

The Spirit of England

Vaughan Williams: On Wenlock Edge

In 1909 the 35-year-old Ralph Vaughan Williams returned to England following an intense period of study in Paris with the French composer, Maurice Ravel, three years his junior. Vaughan Williams later admitted that his reason for studying in Paris was that his music was in need of “a little French polish.” This new musical influence, combined with his English musical training, and his interest and fascination with English folksongs, resulted in his great song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* for tenor, piano and string quartet, composed in 1909. The first performance took place in London’s Aeolian Hall later the same year.

The song cycle is comprised of settings of six poems by the English poet, A.E. Housman, from his first and enduring collection entitled, *A Shropshire Lad*, written in 1896. For these poems Housman created a mythical Shropshire (in fact, a beautiful, rural area of central England) very similar to Thomas Hardy’s dream-like transposition of Wessex (also a beautiful, rural area, in southern England). Housman’s recurring themes are love, loss, death, rural nostalgia and the futility of young men’s lives being sacrificed in war.

Vaughan Williams’ masterstroke was to score the work for string quartet and piano, a combination of instruments already used by several French composers, but never before by a British one. The cycle’s musical influences create a feeling of unity between the songs, its music, symphonic in nature, sweeping forever forwards.

The influence of French music is at once in evidence at the opening of the cycle. The agitated rhythm pattern in triplets, and intervals moving in parallel fourths, played by piano and strings, depict marvelously “the wood in trouble” on Wenlock Edge.

A series of repeated piano chords like the strumming of a minstrel’s harp,

accompany the simple vocal line in the setting of “From far, from eve and morning.” Once again, the influence of French music has not been lost on Vaughan Williams, the piano chords reminiscent of the music of Claude Debussy.

Vaughan Williams’ music brings out



Photo from Boosey and Hawkes Archives

Ralph Vaughn Williams

the drama found in many of Housman’s poems. This is true of the heartbreaking song, “Is my team ploughing,” a dialogue between a dead soldier, and his girl’s new lover. In the vocal line Vaughan Williams creates two distinct personalities, the disembodied voice of the dead soldier, and the robust, virile voice of the young lover. This song contrasts with the following one, “Oh, when I was in love with you,” its two short stanzas, rich with pawky humor and irony, the music echoing the sentiment with imaginative use of a solo string instrument at the end of each stanza.

Nowhere is Housman’s nostalgic world of rural England, basking in the sunlight of a still, Sunday morning, more beautifully created than in the sustained string writing of the penultimate song, “Bredon Hill.” Repeated chords on the piano depict the tolling of the church bells. However as the narrator’s story unfolds, the chordal piano writing, and the eerie, disturbing string writing, turns the

mood of nostalgia into bitter tragedy.

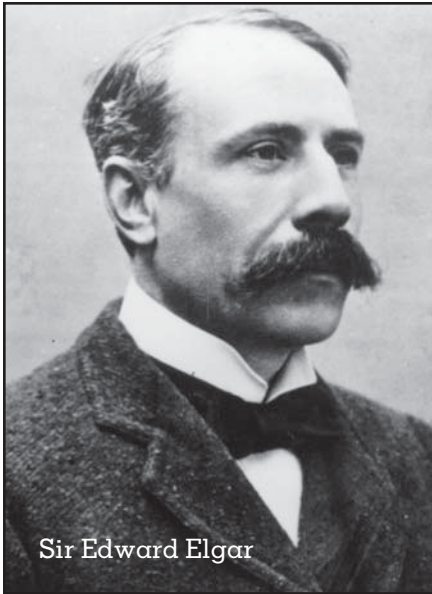
Although Housman was to become a celebrated Classics professor, his growing doubts about the Christian Revelation, and belief that God had turned his back on the suffering of the world, affected him greatly. In the last song, “Clun” for which Vaughan Williams composes music of great sensitivity, Housman accepts the inevitability of death.

Elgar Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84

In 1918, the final year of the Great War, Elgar composed three of his most intimate chamber works; the Violin Sonata in E Minor, Op. 82, the String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 83 and the extraordinary Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84. At that time Elgar, and his wife Alice, were living at Brinkwells, their cottage near the small Sussex town of Fittleworth. Although Elgar did spend periods of time living in London, the English countryside, which Elgar had fallen in love with from an early age, was an important influence for his music throughout his life.

This influence is a fundamental aspect of the Piano Quintet, and in particular, a copse of dead trees, their ancient, twisted branches, stripped bare of leaves, which Elgar encountered on one of his many sojourns. He believed that these strange trees were the physical embodiment of an ancient order of Spanish monks, who, having offended God, had been transformed into these misshapen specters for all eternity. Research has proved that it is indeed a myth, but a fascinating one, which undoubtedly fired Elgar’s imagination when composing the Piano Quintet.

The first movement opens with a



Sir Edward Elgar

Moderato section, mysterious open octaves played by the piano, punctuated by a fragmentary figure played by the strings. Elgar's wife has likened this opening to the ghostly trees, the subsequent downward falling phrase, played by the strings, depicting the anguished moaning of the monks themselves. These two musical ideas will be heard throughout this movement and the Quintet's final movement as well.

The Allegro section opens with a brisk, energetic march, before the essence of Spain is evoked by a graceful Spanish dance, its lilting melody accompanied by

a guitar-like figure played by the piano. The music grows in intensity, its climax, an impassioned dialogue between piano and strings, before the mysterious themes heard in the opening Moderato section bring the movement to a close.

The final two movements, which Elgar originally sketched in Sussex, were completed in London in 1919. The second movement, an Adagio, its main theme introduced by the viola, is the work's shining glory. The movement's soaring, noble music is very different from the Imperialistic and jingoistic music by Elgar which was so popular during the Great War. This reflective movement could possibly be Elgar's heartfelt, personal tribute to his many friends, and the countless millions, who had so recently perished.

The downward theme, associated with the monks, is heard in the Andante section at the opening of the final movement. However this doleful mood is interrupted by unison strings playing the bright, vibrant theme of the Allegro section. The movement's second theme

is introduced quietly on the piano, and is followed by the chordal theme of the first movement, this time punctuated by swirling strings. The movement's pensive, central section juxtaposes the themes from the Moderato section of the first movement, before the main theme of the final movement returns, its heroic nature growing in intensity, and bringing the Quintet to its jubilant conclusion. The first performance of the Piano Quintet, which Elgar dedicated to Ernest Newman, the music critic of the *Manchester Guardian*, was given, privately, on April 26, 1919, its public premiere taking place the following month.

Colin Ure

