositional ideas was his attitude toward the amateur—in his modesty, he often considered even himself to have “amateurish” technique.²³ He took an untrained church congregation just as seriously as a professional orchestra, and wrote much of his most famous music—*Toward the Unknown Region*, *A Sea Symphony* and *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, among many others—for festivals and their amateur choirs and orchestras. The seriousness with which he treated the amateur choir is most obvious. Though *Toward the Unknown Region* is straightforward and not particularly difficult, the piece is packed with excellent music. *A Sea Symphony* has moments of simplicity but is never very easy, and the scherzo is virtuosic, requiring of the choir a serious musical aptitude. Aligning himself with English tradition, Vaughan Williams wrote both of these serious pieces for amateur provincial festival choirs.

England: The Provincial Music Festival

The English provincial festival played an important role not just in the development of compositional style for Vaughan Williams and Parry, but for every English composer since Handel.²⁴ The ubiquity of the festival in English culture, for every type of musician and listener, is unique in Western music. Tellingly, the English themselves have undertaken little objective discussion of the environment of the festival, the environment within which most English composers grow and develop. The provincial festival as Vaughan Williams experienced it in the 20th century was much unlike its earliest predecessors. For two centuries prior to 1900, festivals were almost entirely sacred and almost entirely choral, with little secular or instrumental work included. The Three Choirs Festival, which still exists today and rotates among the cathedrals in

²³ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 187.

²⁴ Percy M. Young, et al, “Festival,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/49527> (accessed May 5, 2011).

Gloucester, Worcester, and Hereford, dates to the first decade of the 18th century, at which point only liturgical music and anthems were admitted. Henry Purcell's *Te Deum* and *Jubilate in D* were common in the earliest years, and were later replaced by Handel settings of sacred texts.²⁵ Other festivals followed the same pattern.

The structure of English festivals began to homogenize somewhat after the premiere of Handel's *Messiah*. The work was instantly a festival favorite, and within a decade had become virtually a prerequisite for a festival's success. Despite its popularity, though, *Messiah* was not at first considered "sacred" music, and so was not allowed to be sung in cathedrals; at times, excerpts would be sung in the cathedral, but for twenty years the work was not sung in its entirety in that space. 1759 was the first year the entire work was sung in a cathedral. The definition of "sacred" music had evolved to include oratorios, and the type of music that was permitted in a cathedral was evolving alongside that. By the end of the 18th century, *Messiah* was always included, generally in a sacred morning slot, and was accompanied by services. Other sacred works, newly commissioned or previously existing, surrounded the work, and the festivals maintained a proper religious atmosphere.²⁶

The evolution away from the strictness of the festival began with the advent of civic festivals, like those started at Birmingham and Leeds, at the end of the 18th century. At those events, sacred works were performed in churches, and secular concerts were given at halls or theaters. A significant break occurred in the mid-19th century, when Birmingham and Leeds built town halls specifically to accommodate the festivals; even sacred works were removed entirely

²⁵ Watkins Shaw and John C. Phillips, "Three Choirs Festival," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27901> (accessed May 5, 2011).

²⁶ Charles E. McGuire, "Vaughan Williams and the English Music Festival: 1910," in *Vaughan Williams Essays*, ed. Byron Adams and Robin Wells (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 248-249.

from their consecrated space.²⁷ As the century progressed, the various traditions regarding placement of oratorios in the program—alone and in the morning was their standard program slot—changed, as did types of new works being commissioned changed. By the end of the 19th century, oratorios and secular choral pieces were performed alongside instrumental works. In the Birmingham Festival of 1906, the first morning was devoted entirely to Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*. On the second morning, however, Elgar’s *The Kingdom*, Bach’s “Sing Ye to the Lord,” and Brahms’ first symphony all had a place on the program.²⁸

Vaughan Williams’ teachers were as deeply connected to the festival environment as he was. Parry’s career turned toward choral music after he wrote *Blest Pair of Sirens* not because choral music was the avenue he wished to pursue above all others, but because of the pull of the English festival. The work was so popular when it was premiered by the London Bach Choir that commissions for similar pieces for choral festivals began pouring in, and in order to meet the deadlines for his commissions he had to sideline much of his instrumental work. He dedicated himself fully to his work on music for the festivals, and did not return to writing orchestral music for another twenty-five years; during that time, he was regarded as England’s unofficial composer-laureate.²⁹ Stanford wrote many of his choral pieces for festivals, and appeared frequently as a conductor. Writing pieces for and making appearances at festivals was a way to garner popularity. Such is the power of the English provincial festival, and though his participation in the festivals did not have the same stifling effect on Vaughan Williams that it had on Parry, the effect of the festival is fundamental to understanding his development.

²⁷ McGuire, “English Music Festival,” 248.

²⁸ McGuire, “English Music Festival,” 250.

²⁹ Jeremy Dibble, “Parry, Sir Hubert,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20949> (accessed May 5, 2011).

Charles Edward McGuire, in his essay “Vaughan Williams and the English Music Festival: 1910,” says that at the beginning of the 20th century,

English composers looked toward the provincial music festival as a sure venue for national recognition.... Festival officials sought to enlarge their repertoires by promoting the creation of large-scale choral compositions, steadily commissioning native English composers for this purpose. Due to this enlightened policy, English composers produced a plethora of works for the festivals, and these scores steadily gained in sophistication and quality. This improvement was recognized by the critics and audiences of the time, and was later thought to mark the beginning of a fresh compositional era in England—a new (or second) ‘English Musical Renaissance.’”³⁰

As Vaughan Williams was finishing his time at the Royal College of Music and moving out of academia, then, he was doing so in an environment that encouraged, on the one hand, works in a traditional choral style that would placate the conservative provincial audiences, and on the other hand, consistent innovation and development within that genre. Having a work commissioned for a festival meant an almost guaranteed publishing agreement, since music premiered at a festival was immediately in demand with choral societies and other amateur groups. Before a work was accepted, the usually conservative programming committee reviewed the score; Vaughan Williams had incentive, then, to meet overarching expectations first. Once the expectations were met and the committees satiated, he would be able to push the boundaries within that framework.

Never in his autobiography does Vaughan Williams mention attending festivals in his youth; the first mention of a festival is his attendance of the premiere of *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1900. This is perhaps a testament to the ubiquity of the provincial festival in English musical culture: though other musical cultures do not have anything quite the same, attendance of festivals was fundamental to being a musician in England. Little information is available as to whether he attended festivals or not, but various factors could have prevented him from attending. The facts that Vaughan Williams’ immediate family was largely un-musical and that musical instruction from his aunt was of limited scope, on top of the problem of distance, could

³⁰ McGuire, “English Music Festival,” 235.

have conflated to keep him away. He likely began attending festivals once he entered college, gained mobility and independence and began what he saw as the process of becoming a serious composer. Parry and Stanford both wrote various pieces for the festival chorus, and as his teachers they would likely have expected him to hear those works or similar works.

Whatever the case, by 1900, Vaughan Williams was certainly familiar with the atmosphere of the provincial festival. In 1905, he was appointed music director at the Leith Hill Music Festival, a competitive annual festival with a choir made up of the singers who entered the classes and contests. The orchestra that accompanied the choirs was semi-professional, and Vaughan Williams often recruited the members himself. He played an unusually active role in the planning and music selection at the festival, pushing for more difficult music and better headline vocal performers. His refusal of payment for his services attests not only to his characteristic generosity,³¹ but also to his fondness for the festival environment.

We can mark the start of 1906 as the end of Vaughan Williams' formative years, a point at which he had completed his fundamental education in music. He had received a Bachelor's degree and a Doctorate in music, having studied with three important teachers. Thorough grounding in the English style he had received from Parry, technical literacy from Wood, and passion from Stanford. However much he loved the music of his teachers, upon his graduation he was not interested in conforming to the musical scene as it was; he was a visionary, and needed to push the boundaries of music in his own way. Whatever the technical instruction he received, what he valued more was encouragement. He was unteachable and proud of it, craving not rules and answers but validation that the direction in which he was moving was positive and productive. His organ post gave him new perspective, and his voyage to Berlin provided him with encouragement from Bruch. His field research in folk music bore fruit in the form of the

³¹ McGuire, "English Music Festival," 236.

English Hymnal, editorship of which had gave him yet another perspective on music. By 1906, Vaughan Williams was equipped to begin his first phase of compositional maturity, with the premiere and publication of his first major work.

Part Two

Hubert Parry, Vaughan Williams, and *Toward the Unknown Region*

Michael Kennedy writes that the end of 1906 was a turning point in Vaughan Williams' compositional career. Though he would not complete a large-scale work until *A Sea Symphony*, he had written some tunes, and edited dozens more, for the 1906 *English Hymnal*, and he had written the song cycles *The House of Life* and *Songs of Travel*, both of which premiered in 1904. By the time he finished *Toward the Unknown Region* in 1907, then, he had a number of pieces that had “passed...into the treasury of English song.”³² *Toward the Unknown Region* is the first major work written after the emergence of what Kennedy considers the “mature Vaughan Williams.”³³ The composer called the work a “song for chorus and orchestra,” and he wrote the work in friendly competition with Holst. Both stuck for ideas, they decided to set the same text—“Darest thou now, O soul” from Whitman's *Whispers of Heavenly Death*—and then judge together whose was better. They compared scores and decided that Vaughan Williams had done the better job, and so his setting was performed at the Leeds Festival that year.

The work met many of the expectations of the programming committee and the festival audience. The work is not overly complicated or difficult to perform, and is short, so it would certainly be popular with amateurs. The text is psalm-like in its tone of moral uplift,³⁴ and is set in a homophonic style that makes the text easily intelligible. The style of the piece harkens back to works like Stanford's 1884 *Elegiac Ode*, whose text is also Whitman, and Parry's 1887 *Blest Pair of Sirens*, whose text is Milton. The music in *Toward the Unknown Region* is not dissimilar to that of his teachers, displaying a certain indescribable “English” character. The music is

³² Kennedy, *Works*, 85.

³³ Kennedy, *Works*, 85.

³⁴ McGuire, “English Music Festival,” 238.

confident and sturdy, and as Kennedy says, heeds Parry's advice to write music as "befits an Englishman and a democrat."³⁵ Familiar-sounding folk-like tunes serve as motives, with diatonic triads as harmony. Vaughan Williams never made any attempt to obscure the roots of his music; Stanford and Parry were more to him than teachers. They had passed on to him the torch of English music, and he saw the continuation of the English tradition as part of his duty to music.

In *A Musical Autobiography*, Vaughan Williams writes, "...I hereby solemnly declare, keeping steadily in view the works of Byrd, Purcell, and Elgar, that *Blest Pair of Sirens* is my favourite piece of music written by an Englishman."³⁶ Though his *Musical Autobiography* was not written until Hubert Foss published his biographical study in 1950, surely Vaughan Williams knew the piece by the time he wrote *Toward the Unknown Region*. When he was in college, he "worshipped at the shrine" of Parry's music, though he became less able to "swallow his music whole" later in life.³⁷ *Blest Pair of Sirens* was Parry's first work to receive serious national attention, and given its structural similarities to *Toward the Unknown Region*, which will be discussed a bit later, a brief investigation of its genesis is valuable.

The composition of this piece followed a decade that Parry devoted almost entirely to instrumental music. During the 1880's, he completed four symphonies and a symphonic suite, in addition to several smaller works and an unsuccessful attempt at opera. Though early in his career he was an admirer of Mendelssohn and Sterndale Bennett, by the 1880's he was fascinated with Brahms and Wagner. He did not have enough of Wagner's mastery of drama to write a successful opera, but he did have enough dramatic and instrumental facility to compose effective vocal music. Connections to the rest of the English music scene and, indirectly, to Vaughan Williams, abound. Parry composed *Blest Pair of Sirens* for the London Bach Choir, and

³⁵ Kennedy, *Works*, 112.

³⁶ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 180.

³⁷ Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 180.

dedicated it to Stanford, who was the director of the Bach Choir at the time. Aside from the fact that both Parry and Stanford taught Vaughan Williams, their student was the one who would take over direction of the Bach Choir when Hugh Allen resigned in 1921. Though he wrote in a letter to Nicholas Gatty in 1898 that the Bach Choir "...does good things but can't sing," in 1903, Vaughan Williams joined the choir,³⁸ which had by then undergone changes in the audition process and general organization under the direction of Henry Walford Davies.³⁹ When Vaughan Williams was in college in the 1880's, the Bach Choir was an important player in the choral music scene in London, and *Blest Pair of Sirens* was new among the great English choral works.

When Vaughan Williams and Holst decided around 1905 that they would each write a setting of a Whitman text in a relatively short choral form, they were not looking at the compositions as important life works. These compositions would be an exercise, something simply to get their creativity flowing. However admirable his work ethic, Vaughan Williams did not start from a completely blank slate each time he sat down to compose; he worked with forms and styles that he knew, and adapted them to the situation at hand. Whether Vaughan Williams consciously considered the work or not, *Blest Pair of Sirens*, a choral-orchestral ode, serves as a historical precedent for his setting of this five-stanza Whitman poem. The pieces show similarities in overall structure and in their mostly declamatory settings of text that, though spiritual, does not come from the Bible.

Each of these two pieces is between ten and twelve minutes in length, and each features straightforward, declamatory treatment of the majority of its text. The first six out of the seven stanzas in Milton's ode are set almost entirely without repetition. To take an average, each line

³⁸ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 56 and 106.

³⁹ "The Bach Choir: Choir History," London Bach Choir, accessed May 5, 2011, http://www.thebachchoir.org.uk/about_history.php

occupies about four measures and a stanza of four lines takes sixteen measures; Parry sets up that pattern in the first stanza. Showing his Wagnerian ambitions, though, the composer frequently strays from his own pattern, pushing and pulling for dramatic effect. Nonetheless, though he ruminates on some phrases longer than others, the goal of the first six stanzas is to advance the action, and get across the text in such a way that the listener can hear the words and understand the meaning. Though not always homophonic, the voices come together on the same text at the same time frequently enough that hearing the words is not difficult. The music and orchestration are dramatic and sensitive to the text in a late-Romantic way, even if the harmony is unchromatic and English—Parry sticks to his diatonicism, and generally to one harmony for each bar.

Following the sixteen-measure introduction, the choir is singing almost constantly except for two notable times, at the end of the fourth and sixth stanzas. After the fourth stanza, an eight-measure instrumental break follows the text “Hymns devout and holy psalms / Singing everlastingly,” which marks the first change in voice in the text. The previous sixteen lines of poetry are in an objective third-person; the following twelve are in the first-person plural. Pausing at that moment emphasizes the shift in voice, especially coupled with a bit of word painting on the reentry. The choir sings the text “That we on Earth, with undiscording voice” in unison, becoming one with the poetry. Similarly obvious word painting occurs again four lines later at the text “...and with harsh din,” which is set against rests in the orchestra in a jarring half-diminished VI in the key of G major. The other notable time, at the end of the sixth stanza, marks the end of the central part of the poem, and the beginning of Milton’s plea:

O may we soon again renew that song,
 And keep in tune with Heaven, till God ere long,
 To His celestial consort us unite,
 To live with Him and sing in endless morn of light!

Sixteen measures of orchestra alone precede this stanza; they serve to reestablish the home key of E-flat major, and move from 3/4 time back into the 4/4 of the beginning.

The first six out of seven stanzas occupy the first two thirds of the music; the final four-line stanza occupies the last third. This last section of the music builds to a thrilling, if unsurprising, final chord, a moment of apotheosis and emotional release. The first three lines of the stanza undergo repetition, but not extensively; these three lines span twenty-six measures. The final line is the true climax. The text is repeated over and over, building to the final moment: eight-part choir, organ, and the entire orchestra crash, fortissimo and with perfect voice leading, into a five-octave tonic chord on the word “light.” That ending follows sixty-seven measures of buildup, repeating again and again the text of the last line.

Toward the Unknown Region is constructed in a similar way. An instrumental introduction precedes the choir’s entrance, and the first four out of five stanzas of the Whitman poem are set without repetition. Inspired by the Parry, this is not just a poem put to music in a form based on strophic principles. This is a throughcomposed work constructed, sensitively, for this poetry. The choir in this work is almost always active, and moments that are solely instrumental are therefore meaningfully and thoughtfully so. Aside from the introduction, the only point at which the choir silent for more than a few measures starts at m. 50, between the second and third stanzas. In this case, too, the instrumental break comes at a change in voice. The first-person narrator in the first and second stanzas does not reveal his own thoughts, and speaks in a relatively objective way. In the third stanza, the first line is “I know it not, O Soul; / Nor dost thou—all is a blank before us...,” which is the first time since the beginning that the narrator returns to address the Soul directly, and the point at which we understand the inevitability of embarking on the journey into the “unknown region.” This line marks the turning

point from the tentativeness, and even fear, of the first two stanzas to the fierce optimism that emerges in the final stanza.

Toward the Unknown Region text overview

(introduction)

(12)
DAREST thou now, O Soul,
(13)
Walk out with me toward the Unknown Region,
(16) (20)
Where neither ground is for the feet, nor any path to follow?

(25)
No map, there, nor guide,
(29)
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
(31) (42) (47)
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.

(instrumental break)

(63)
I know it not, O Soul;
(66)
Nor dost thou—all is a blank before us;
(79) (92)
All waits, undream'd of, in that region—that inaccessible land.

(100)
Till, when the ties loosen,
(101) (104)
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,
(107) (111)
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds, bounding us.

(112) (121)
Then we burst forth—we float,
(124)
In Time and Space, O Soul—prepared for them;
(149) (180) (190) (195)
Equal, equipt at last—(O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfil, O Soul.

An overview of the text of *Toward the Unknown Region*. Parenthetical numbers represent measure numbers, and are located above the text to which they correspond.

Continuing its similarity to Parry's work, the fifth and final stanza occupies a third of the music (see example above). Where Parry focuses his repetition on the final line, Vaughan Williams here subjects the entire third stanza to repetition, trading the text around among the

voices. This text, like the Milton, has a clear climactic moment, at the line “Then we burst forth—we float / In Time and Space, O Soul.” After each voice takes its turn singing the word “then,” finally building a D major triad with the orchestra, the key signature changes back to F major. The choir sings “Then” together on two octaves of F, the basses and altos stretching up to the top of their registers, over four measures while the orchestra restates the theme that becomes the main theme of the rest of the work:

The image shows a page of a musical score, numbered 17 in the top right corner. It consists of four vocal staves and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Maestoso moderato. ♩ = 108." and the dynamics range from "ff brillante" to "ff molto allarg.". The lyrics are "Then, Then we burst". The piano part includes a circled section with a triplet of eighth notes and a sixteenth note.

From the Stainer & Bell piano-vocal score, mm. 117-121.

The music continues to build to the end, each false ending trumped by the next, finally culminating in a three-octave, unaccompanied *fff* shout of the word “soul” on an F major triad, which represents the home key area. The orchestra then repeats the main theme, and ends on its own five-octave F major triad. The ending section lasts for eighty-eight measures.

The construction of Parry’s work, then, is clearly reflected in *Toward the Unknown Region*. We know from looking at the *Sea Symphony* and other later works that he was attracted

to moments of apotheosis, which would usually help to delineate the form of his works. His attraction to the climax in *Blest Pair of Sirens*, therefore, is not surprising. He did not simply take an existing model and change some melodies around, though; *Toward the Unknown Region* is different from the Parry in some important developmental ways. Vaughan Williams, like much of his Cambridge generation, disdained the decadence of late Romanticism. He sought a cleaner aesthetic, with more open space and less overt emotional baggage. He did not attempt the same Wagnerian sound that Parry aimed for; he orchestrated in a different way, looking to the music for clues to orchestration as well as melodic and harmonic content. Parry used full sections throughout, aside from the occasional soloist, and most of the time all instruments have a part; his technique creates a lush, full sound characteristic of the late Romantic. Vaughan Williams took a different approach, using smaller groups and leaving out sections at different times to create an orchestration that sounds lighter and more modern than Parry's heavy Victorian style.

What we can gather from Vaughan Williams' involvement in the provincial festival environment is that he did not look down at these groups as untrained amateurs. The previous generation of composers, which included his teachers, comprised musical intellectuals who looked at festival pieces differently from more "serious" and less "popular" works. Vaughan Williams believed wholeheartedly in the ability of these groups to make great music, and the seriousness with which he viewed provincial choral groups is manifested in the treatment of the voices as evocative, powerful instruments in *Toward the Unknown Region*. He did not use the voices as simple vehicles for reciting the text; he gave them a part equal to that of the orchestra, and more interplay between the voices and the orchestra can be seen here than in Parry's work. That is not to say that Parry did not believe that the choirs could sing beautiful or difficult music;

he wrote beautiful melodic lines and spiky contrapuntal textures, and his music was not necessarily easy to perform.

The score for *Toward the Unknown Region*, however, reveals a different treatment of the choir. In the first forty-five measures, Vaughan Williams asks the singers for *sostenuto*, *misterioso*, *cantabile*, *poco smorzando*, and back to *sostenuto*.⁴⁰ His request at m. 92 for *parlando* (*dark tone*), while also singing *mezzo-forte*, is ambiguous and almost impossible to achieve with any accuracy. Given his experience with these choral groups, we can assume that Vaughan Williams knew that these various stylistic requests would be attempted to greater or lesser effect depending on the choir, the conductor and the singers, not to mention the myriad other variables involved in a performance by a large amateur group. He wrote instructions to make music as he knew it could be, and was not bothered that some choirs would not fully realize that potential. The music he wrote was not just music that was to be sung by a choir; his was music written specifically *for* the choir, working with the nuances and expressive possibilities that were available when working with a large group of voices. In his treatment of the festival choir he rose to a higher plane than his predecessors. He was a visionary, but not a revolutionary; without any drastic about-face in musical style, Vaughan Williams had found a way to create more serious, and more beautiful, choral music that helped to propel English style into the 20th century.

⁴⁰ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Toward the Unknown Region* (piano-vocal) (Surrey: Stainer & Bell, 1918).

Part Three

Toward the *Sea Symphony*

During the first decade of the twentieth century, while he was editing the *English Hymnal*, composing song cycles, collecting folk songs, revising countless works, and composing *Toward the Unknown Region*, Vaughan Williams was also working on his first large-scale work: *A Sea Symphony*. This, Vaughan Williams' first symphony, is in four movements, scored for orchestra, four-part chorus, and soprano and baritone soloists. The text, present in all four movements, is Whitman poetry, from *Sea-Drift* and *Passage to India*, which were both published in *Leaves of Grass*. The scheme of the symphony is fairly standard: fast, slow, scherzo, and finale. The premiere of the work was at the Leeds Festival in 1910, where both audiences and critics received the work enthusiastically. Vaughan Williams himself had different feelings about its reception, calling it "doubtful" and saying that he owed its life in part to the fact that Charles Stanford "pushed it down people's throats after the Leeds performance was a complete flop." Kennedy surmises that Vaughan Williams' own impressions of the work's first performance were colored by the small mistakes that so rankle performers who know a work well, making them far more conscious of imperfections than the listeners.⁴¹

The fact that Stanford liked the work is telling in itself: as mentioned in the first part of this essay, Stanford had not appreciated all that Vaughan Williams wrote, and Vaughan Williams himself says that Stanford "never displayed great enthusiasm" for his compositional efforts.⁴² Critics in attendance expressed varying degrees of praise. The anonymous critic from *The Musical Times* wrote that "by the time the final movement comes around, a feeling is created that the composer's invention is so little exhausted...that he might well lead us on to further and

⁴¹ Kennedy, *Works*, 99.

⁴² Vaughan Williams, "Autobiography," 185.

further climaxes.”⁴³ The *Manchester Guardian* critic argued that the work “definitely place[d] a new figure in the first rank of our English composers” and that it was “the nearest approach [of the English composers] to a real choral symphony, one in which the voices are used throughout just as freely as the orchestra.”⁴⁴

What is curious now is the question of the starting point, the inspirational spark, for producing a symphony of this magnitude as a first large work. Certainly, choral symphonies of this level—one in which, as the *Guardian* critic quoted above mentioned, the voices are treated equally to other instruments in the orchestra—had not been attempted successfully by English composers, and were uncommon (and remain uncommon) elsewhere. The *Sea Symphony* falls somewhere between the two main choral forms in Britain that had been treated by his predecessors and teachers: this work is longer than a cantata, and more chorally focused than an oratorio. While *Toward the Unknown Region* seems to be a logical next step from works like Parry’s *Blest Pair of Sirens* (1887), the *Sea Symphony* runs six times as long as both of those works, is of larger scale and sound, and features much greater integration of the vocal parts with the orchestral parts; this work clearly stems from some other source.

Comparison to an oratorio is initially appealing. Given the composer’s staunch agnosticism, one might expect him to set an oratorio text that treats the sea as an allegory for a human, spiritual universality rather than explicitly religious text. The comparison to an oratorio does not work, though. Vaughan Williams was working on the *English Hymnal* during the time he was working on the *Sea Symphony*, and later set the mass text (*Mass in G minor*) and other sacred texts (*Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Dona nobis pacem*, etc.). Though he had no appreciation for organized religion, he nonetheless had no qualms about working with religious material, and

⁴³ Kennedy, *Works*, 98.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Works*, 99.

could have written a proper religious oratorio, had that been his interest. Aside from the matter of subject, the baritone and soprano solo parts do not have any defined character, and the work certainly does not have the “dramatic, narrative, and contemplative elements” required by *Grove’s* definition of an oratorio.⁴⁵ The *Sea Symphony* is simply not operatic in any way. The work is, intentionally and self-consciously, of a style that had not been attempted before by Vaughan Williams’ teachers or any of his English predecessors: a proper choral symphony. The next question, then, is this: what motivated him to attempt a work of such a scale? The size and scope seem out of character for someone so modest.

Composition for the work started in 1903, when he began abstract sketches of a large-scale work setting text from Whitman poems. Letters to Holst from 1904 mention briefly a cantata, which would likely become *Toward the Unknown Region*. Also during 1904, he completed *The House of Life*, a setting of sonnets by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and *Songs of Travel*, a setting of Robert Louis Stevenson poems that were something of a stepping-stone to Whitman’s poetry. He was working on the *English Hymnal* and collecting folk tunes—certainly nothing of the professional and polished nature of *A Sea Symphony*. Indeed, the work started its life as modest orchestral sketches that belied none of its later grandeur—he originally envisioned a set of songs for chorus and orchestra.⁴⁶ In 1908—a year after the first performance of *Toward the Unknown Region*—he traveled to Paris to study with Ravel, during which time he practiced “chiefly orchestration”; he thereby shed his self-described “heavy contrapuntal Teutonic manner” and learned how to “orchestrate in points of colour rather than in lines.” Once he returned to England, according to *A Musical Autobiography*, his brief “French fever” was quick to subside, but his “musical metabolism” was left in better condition. Though he had not come to

⁴⁵ Howard E. Smither, “Oratorio,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20397> (accessed February 3, 2011).

⁴⁶ Kennedy, *Works*, 80.

compose in the French style—Ravel said to Vaughan Williams, in fact, that he was his only student who “n’écrit pas de ma musique”—he had gained confidence in his own orchestral abilities.⁴⁷ That leads us to believe, then, that Vaughan Williams, armed with a new confidence in his ability to orchestrate and polish, was inspired to turn his sketches into a massive work, in the same vein as the very first choral symphony: Beethoven’s Symphony no. 9.

From his essay “Some Thoughts on Beethoven’s Choral Symphony” we learn of Vaughan Williams’ honest and unpretentious love for the entire Ninth Symphony, and even more so the setting of “Ode an die Freude” that dominates the final movement. Vaughan Williams, interestingly, was never a Beethoven devotee. In his youth he “hated” Beethoven, and writing in 1950, he said that “...to this day, the Beethoven idiom repels me, [though] I hope I have at last learnt to see the greatness that lies behind the idiom that I dislike....”⁴⁸ Thus, we understand what he means when he writes in his essay on the Ninth Symphony that he does not consider himself a “pious Beethovenite,” and his disagreement with some of Beethoven’s stylistic decisions is therefore less surprising. To a lover of Beethoven, the essay is startlingly frank and forthright about moments at which Vaughan Williams believes the composer could have done things better, or just plain fails; we are not accustomed to such critiques of a master.

Moments of critique give way, though, to an obvious overarching love of this work. In the section that discusses the final movement, Vaughan Williams’ excitement is palpable in his description and analysis, personifying the sections of the orchestra and constructing a narrative of musical events. He calls Beethoven “truly religious” in his willingness to juxtapose emotional passages in ways that did not obey Classical rules.⁴⁹ In that willingness to stray from established

⁴⁷ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 191.

⁴⁸ Vaughan Williams, “Autobiography,” 181.

⁴⁹ Ralph Vaughan Williams, “Some Thoughts on Beethoven’s Choral Symphony,” in *National Music and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 83.

forms, patterns and rules, we get a feeling that Vaughan Williams sees some of himself in Beethoven. During these early stages of his career, Vaughan Williams was still part of the musical culture that was working to propel English music beyond creativity-stunting imitations of Handel and Mendelssohn. Unmoved though he may have been by much of Beethoven's work, he certainly had a passionate love for the Ninth Symphony; we can conclude, without any trouble, that this symphony is among his inspirations for his own first symphony.

Vaughan Williams' choice to write a choral symphony, when examined in context, is not as incongruous as it might otherwise seem. As of 1910, the composer had written primarily choral and vocal works. Certainly, all of his most famous works—the early song cycles and *Toward the Unknown Region*—were for voices. In the choral genre specifically, festivals provided an instant barometer of public opinion and, for works that were successful, a greater likelihood of subsequent popularity.⁵⁰ Aside from those factors of convenience is the fact since sometime in 1903⁵¹ he had been considering the possibility of setting a group of Whitman texts related to the sea. Correspondence with Holst and investigation of his papers tell us that he originally intended a set of songs, and then perhaps a suite of choral pieces. Not until he returned from his study with Ravel, aged thirty-eight and with newfound confidence in his orchestration, did he envision turning the Whitman settings into a full-scale, unified symphony. This first large work, nearly a decade in the making, was a harbinger of Vaughan Williams' lifelong penchant for defying expectations with each new work.⁵²

The unusual choice of medium notwithstanding, the *Sea Symphony* is a fairly standard symphony, particularly when compared with Vaughan Williams' later works. Elliott Schwartz

⁵⁰ Elliott Schwartz, *The Symphonies of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), 20.

⁵¹ Kennedy, *Works*, 409.

⁵² A. E. F. Dickinson, *Vaughan Williams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 181.

asserts in his analysis that unity in the melodic and harmonic content of the symphony is generated by “cyclic use of three leitmotifs.” What he terms Motive A is a harmonic progression first heard in the beginning of the first movement: a minor triad moving to a major triad whose root is a third higher. His Motives B and C are both melodic, reminiscent of folksong and both spanning the interval of a third.⁵³

Motive A



Motive B



Motive C



Examples from Schwartz's analysis.

The four movements look back to these three main themes frequently, altering and expanding on them in various ways. Though at many times the original theme is obscured by alterations, many of the arrivals of these themes are audible to an acute observer even on a first hearing, giving the four movements a strong sense of cohesion as a unit.

The form of the symphony is rather straightforward. The first movement is a symphonic sonata-allegro, straying from classical norms in only a few ways. The proportions are skewed:

⁵³ Schwartz, *Symphonies*, 20-27.

the bulk of the music is in the exposition, which is more than half of the movement. On top of that, the form does not show the same key movement that we expect from classical sonata forms. Also, the dreamy, quiet coda fades into silence without the benefit of a V – I cadence, instead of triumphantly confirming the tonic. The second movement, slow, reflective and philosophical, is in ternary form, starting and ending in modal E minor. The third movement Vaughan Williams calls a scherzo, though the form is simple sonata form with an interlude in place of a true development. The final movement is in two broad sections, each in ternary form;⁵⁴ the final movement can almost be considered a work of its own, so great is its formal, melodic and textual breadth.

The Whitman text, which Vaughan Williams altered freely, creates a dramatic structure in which each of the first three movements deals with a different aspect of the sea, and the final movement wraps everything up into a larger, transcendental meaning.⁵⁵ For the symphony's complete text, see the appendix of this study. Whitman's style had various parallels with that of Vaughan Williams, especially related to ideas of mysticism and transcendentalism, and their relation to exploration and nationalism. A. E. F. Dickinson's summary of the dramatic structure bears quoting:

- I. "Behold, the sea itself." Limitless, indomitable. And not less indomitable the sailors, the "unnamed heroes...whom fate can never surprise nor death dismay...."
- II. So, to the philosophic mind the sea is a vast symbol of all human life.
- III. (Descriptive digression.) Look at it! That wonderful panorama of a myriad waves [sic], following the great ship as ceaselessly as they are displaced by it.
- IV. *Now I begin to see the meaning of it all.* These restless explorations will lead to a Reality of some kind.... "We too take ship, O Soul...steer for the deep waters only...where mariner has not yet dared to go.... O farther, farther sail!"⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Schwartz asserts that the first part of this movement is in sonata-allegro form. Without the "proper" relationships between keys or the formal development of first and second theme groups, however, the form is more easily labeled as ternary.

⁵⁵ Schwartz, *Symphonies*, 20.

⁵⁶ Schwartz, *Symphonies*, 21.

What is clear, in the musical as well as the dramatic structure, is that the first and fourth movements are the biggest and most important; their running times are approximately twenty and twenty-seven minutes, respectively. The second and third movements run ten and eight minutes. The outer movements are the dramatic movements, large in scale because they treat large themes. The final movement serves to expand philosophically on the first, using the reflections from the middle two.

Overlaying a manner of construction that in many ways obeys formal symphonic rules is a linear dramatic progression from the beginning of the first movement to the end of the final movement. Although never is the symphony narrative, each movement has an intrinsic drama—one that cannot be expressed by choir alone. Creating a piano reduction of the *Sea Symphony* is unthinkable; the choral parts do not stand without the orchestra. The drama comes not just from Whitman’s poetry, but also from the interplay between the voices, their text, and the orchestral texture that surrounds them and intertwines with them. The drama within each movement, coming to climaxes at various moments throughout, builds to a final moment of apotheosis that arrives, finally, in the final measures of the symphony. In order to demonstrate how this progression unfolds, the discussion here will be primarily focused on the final movement. First, though, an introduction to the first three movements is necessary.

Movement I: A Song for all Seas, all Ships

Choosing as the opening text a poem from the broad and patriotic *Song of the Exposition*—the rest are from *Sea-Drift*, in *Leaves of Grass*—allowed Vaughan Williams to begin the symphony triumphantly, the text serving as a “broad salute” to mariners and the sea in general. Starting on the beginning of the first poem from *Sea-Drift*, “Out of the Cradle,” would

have required an “intimate” beginning not well suited to the opening of a first symphony.⁵⁷ The purpose of this movement is to celebrate, joyously, the sea and the life of the sailor. Whitman and Vaughan Williams alike were fascinated by the seeming endlessness of the sea, and the sea as a representation of the vastness of life and the universe. In this poetry and music, the listener—presumably part of Whitman’s “divine average,” the great middle class—is represented by the sailor, heroically exploring the sea that is life.

Central to this triumphant, if at times meandering, opening movement is an excitement at the sea and its vastness, and at the sailors who explore its limits. The opening \flat VI – I harmonic motion, expanding from B-flat minor in two octaves to D major in five octaves, gives the listener an overwhelming sense of the sea opening up, as though a curtain is pulled back to reveal its limitless, glistening expanse. The text begins by revering the “sea itself,” but changes focus to the men who sail it after about sixty measures. The focus moves back and forth between the two for the remainder of the movement, winding up with an eight-part choral chant on “all seas, all ships” in the coda.

The first movement serves as a concrete setup for the fourth movement, both musically and textually. Musically, we discover immediately that this work will be a more evolved and elaborate version of the choral style found in *Toward the Unknown Region*. Where the earlier work is choir-centered, and can be performed with a piano or organ reduction without great difficulty or loss of effect, the choral parts of the symphony cannot stand alone. Textually, the first movement proclaims, exuberantly and unselfconsciously, the wondrousness of the sea and those who explore it. After a reflective philosophical movement, followed by a boisterous and

⁵⁷ Dickinson, *Vaughan Williams*, 183.

digressive scherzo, the listener is prepared to reflect back on the sentiments of the first movement during the wandering, exploratory journey of the finale.

Movements II and III: On the Beach at Night Alone / The Waves (Scherzo)

The smaller middle movements treat more specific subjects than the big, broad first and fourth. The second movement, slow throughout and in a simple ternary form, meditates on the “vast similitude” that “interlocks all” people. This type of thought is characteristic of Vaughan Williams’—and Whitman’s—agnostic, humanist and transcendentalist personal philosophies. The rhetoric in this movement places emphasis on humans and the unknowable connections among all people, and the reflection is prompted by the beach at night, with the universe open above. The second movement provides, therefore, a textual foil to the first. The first movement revels in the majesty of the sea, in its grandeur and indomitable vastness; the second movement uses the sea as a catalyst for a meditation on humankind.

Here, as in *Toward the Unknown Region*, we can see Vaughan Williams’ characteristic desire to pull specific sounds out of the choir and the orchestra, especially at dark and somber moments. The violins and winds, when they first enter, are instructed to play *solemne e tranquillo*, the strings playing moving double stops alternating between double- and triple-*piano*. On the baritone soloist’s entrance, he is instructed to sing *misterioso*, and trades back and forth with a semi-chorus of altos. When the other voice parts enter, they too are semi-choruses, singing no louder than a brief *mezzo-forte*. Suddenly, at m. 118, the rest of the singers enter on the text “This vast similitude spans them,” *forte* and momentarily *a cappella*. The text that follows is “...and always has spanned, / And shall forever span them, / And shall compactly hold and

enclose them,” all of which is declaimed *fortissimo* through m. 128. The orchestra plays a brief two-measure statement, and is back to *pianissimo* by m. 132. By that point, Vaughan Williams has succeeded in achieving his effect, placing unmistakable—and, indeed, rather heavy-handed—emphasis on the text he considers to be most important, and giving a climactic moment to the otherwise static movement. He uses the choir and orchestra for their characteristic vocal effects, both mysterious and majestic. His compositional goal was always to ask more of the choir and the instruments in the orchestra; for him, each singer and instrumentalist had more emotive sonic potential than the simple ability to play loudly or softly.

The third movement is the polar opposite of the second. The tempo marking is *Allegro brillante*, and the choir is instructed to sing *brillante*. There is no soloist anywhere in the movement; the choir sings as an ensemble throughout. Though in some ways the fourth movement could stand alone as a smaller version of the larger symphony, if any movement were to be extracted from this symphony to be performed as an independent and decontextualized choral-orchestral showpiece, this is the one. Serving as what Dickinson calls a “descriptive digression” to the rest of the symphony,⁵⁸ the movement can stand textually alone. The subject, reflected in the movement’s subtitle, “The Waves,” is a ship’s wake. The music is frantic and astonishingly evocative, giving the listener a feeling of following a ship as it traverses the sea, exploring unknown regions of the universe. Though this movement serves an important function in its place in the symphony, the other three movements have little impact on it, allowing it the possibility of standing successfully in their absence.

⁵⁸ Schwartz, *Symphonies*, 21.

“The Waves” is a scherzo in the Brahms mold more than that of Beethoven: The movement is vigorous and tricky rather than light and jocular.⁵⁹ The poetry and the music are exuberant. The meter changes and fast-moving instrumental and vocal parts combine to make this something of a virtuoso piece, too difficult for a secondary school choir but just right for a good amateur festival choir. This is not a piece whose performance can be cobbled together; Vaughan Williams had, as usual, high expectations for the festival choirs he expected to sing this music. Though he expected more from these choirs than did perhaps any composer of the time, the way he wrote the music allowed the amateur choirs to achieve successful performances. The music he wrote was difficult, but not unapproachably so. He understood the voice, performers, and people, and he used that understanding to compose and instruct in such a way that his performances consistently came off well.

Finale: The Explorers

“The Explorers” is home to the philosophical meat of the *Sea Symphony*. The text is by far the longest and most demanding: fifty-seven lines of text, bringing to a head the thematic elements—textual, philosophical and musical—treated in the three previous movements. The opening line, “O vast Rondure, swimming in space,” marked *Grave e molto adagio*, feels instead *Maestoso*, sure-footed but awestruck. The first stanza, whose text seems excited, Vaughan Williams sets slowly, contemplatively; these lines serve as a slow start to the movement’s overarching journey. This is mysticism at its most obvious: “With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention, / Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.” Within the sea

⁵⁹ Tilden A. Russell and Hugh Macdonald, “Scherzo,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/24827> (accessed May 5, 2011).

lies unquantifiable knowledge that cannot be learned, but is known intuitively as one surrenders to contemplation of its limitless expanse.

The shift to the second stanza is abrupt. The text is decidedly different, and is the only point in the symphony at which we approach any kind of narrative poetic structure. The tempo marking here is *Andante con moto*, and the music sounds significantly different from that of the previous stanza. Rather than being paralytically awestruck, here the music and text gain the motion reflected in the tempo marking:

Down from the gardens of Asia descending, radiating,
Adam and Eve, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,
With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts,
With that sad incessant refrain, *Wherefore unsatisfied, soul?* and *Wither O mocking life?*

The musical reflection of walking goes almost so far as to sound like a slow march at the beginning of this section, the majority of which is sung only by men. The four-part men's writing contrasts sharply with the entrance of a semi-chorus of women, four people on each of the four parts, on "Wherefore unsatisfied, soul?" Here, again, Vaughan Williams gives the performers very specific instructions. His note at the bottom of the page instructs that the women's first chord—held, *pianissimo*, on "Where"—should not be heard "until the orchestra has left off," and that a harmonium can be used at that place "if necessary."⁶⁰ The effect is particularly difficult to achieve in performance; a choir needs uncommon restraint in order to attain anything close to what he is looking for. On top of the fact that he wants the onset obscured, Vaughan Williams originally intended for the semi-chorus to be sung offstage from the wings for a disembodied effect.

This declamatory section leads into the first of two climactic moments in the movement: one in the first part, one in the second. As expected, the second apotheosis is greater than the

⁶⁰ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *A Sea Symphony* (London: Stainer & Bell, 1918).

first. After the section of worrying about the sadness and restlessness of humankind, the poetry takes a positive turn:

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains, and shall be carried out,
Perhaps even now the time has arrived.

After the seas are all cross'd,
After the great captains have accomplished their work,
After the noble inventors,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

Knowing what we know about Vaughan Williams' personal philosophy, that this text would appeal to him stands to reason. Whitman's exaltation of science and of poetry is what Vaughan Williams would have espoused during his college years.

The music takes an appropriate course alongside this text. We get glimpses starting at "Perhaps even now..." and the new direction is confirmed by a complete shift in mood at the word "inventors." The two subsequent lines are treated to embellishment and repetition, with particular emphasis on "Finally," which is repeated and traded among the parts, and "singing..." which is repeated and expanded, winding up on a triple-*forte* choral melisma that bursts forth into "...his songs!" to end the section. These lines mark the end of the first ternary form of this movement. At this point, we have not heard from a soloist. The text has revered the sea, worried that people might never appreciate it, and then rejoiced at the state of humanity and the existence of poetry and music.

An orchestral interlude of twenty-six measures separates the two main parts. Although Schwartz associates this music with the first part,⁶¹ a more accurate description would not associate this interlude with either part, situating it squarely between the two. Rather than shifting abruptly from one mood to another, Vaughan Williams simultaneously connects and separates the sections by creating a sort of mood modulation. The interlude serves as a gentle

⁶¹ Schwartz, *Symphonies*, 31.

landing from the climax of the previous section, and an introduction to the more declamatory duet of the section to follow. This “mood modulation” serves the purpose of a conventional modulation as well, transitioning gently from the cadence in G major at the end of the first section to what we can call the home key, E-flat major, of the second.

The ternary form of the second part starts at the end of the interlude, at m. 214. The tempo marking is *Allegro animato*, the tempo that will also mark the reprise of the A section at the end of the form. The chorus here takes a back seat to the pair of soloists, who sing the next thirteen lines as a duet. This is the moment in the poetry at which we embark on the final segment of the journey: “O we can wait no longer, / We too take ship O soul.” Although resorting here to a dramatic narrative, creating characters out of the two soloists, must have been tempting for Vaughan Williams, he chose instead to maintain a distance from any dialogic action. The text “thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me” could have constituted a brief moment of dialogue, but is more effective as it is, with the soloists echoing each other. The second half of the A section is marked by a change in tempo at to *Andante tranquillo* at m. 289. The text here is “O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,” the baritone and soprano soloists still singing in a duet. This is a meditative moment, transcendentalist in its “Thoughts...of Time and Space and Death.” For Whitman, the sea is a manifestation of God; the two are eternal and infinite, and knowledge of one is embedded in knowledge of the other. “Bathe me O God in thee,” he says, drawing the direct connection ever more clearly.

The B section starts at m. 337, the tempo marked *Più lento*. This coincides with the beginning of Vaughan Williams’ optional cut, though why any choir would make such a cut is mysterious. The choir appears here for the first time since m. 214, on the text “O Thou transcendent.” The parts are homophonic, alternating with the soloists as they proclaim their awe

of the sea. The last long soloist part begins here, a final reflection for baritone without his soprano comrade:

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou masterest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

This text serves as a philosophical aside. The philosophy is of the type that was meaningful to Vaughan Williams—mystical and transcendentalist—but he seems to have been worried as to whether everyone would want to perform another slow section, another reflection on the same philosophical ideas. The cut is rarely, if ever, made.

The beginning of the final *Allegro* section at m. 402 is the beginning of a build to the same sort of apotheosis we see in the first movement and in *Toward the Unknown Region*. Here is where his style seems most different from a classical symphony. As the orchestra and choir build, with syncopated shouts of “Away, O soul!” coming from each voice part, the listener begins to understand that this is not simply the climax of a movement, or even of just a piece of music. Vaughan Williams has been working up to this moment throughout the symphony—the moment at which we are urged to “steer for the deep waters only,” in search of the fundamental truths of life. This is a climax of ideas as much as it is of musical material. Certainly, the symphony is a celebration of the sea as a concrete, worldly subject. However, Vaughan Williams was a fan of Whitman not because he wrote poetry that nicely described worldly subjects; Vaughan Williams chose to use Whitman poetry because his writing is profoundly connected to a non-specific, universal spirituality. The *Sea Symphony* is a celebration of that spirituality as much as, or possibly significantly more than, of waves and sailors.

Whether or not the optional cut is made—and we can safely assume that the cut will not be made in any serious performance—the sudden shift from *Lento* to *Allegro* is a change from a beat on the half note, marked at 60bpm, to a beat on the quarter, marked at 160bpm. Without being able to see the change in the conductor, the listener does not immediately know that the tempo has changed so drastically, since the orchestra is playing only a tremolo on a D minor triad. Our first clue is the soprano soloist, who sings “Away...,” followed immediately by a glissando in the harps and an embellished quarter-note motive in the violins and violas. A measure later, the baritone chimes in with “Away...,” followed at increasingly quick intervals by the choral parts:

The image shows a musical score excerpt from the Stainer & Bell score, measures 404-408. It features vocal parts for Soprano, Baritone, and Chorus, along with piano accompaniment. The lyrics "A-way", "O soul!", and "A-way," are visible under the vocal lines. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

From the Stainer & Bell score, mm. 404-408: choral shouts of “Away...”

The music builds continuously, through “Hoist instantly the anchor! / Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!” to a choral exclamation, marked *Più lento* at 100bpm, of “Sail forth.” The rest of the text in that stanza is treated to contrapuntal repetition, turned over and over and inside and out by the four choral voices until they come together, repeat twice the text “Steer for the deep waters only,” and end the section with three repetitions of “Sail forth.”

Not content to leave the ending as such, Vaughan Williams then added a coda, marked *Molto adagio* and *pianissimo*. The instruments are instructed variously to play *molto tranquillo* or *sempre tranquillo*; the strings are to play *sul ponticello*. Crescendos are marked *non troppo*.

The choir here sings softly and slowly, with chant-like motion. Soloists sing disjunct lines, focused on long, held high notes. The text is focused on “O farther, farther sail,” which is repeated freely among the voices. The coda arrives quietly and departs even more so, drifting off into held triads, *quasi niente*, in the cellos and basses. The journeying sailors drift off into the uncharted distance, sailing farther and farther.

Apotheosis in Vaughan Williams

The compositional effect of building an entire work to one big climax is characteristic Vaughan Williams. All of his large works give the impression that he knew before he sat down to write where he wanted to start and where he wanted to go, and then composed from one to the other along a more or less straight line. The form is not, however, the linear cumulative form of Charles Ives, in which no other formal organization can be inferred. Vaughan Williams fit his linear musical plot into classical forms, and did so comfortably. He established and elaborated themes in traditional ways, and created delineated formal structures. Each climactic moment in any given piece is bigger than the last. The increase does not come just from his instrumental scoring; the build is rhetorical. Each moment *says* more than the previous moment, taking all of the previous ideas in the work and summarizing them as they exist in the moment.

The effect of apotheosis in the symphony is different, and even more dramatic, than in *Toward the Unknown Region*. Vaughan Williams’ style is fundamentally more developed. In the earlier work, the orchestra serves as coloristic and harmonic support for the singers, who carry the weight of the burden. Thus, a piano or organ reduction does not give the same dramatic effect as the fully realized version, but the work does not lose any great measure of drama. In the *Sea Symphony*, the way the work is constructed gives a great deal more strength to the intrinsic

drama created by melody and harmony. The orchestra and the choir do not exist on separate musical planes; they form a unit in which one cannot exist without the other. Vaughan Williams made an annotation in the beginning of the published score for the *Sea Symphony* that states explicitly which instruments should be included in a reduced orchestration, and which parts they should play at which times. The singers and players make up one large ensemble, rather than two entities playing together, and the effect of the large group working together is calculated at all times.

Vaughan Williams' name for this work as a symphony is therefore not in any way an understatement. This work is not a choral oratorio, or an extended cantata. The *Sea Symphony* is as much a symphony as is Beethoven's Ninth, or his Third or Fifth or any of the Mozart or Haydn symphonies. The statements Vaughan Williams made in this symphony are dramatic in a musical sense. He took the poetry and changed it at will, excerpting parts and leaving out words and parts of lines. His goal was to make the text fit into the dramatic musical context he envisioned for the work. In doing so, he created a work of art in which the text adds to the effect without distracting from the music. The text in this form does not exist without the music, nor the music without the text. The climactic moment is a culmination of music and text, harmony and melody, imagery and philosophy, all wound together into an ecstatic moment of discovery.

Conclusion

Farther, farther sail

The *Sea Symphony* represents, in many ways, the culmination of Vaughan Williams' experimentation with the choral medium. Though he continued to compose choral-orchestral pieces throughout his life, never again did he attempt anything on this scale; as successful as the piece was, he did not make a model of it. Perhaps he simply considered the piece to be too large for the provincial festival; more likely, though, the reason is twofold. First, he likely felt that he could not write a choral symphony that was better, or more interesting, than this one. The variety of works that he wrote over the course of his compositional career demonstrates his distaste for doing the same thing twice in the same way. Vaughan Williams was not Mozart, and had no interest in writing dozens of symphonies that followed essentially the same scheme. Second, the success of the *Sea Symphony* had probably left him with enough confidence in his ability to write a large-scale work for an orchestra that he felt able to write a symphony that was not choral; he no longer needed the text to back up his musical decisions.

In *Toward the Unknown Region* and the *Sea Symphony*, he used the text as a guide for the overall dramatic structure. In subsequent works, he moved away from the programmatic guide. *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* is not programmatic at all; the piece uses a preexisting theme as the main dramatic germ, and grows through variations of the theme. The next two symphonies, *London* and *Pastoral*, are programmatically titled, but the drama and beauty come from Vaughan Williams' music, not from the imagery. He no longer needed to work from a text; after the *Sea Symphony*, he was confident enough to construct his own dramatic progressions to bring the music from beginning to end, without the need for a text or a choir to voice it. Though he would continue to write for choir throughout his career, he would never again create such an

ambitious, genre-bending work. Future pieces for choir and orchestra, such as *Dona nobis pacem* and *Sancta Civitas*, reverted back to the festival mold, requiring less of both the choir and the orchestra. Except for *This Day (Hodie)*, a cantata written for Christmas in 1954, none of his later choral-orchestral works run much longer than half an hour. They serve a purpose very different from that of the *Sea Symphony*.

The *Sea Symphony* is in many ways a unique work. The symphony is singular in Vaughan Williams' career, certainly; on top of that, though, this symphony is singular in the history of western music. Few composers have ever attempted to write a choral symphony. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Mahler's Symphony no. 8 (which Vaughan Williams would not have heard by the time he wrote the *Sea Symphony*) are both considered to be choral symphonies, but neither operates in the same way. Beethoven used the choir only in the final movement. Mahler set a Christian hymn and the ending of Goethe's *Faust*, and relied on eight soloists, each with a defined character, to advance the action. Beethoven used the choir as an added instrument at the end, and Mahler used the choir as a vehicle for telling a story set to music. Neither of these works attempted the unity of choir and orchestra, of music and text, that Vaughan Williams achieved with the *Sea Symphony*.

The developments he made in his writing for choir show his early success in the advancement of English musical style, and specifically choral style. Most significant is the aspect I have most frequently discussed here: his treatment of orchestra and choir as one large ensemble, capable of far greater dynamic breadth and depth than his predecessors were able to extract. Vaughan Williams used specific, detailed dynamic instructions gives players and singers a guide not just to volume or articulation, but a *human* manner of expression. Even the instruments in the orchestra, in striving to follow his instructions, achieve a vocal quality that

closes the expressive distance between instruments and voices. Previous English composers had not asked so much of their choirs and orchestras, and particularly for festival pieces. They wrote beautiful, expressive orchestral music that accompanied choral writing that was also beautiful and expressive. What Vaughan Williams lacked in technical smoothness he made up for in his ability to ask of the musicians exactly what he wanted, at exactly the correct moment.

Parry and Stanford wrote music that sounded truly English, and Elgar and Delius wrote music that looked towards continental styles. Vaughan Williams looked to the continent for polished orchestration and formal construction, but ultimately reverted to the sound of his native England in creating his works. He absorbed the English tradition that came before him, and eagerly “took up the torch” that he felt had been passed to him. His early choral works, shaped by his fascination and comfort with the voice and the word, were his point of entry to an entire career of composing works that brought new life to English music.

Appendix

Text of the *Sea Symphony*

I. A Song for all Seas, all Ships

Behold, the sea itself,
 And on its limitless heaving breast, the ships;
 See, where their white sails, bellying in the wind,
 speckle the green and blue,
 See the steamers coming and going,
 steaming in or out of port,
 See, dusky and undulating,
 the long pennants of smoke.
 Behold, the sea itself,
 And on its limitless heaving breast, the ships.

Today a rude brief recitative,
 Of ships sailing the seas,
 each with its special flag or ship-signal,
 Of unnamed heroes in the ships—of waves
 spreading and spreading as far as the eye can reach,
 Of dashing spray,
 and the winds piping and blowing,
 And out of these a chant for the sailors
 of all nations,
 Fitful, like a surge,
 Of sea captains young or old, and the mates, and of all intrepid sailors,
 Of the few, very choice, taciturn,
 whom fate can never surprise nor death dismay,
 Picked sparingly without noise by thee, old ocean,
 chosen by thee,
 Thou sea that pickest and cullest the race in time,
 and unitest the nations,
 Suckled by thee, old husky nurse, embodying thee,
 Indomitable, untamed as thee

Flaunt out, O sea, your separate flags of nations!
 Flaunt out visible as ever the various flags
 and ship-signals!
 But do you reserve especially for yourself and for
 the soul of man one flag above all the rest,
 A spiritual woven signal for all nations, emblem of man
 elate above death,
 Token of all brave captains and of all intrepid sailors and mates,
 And of all that went down doing their duty,
 Reminiscent of them, twined from all intrepid
 captains young or old,

A pennant universal, subtly waving all the time,
 o'er all brave sailors,
 All seas, all ships.

II. On the Beach at Night, alone

On the beach at night alone,
 As the old mother sways her to and fro singing
 her husky song,
 As I watch the bright stars shining,
 I think a thought of the clef of the universes
 and of the future.
 A vast similitude interlocks all,
 All distances of space however wide,
 All distances of time,
 All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different,
 All nations, all identities that have existed or may exist,
 All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,
 This vast interlude spans them,
 and always has spanned,
 And shall forever span them and shall completely
 hold and enclose them.

III. Scherzo: The Waves

After the sea-ship, after the whistling winds,
 After the white-gray sails taut to their spars and ropes,
 Below, a myriad, myriad waves hastening, lifting up their necks,
 Tending in ceaseless flow toward the track of the ship,
 Waves of the ocean bubbling and gurgling, blithely prying,
 Waves, undulating waves, liquid, uneven, emulous waves,
 Toward that whirling current, laughing and buoyant with curves,
 Where the great vessel sailing and tacking displaced the surface,
 Larger and smaller waves in the spread of the ocean yearnfully flowing,
 The wake of the sea-ship after she passes, flashing and frolicsome under the sun,
 A motley procession with many a fleck of foam and many fragments,
 Following the stately and rapid ship,
 in the wake following.

IV. The Explorers

O vast Rondure, swimming in space
 Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty
 Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,
 Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless stars above
 Below, the manifold grass and waters,
 With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention
 Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee

Down from the gardens of Asia descending, radiating,
 Adam and Eve, then their myriad progeny after them,
 Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,
 With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts,
 With that sad incessant refrain,
 Wherefore unsatisfied, soul? and Wither O mocking life?

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children?
 Who justify these restless explorations?
 Who speak the secret of impassive earth?

Yet soul be sure the first intent remains, and shall be carried out,
 Perhaps even now the time has arrived.

After the seas are all cross'd,
 After the great captains have accomplished their work,
 After the noble inventors,
 Finally shall come the poet worth that name,
 The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

O we can wait no longer,
 We too take ship O soul,
 Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,
 Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,
 Amid the wafting winds (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me)
 Caroling free, singing our song of God,
 Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.

O soul thou pleasest me, I thee,
 Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking in the night,
 Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death, like waters flowing,
 Bear me indeed as through the regions infinite,
 Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear, lave me all over,
 Bathe me O God in thee, mounting to thee,
 I and my soul to range in range of thee.

O Thou transcendent,
Nameless, the fibre and the breath,
Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them.

Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou masterest Time, smilest content at Death,
And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,
Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!
O farther, farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

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