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Ralph Vaughan Williams' Long Journey Out of War

“Died some,” intones the narrator of Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, “pro patria, / non ‘dulce’ non ‘et décor’ . . . / walked-eye deep in hell / believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving / came home, home to a lie, home to many deceits, / home to old lies and new infamy.” Thus reads one of the most celebrated post-World War I anthems for doomed youth. (The latter phrasing, as will be recognized, is that of the young British soldier-poet Wilfred Owen, aged 25, himself killed in Flanders a week before the German surrender) Such poetic expressions of generational protest, written by contemporaries or by slightly older figures like Pound, comprise one of the great genres of the war, and are reflected as well in a larger history of survivorship writing, Anglo-European and American: Robert Graves’s *Good Bye to all That*, Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. “You are all a lost generation:” Hemingway claimed to have gotten the famous line—used as an epigraph to his 1925 novel of war-ruined expatriates in Paris, *The Sun Also Rises*—from a conversation with Gertrude Stein, who in turn is said to have heard it originally it from a French garage-owner, complaining of the curious anomie of a young mechanic assistant who had survived the war.

Thus in life and art alike, the experience of fighting and dying young became a signature motif of World War I on the western front and elsewhere, as did frequently also that of perhaps surviving the war but in the process returning home too physically or psychologically damaged to resume anything resembling

the patterns of peacetime existence. But it is not the only one. As a battlefield survivor and an artist, the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams represents a noteworthy departure from the pattern in any number of respects, both experiential and aesthetic, having gone to war old and having survived far into a fabulously creative later life, in the process fashioning one of the great musical careers of the 20th century. In fact, Vaughan Williams was 41 when he enlisted; 43 when deployed to western front; and 46 when demobilized in 1919. (The only English cultural figures that come to mind as comparable are the poet Edward Thomas, aged 38, and the politician Raymond Asquith, aged 36, both killed in action, or the novelist Ford Maddox Ford, aged 43, serving briefly as a rear-area transport officer before being variously reported as having been “gassed” or “shell-shocked.”) When Vaughan Williams died at age 86 in 1958, he had written a full nine symphonies, along with nearly countless other orchestral and choral classics—operas, ballets, film scores, concertos, fantasias, oratorios, masses, songs, carols, hymns, and ballad cycles—both secular and religious. By comparison, surviving British literary counterparts such as Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Edmund Blunden, all active combatants, may have all lived long postwar lives, with relatively productive careers; but they all evinced a lifelong pain and anger over their experience of the war in pronounced forms of estrangement, personal and cultural, from postwar life: Graves in Majorca, with his reconstructions of the ancients and recondite poetic mythmaking; Sassoon with his endless autobiographical revisions and struggles with his culture and sexuality; Blunden with his extended Asian sojourns and polite academicism. “Never such innocence again,” writes their successor Philip Larkin, capturing the mood of chill alienation exactly. Ralph Vaughan Williams, in contrast, somehow came back from World War I determined to make England once more his home and to remake 20th century English musical art, in the fullness of its richness and possibility, as the vehicle of an ever-evolving *and* culturally embracing creative modernism.

This strikes one as particularly remarkable given the unusually vivid and immediate character of Vaughan Williams’ service, first as an enlisted stretcher bearer in France, where he survived the Somme; in Salonika, where his medical unit was deployed to support a malarial mini-Gallipoli; and then back in France near the end, where he served again at the front as an artillery officer. Nor was his time unattended by the loss of friends or artistic compatriots, most notably with particular poignancy in Vaughan Williams’ case, the composer Frank Butterworth. Pound again: “There died a myriad, / And of the best among them.” Vaughan Williams indeed never got over Butterworth, or the idea that had the latter lived

he would have been the great composer of his generation. In all these respects, to borrow the title of Blunden's memoir of life in the trenches and its aftermath, the post-1918 world of Ralph Vaughan Williams would be one in which musical composition would never be free of undertones of war. The difference lies in what Vaughan Williams tried to do with them as an attempt to address the experience of the war through the reintegration of Anglo-European classical music tradition into the patterns of subsequent 20th century life and culture.

To cite a commonplace in Vaughan Williams studies, to listen to the composer's music at nearly any point, is to be "never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new." Moreover, it is also thereby to experience the continuous achievement of a lifelong modernist historical and cultural project, with the composer confirmed in his artistic commitment, if anything, by the defining experience of the war, when Vaughan Williams in fact spent nearly five years of military service away from formal composition. Indeed, this character of sustained commitment now seems evident in nearly everything the composer wrote: portended in the prewar "Linden Lea"—Vaughan Williams' first well-known musical production, a pastoral song, derived of a poetry text in the Dorsetshire dialect by the cleric William Barnes (1800-1886), with a melody resembling that of a folk tune or a popular hymn, but of the composer's own musical imagination; and equally fulfilled in *Hodie*—a Christmas Cantata, written in the very last years of the composer's life, with a libretto taken from poetic and literary texts by John Milton, Miles Coverdale, Thomas Hardy, George Herbert, and others, but with the traditional melodies of the English hymnal updated by the composer into the tonalities of a mid-20th century modernist polyphony. Everywhere in Vaughan Williams we thus find the complex modernist project of cultural reconstitution and re-connection, the great provisional re-synthesizing of the ancient and the experimental; the commonplace and the visionary; the vernacular and the epiphanic. The symphonies, alone, a full nine of them, take us from a self-conscious Edwardian and Georgian parochialism into the cosmopolitan world of the late 19th and early 20th century modernist pantheon, with echoes of hymnal and folk melodies and of fellow English composers of the era enlarging into invocations of the great Europeans—Ravel, Bruch, Mahler, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, and others. Likewise, the great choral works, in a venerable Anglo-European sacred lineage—*Toward the Unknown Region* (1905-07), *Five Mystical Songs* (1911), *Sancta Civitas* (1926), *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936)—honor the traditions of Byrd, Tallis, Bach, Handel, and their inheritors even as they move into the secular, frequently experimentalist compositional metaphysics of a "cheerful agnostic." "There is no

reason why any atheist shouldn't be able to write a good mass," Vaughan Williams once famously said. From the standpoint of embracing the modernist project of culture in its various forms, that is just the point.

This is to posit, then, that beyond everything else Vaughan Williams' modernist project of musical creation, for all the attempts of interpreters at various categorizations, was much like Eliot's "tradition" or Pound's "kulchur"—though happily, without a trace of the fascist mystagogy of either. Thus, "Englishness," described by both Peter Ackroyd and Richard Frogley as a common characterization of the composer's work, in Ackroyd's phrasing, a general character of "lyric melancholy": to move again to literary ground, in this respect "England" for Vaughan Williams becomes much like Joyce's Ireland or Faulkner's Mississippi, a creative precinct wherein the 20th century artist pursues the modernist effort of restoring the vision of the human to the stern, impassive mechanics of History. And thus, equally, "pastoral," as discussed by Frogley, may be seen to correspond rather exactly with that term as described by Paul Fussell in regard to the British literature of the Great War, whereby is invented a dominant 20th century mode of Irony, of complex cultural inscription and dissonant, often parodic, revision. To this may be added, as briefly outlined above, a larger, complex syncretism of cultural invocations and appropriations—in some cases taking the form of harmonious confluence and in others of jarring juxtaposition—yet no more or no less evocative of the modernist paradigm (again to choose the two most obvious analogues) than Eliot's syntheses of the Hindu scriptures alongside the British metaphysicals, or Pound's of the French troubadours alongside the Chinese classics. "These fragments I have shored against my ruin" says the narrator of Eliot's *Waste-Land* at the end of his labors. It is the very paradigm we see here in Vaughan Williams the modernist composer, the post-World War I project of the artist as the artificer of culture, the provisional creator who somehow puts the world together after the end of the world.

A proximate explanation for such largeness and continuity of creative purpose, of course, may partly have been a fortunate matter of age and experience. In comparison with the younger Butterworth, for instance, it now seems notable that when Vaughan Williams went to war, besides having spent more than four decades of being alive in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he also already had the makings of a substantial musical career behind him. In turn, he eventually outlived the war and its immediate aftermath by a full four more decades, in possession moreover of his large creative powers to the end. In both of these connections, he further "experienced" the war in his own, notably formative ways.

Unlike Graves, Sassoon, Blunden, Owen, or, quite probably, Butterworth, also an infantry officer, he never had to kill anyone in France; but as his wife Ursula put it acutely, at the Somme in 1916 he certainly saw many people killed in all the myriad ways of modern industrialized warfare. “Working in the ambulance gave Ralph vivid awareness of how men died.” Afterward, for the composer, the vision of war was always there in his major compositions—though with elegiac purposes frequently overstated, especially in works of the immediate postwar decade such as the Second Symphony (“Pastoral”) and *Missa Solemnis*. He never wrote a War Requiem, though he lived through not just one but the two greatest in History. Still, it would be accurate to say that with few exceptions the vision of War generally is a presence in everything he wrote afterward. At the same time, it is never unmixed, existing in a given work as the function of a particular time, place, and creative enterprise. If the *Pastoral Symphony* speaks the experience of the 1914-18 trenches, for instance, it is precisely in the complex ironic register ascribed by Fussell to the postwar poets working the same deeply English vein, at once of the war and in its disturbed aftermath. So the composer himself famously wrote: “It’s really wartime music – a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance wagon at Ecoivres and we went up a steep hill and there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset - it’s not really lambkins frisking at all as most people take for granted”. So the stern menace and challenge of symphonies 4 and 6 are by musical historians said to envision a new landscape of war—the dissonant, angry 4th, charting the 1930s darkness of a new march into the abyss; the post-World War II 6th with its bleak, atomic landscape, a world of silent destruction, as with Farley Mowat’s Keatsian entitling of his memoir of that war—“and no birds sang.” Yet these, too, as Heffer points out, both exist as well in their own distinct musicological relations—the first, associated with *Job, a Masque for Dancing*, an extremely complex and innovative mixed-media composition, a ballet based on the strange iconographies of the illustrated version of the scriptural text famously produced by William Blake; and the second, an allusive homage to the music of his beloved friend Gustav Holst, coupled with compositional strategies newly explored while writing program music for World War II documentaries. (In between, it might be mentioned, one also accounts contextually for the 5th, frequently noted for its lyrical otherworldliness—a melodious recuperative 1943 contribution to wartime morale.) From the same era, as much might be said of the complex associations of the 1926 *Sancta Civitas*, the 1936 *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and the 1939 *Five Variants on Dives and Lazarus*. In the first two, expressions of postwar hope may be seen as complicated by an increasing sense of the imminence

of new global catastrophe. In the last, surely the most hauntingly beautiful of all his compositions, precisely on the eve of new European war there arises a pure music of human supplication, a plea to brotherhood and mercy

Such achievement of a rich, cosmopolitan modernism, to be continued in the decades after 1939 as well, might now also seem to have been culturally prefigured in a remarkable early personal history, at once deeply parochial and liberated. The son of a churchman, on his mother's side Vaughan Williams was descended closely from both the Wedgwoods and the Darwins in a family world imbued with their history of involvements in emancipatory scientific inquiry. An educational passage including Charterhouse, Cambridge, and the Royal College of Music produced intellectual associations with the philosophers Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore and musical studies with Hubert Parry. Further study abroad with Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris was conjoined with new creative friendships with fellow English composers including Gustav Holst and Frank Butterworth. All this took place by the turn of the century. In the larger musical world of the day, Vaughan Williams first made his mark in 1904 as a co-editor of the *English Hymnal*, locating and transcribing original traditional melodies and contributing several of his own composition. His first celebrity as composer came with the greatly popular *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, accompanied in the same year by the *Sea Symphony* (No. 1), an experimental work for chorus and orchestra with lyrics by the American poet Walt Whitman. There followed the well-regarded *London Symphony* (No. 2) in 1913, and *The Lark Ascending* in 1914.

The fairly standard account of Vaughan Williams' post-World War I development as a composer is sketched above. The 1931 *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 3), largely on the basis of a celebrated misplaying in the final movement of bugle notes from "The Last Post," the British equivalent of the U.S. "Taps," is often reckoned an elegy for lost comrades and friends. (Indeed, one memoirist goes so far as to record a purported wartime glimpse of Vaughan Williams as a "doctor" resting between patients and attending to the solitary sounds of the melody in question.) Similar quasi-religious postwar purposes, in spite of Williams' reputation as a lifelong unbeliever, are frequently ascribed to the *Mass in G Minor* (1922). And in both cases, such readings may be partially correct as far as they go. The decade of the 20s, after all, became the great years of literary-cultural emergence of the Anglo-European and American generation of the war, including Graves, Sassoon, Owen, Remarque, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and others. Still, to accept such spiritualistic interpretation wholly is also to play false to the larger contexts of an already major career—a career, to be sure, interrupted by the deeply personal experience of the

war, and now assimilating the composer's deeply personal creative responses to that experience—but also one unfolding anew into an extremely diverse and eclectic body of major contributions to postwar English musical culture for decades to come. Just to begin, for instance, with the roughly ten year period just after Vaughan Williams' military discharge in 1919, *along with the Pastoral Symphony and the Mass in G Minor*, appeared a classical *Piano Concerto in C*, several attempts at folkloric ballad opera including *Hugh the Drover*, *Old King Cole*, and *Sir John in Love*, and extensive experimentation with various meditative, mystical, and sometimes explicitly religious forms: *Flos Campi* (1925), a composition for viola, wordless chorus, small orchestra; *Te Deum* (1928) for the installation of Cosmo Lang as Archbishop of Canterbury; (1928) *Three Choral Hymns*, (1930); and the aforementioned *Job—a Masque for Dancing*.

Along with works already described, the wide-ranging creative energies of the immediate postwar decade also may be said to have extended into the various productions of the 30s. The 1934 popular masterpiece, *Fantasia on Greensleeves* seemed self-consciously to partake of the folk origins of the composer's prewar music, perhaps for that reason still remaining an audience favorite. The direct influence of the war itself, on the other hand, shows itself self-consciously in the foreboding, painful *Dona Nobis Pacem*, with lyrics from Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps* poems about his service in the American Civil War, analogous to the composer's on the Western Front, as a stretcher bearer, wound-dresser, and hospital attendant. At the same time, program music and dramatic compositions included *Five Tudor Portraits* (1935), a *Serenade to Music*, from famous passages devoted to the subject in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Poisoned Kiss* (1936), an opera fashioned after Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter."

Writing for numerous film documentaries related to the 1939-45 war effort—*The 49th Parallel*, *Coastal Command*, *The People's Land*, and others—in turn supplied further evidence of Vaughan Williams' complex understanding of the new, mass-media potentialities of the project of modernism, the continuing connection of the virtuosic challenge and complexity of classical composition with a genuine popular tradition of British cultural expression through music. Meanwhile, besides the two symphonies—the melodious *Fifth*, debuting at the midwar 1943 Proms, and the 1946 *Sixth*, conversely noted for its grim postwar bleakness, various other compositions of the 1940s included the *Oboe Concerto* (1944), the *Concerto for Two Pianos* (1946), and the 1949 *Oxford Elegy*, a work personally honoring his lifelong friend and fellow English composer, Gustav Holst, with texts from two favorite Matthew Arnold poems, "Thrysis" and "Scholar Gypsy."

Nor did the aging composer slacken creative pace with another decade about to begin, completing *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a long opera project he had been working at off and on since before World War I, and writing for the BBC the celebratory accompaniment to a documentary on the polar explorations of Robert Falcon Scott, eventually also to become the basis of *Symphony Number 7*, the "Antarctic." That symphony appeared in 1953, along with two more, numbers 8 and 9, in the mid 50s. They were joined just before the composer's death in 1958 by *Hodie*, a Christmas Oratorio, with conclusion sounding rather like that of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*—though with the ironic pastoralist's characteristic choice of subject, one might opine, in the pagan winter holiday so much beloved of the English as opposed the springtime Easter festival of the traditional church.

Here, with the final flowering of a signature Englishness in musical homages to figures as various as Holst, Bunyan, and Scott of the Antarctic, along with a valedictory religious work such as the *Hodie*, one may be tempted to see Vaughan Williams as having succumbed to the parochial nostalgia of English cultural history or the late life solace of the English church. Yet here, too, once again this would be a complete misreading of the composer's lifelong attitude toward the relationship between the particular tenor of his individual productions and the larger intellectual and creative designs of musical modernism. Constructions of the secular imagination on one hand—folklore, history, literature, the visual arts—and those of the sacred on the other—Biblical texts, church liturgy, iconography, architecture—all continued to appear in Vaughan Williams' music to the end with equal respect as *complex forms of culture*, no more or less privileged than other imaginable counterpart forms. As Alain Frogley has importantly written on both points, there is vast difference in Vaughan Williams in the first case between English nationalism and a sense of English nationality, and in the second between English religion and the cultural fact of a long tradition of English religiosity; to help one's fellows to attempt to live in the world of the modern, as seems the point in so much of Vaughan Williams' music, is to use such cultural legacies as may be available to help recreate a recognizable world of history and tradition in which in the individual person, to use Frogley's image, may feel himself or herself to be a not incidental inhabitant of the landscape.

From a musicological standpoint, any such myth of Vaughan Williams' going quietly in his last decade is equally dispelled by evidence of ongoing adventurousness of his new experiments in modernist technical inventiveness and eclecticism, his continuing attempts, if one may so phrase it, to help create the century's myriad new languages and possible architectures of composition. In this respect, the

final symphonies may now serve as an abstract or epitome of the later career. The documentary origins of the *Sinfonia Antartica*, as he elected to call his 7th, have been mentioned, in their connections with wartime experimentation in new multimedia constructions for film and television of the musical, the visual, and the verbal. At the same time, the score, perhaps best described as a symphonic and choral tone poem in five parts, complete with wind machine, also proves dense with literary and musicological allusion to other cultural texts. The program notes alone cite Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound," Psalm 104 of the English Bible, Coleridge's, "Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Cluny," and Donne's "The Sun Rising." The 8th, frequently described as a somewhat lighthearted work, is composed in a novel rewriting of the traditional four-part invention, here substituting a Fantasia, a Scherzo, a Cavatina, and a Toccata. The first movement, described by the composer himself as "seven variations in search of a theme" was hailed by one reviewer as "the most sophisticated, civilized and universal music he has ever written, with an oddly melodious opening in a minor key leading from one strain into another into a final dizzying waltzlike swirl." The same reviewer called the Scherzo the wittiest music Vaughan Williams had composed—sounding perhaps as if, offered another, "Shostakovich had become a Cockney with atavistic memories of the Cotswolds." The Cavatina, defined as a song for a single instrument, duly devoted itself to the string section alone with major solo passages for violin and cello; the Toccata in turn moves the composition to an energetic conclusion notable for a display of percussion—including gongs, bells, xylophone, celesta, glockenspiel, and vibraphone—happily described by the 83-year-old symphonist as "all the 'phones and 'spiels known to the composer."

The 9th, completed just before Vaughan Williams' death in 1958, seems even more boldly to forge from the self-consciously allusive and personal into the unknown. Program notes at the time suggested connections in early movements with Hardy's dark novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a particular favorite of the composer, and the dark Wessex landscape on which it is set. An early title, indeed, for the opening section was "Wessex Prelude." The second carried headings for particular sketches including "Tess," "Salisbury," and "Stonehenge." Such portions are also said to reprise important musical echoes from the composer's own career. A stark, atonal, brass-dominated opening fanfare yields to individual responses by solo violin, harp, oboe, flute, each playing a precise, correct, brave melody, but with the series abruptly ended by return to the menacing brasses of the opening. The usual reference made to the style of such passages connects them with a particular musical favorite of Vaughan Williams, his beloved *St. Matthew Passion*. Part two

begins with what sounds like low cornet or bugle; it is a baritone flugelhorn; drums begin a steady rhythm; the march continues until the conclusion. The flugelhorn opening recalls, according to some interpreters, a much earlier composition, "The Solent." To others, it goes as far back as *The Sea Symphony*. The steady percussion, as noted by the composer himself, is meant to bear a musical relation to invoke "the ghostly drummer of Salisbury Plain," a familiar local story collected and pseudonymously published among "The Ingolsby Legends" by a local cleric, the Rev. R.H. Barham. As variously noted by Vaughan Williams biographers, such cultural and spiritual geography meant nearly as much to Vaughan Williams as his own native countryside—so much that he once walked the entire literary circuit of the region with his beloved friend Holst. Well known also was his abiding love for the town of Salisbury and its ancient cathedral. But in the realm of the deeply personal, there is more to the memory, one may suggest. In 1914, Salisbury Plain was also the place where the 41-year-old composer underwent his basic military training as a private in the British army. To use once more Blunden's apt entitling, such a landscape, even at the remove of more than forty years, surely must have carried last undertones of war. The opening and concluding brasses of the first section starkly frame the plaintive lyrical statements of the individual solo instruments. The unexpected menace of the flugelhorn becomes possibly one final, darkening reprise of "The Las Post." The drums are those to which Ralph Vaughan Williams may have marched in that very place in the first passages of his journey into war. The remaining story of the symphony is quickly concluded. Part three throughout sounds like a dance. At first it sounds like a danse macabre; then it sounds like a Morris dance; then, jocular, playful, abrupt, it vanishes. Part four begins with a lyrical $\frac{3}{4}$ section much in the vein of the early teacher Ravel; briefly there is a return to the earlier, contemplative passages of small, solo instruments; but again, the brasses encroach, contesting for the dominant strain with woodwinds and strings, becoming dominant in stern final chords, but then in turn yielding in release to quiet strings. The strings disappear into silence.

We need not be too somber about the last symphonies or such other late works of elevated spirit as *Hodie* as part of some final Vaughan Williams passage to virtuosic sublimity. Throughout his life and career, even to the end, indeed, it is rather accurate to envision Ralph Vaughan Williams in the happy warrior persona that served as his public face. For a composer of works frequently notable for their fineness of execution and almost unearthly beauty, he was also hardworking and hard-nosed, with a pronounced vernacular directness. Someone is alleged to have told him once that Faure wrote his *Requiem* on his knees. The impenitent English

popularizer Vaughan Williams is said to have replied that he wrote the *Missa Solemnis* “sitting on his bum.” He firmly believed—and said so in many places—that he thought the main point of the hard work of 20th century English modernist musical creation was to help people find it in themselves. “His missionary beliefs in music-making,” as described by Heffer became pronounced in the years after the war through a new commitment “not just to resume composing, but to teach and to encourage others to make music.” And so throughout the ensuing four decades, for instance, he devoted unstinting support and presence at such musical gatherings as the Three Choirs, Glyndbourne, and the Proms. Closer to his birthplace, the provincial Leith Hill Musical Festival remained as important as any other single object of professional commitment in the course of his lifetime. So among his proudest productions remained the hymn, at once a product of invention and tradition. Officially “Come Down, O Love Divine,” “Down Ampney,” became its familiar title. It was the name of the place of his birth.

Somehow in keeping with the age of the internet, the global village of electronic communication, Ralph Vaughan Williams’ 20th century modernist legacy of music keeps touch with cultures both cosmopolitan and local. Among the first of the great twentieth-century composers with major modern recording projects devoted to the standard body of work, Vaughan Williams further remains the cynosure of assiduous electronic curators, collectors, and preservers. Perhaps most heartening is the current availability virtually the whole canon, major and minor, on YouTube, with performances English, American, European, South American, Australian, and Asian, professional and amateur, produced for formal programming or locally recorded. One finds available, for instance, the popular *English Folksong Suite*, in stirring performances by the Eastman Wind Ensemble or Sir Adrian Boult and the London Symphony Orchestra. Meanwhile, on the computer display page, ready to be queued for viewing just below these are others every bit as enthusiastic by the Kanawah, West Virginia, County High School Band and by a youth orchestra playing in a park in Singapore.

In the large or small, were one to attempt a signature term for Vaughan Williams’ compositions from start to finish, one could surely do worse than recall that ascribed by Warner Berthoff to the Herman Melville who spent his last years working on the manuscript of *Billy Budd*. In a world of war, writes Berthoff, the tragedy of the handsome young sailor, falsely accused of mutiny yet condemned to die by the inexorable military laws of the sea, becomes simply a fact of things—of which myriad accounts will be written, frequently in direct contradiction of

each other. Yet the tale nonetheless becomes neither a testament of acceptance or resistance, says Berthoff, but rather a grand statement of Melvillian Magnanimity.

So Vaughan Williams seems to have been imaged in the personal regard, understanding of literary and artistic contemporaries, such as the exile Elias Canetti: “*The most wonderful pure man, Ralph Vaughan Williams,*” Canetti called him, “*the composer and pride of the nation, great-hearted, independent, with no notion of aristocracy, submissive, but without acute rebellion, a man one would like to cover pages and pages about.*”

So one might identify this, I would claim in conclusion, as precisely the spirit emanating, from the most memorable and most characteristic artistic productions of Ralph Vaughan Williams, the survivor of the Great War who went on to become the great 20th century modernist musical composer. Were one to choose a particular *Billy Budd* moment in Vaughan Williams, one might search in a number of places. For reasons outlined above, an apt choice, biographically and artistically, might be the valedictory *Ninth Symphony*, to which the musicologist Alain Frogley has devoted an extended compositional analysis, arguing its meticulous late-life inventiveness and technical complexity. Another might be the *Serenade to Music*, which in its sublime beauty *and* compositional virtuosity is said in its first performance to have moved the fellow composer Rachmaninoff to tears. Yet another could be the oratorio *Sancta Civitas*, the composer’s favorite among his choral compositions, with textual inscriptions of the *Phaedo*, the *Book of Revelation*, and the Taverner Bible, charting the progressions of the musical score toward a chastened postapocalyptic vision of grace.

The fact of the matter is one might choose almost as readily from many places in the prodigious body of composition. Personally, I would give the award to another of the short works, the briefer (like *Billy Budd*, something of a musical novella in multiple renditions) *Five Variants on Dives and Lazarus*, written just at the chronological midpoint of Vaughan Williams’ post-World War I career in 1939, at the heart of the dreadful century, as the dark memory of the slaughter of 1914-1918 spilled over for many survivors such as the composer into the prospect of another even more monstrous and horrific. For me it remains his most melodiously beautiful. I would also claim it as his most humanly poignant and most compositionally precise. It is also a work, for those of a modernist bent, with a characteristic Vaughan Williams history. Commissioned for the 1939 New York World’s Fair as expression of the spirit of English culture in music, it arises in fact from what might be called a scriptural anecdote, a small human story, biblically obscure, though among the most frequently represented in medieval church iconography.

Not to be confused with associations of Jesus and Lazarus, it is a parable entitled “the rich man and the leper,” with a specific rendition appearing only in Luke 16: 18-31 and having no traces in the other gospels. In the version invoked by Vaughan Williams, the text in turn invokes its own complex history as a cultural figuration. Dives and Lazarus: the former derives from the Latin tradition, a word meaning “rich man;” the latter comes from the Hebrew “God is our help;” from the middle ages onward it became further synonymous with leper. The parable, similar to that of the Good Samaritan passing by the stranger on the side of the road, is frequently cited for a moralistic conclusion giving one of the most notable New Testament renderings of the vision of the afterlife. Frequently ignored is a notably cruel and punitive conclusion. Dives, consigned to eternal torment, without hope of mercy, sees Lazarus taken to dwell forever in the bosom of Abraham. The possibility of human connection, either Dives in repentance or Dives in forgiveness, we are told, is for all time abridged across the abyss of history. Again, the transforming beauty of musical rendition lies with Vaughan Williams’ rewriting his particular account out of a familiar magic and mystery—in this case, as in so much of his work, from a well-known English melody of the folksong tradition, received in a number of regional versions, though best known through its rendition, “Come All Ye Faithful Christians,” into a carol.

A first performance of the Vaughan Williams set of complex musical variations met with great acclaim in 1939, becoming immediately embraced as a permanent part of the repertoire. Less known, how it came to be reprised on film in 1947 during the gray, mournful, austere period of post-1945 recovery for a documentary, *The Dim Little Island*, in which the composer appears in person along with three other figures reckoned proper exemplary spokesmen for encouragement of a sturdy, striving postwar morale spirit—an industrialist, a naturalist, and a popular cartoonist. In the composer’s section, over the melody he speaks, commenting on the music, its history, his quiet pride in what it says about the English spirit, his belief in music itself as a basis of cultural cohesion. “Listen to that tune,” he says. “It is one of our English folk-tunes. I knew it first when I was quite a small boy, but I realized then that here was something not only very beautiful, but which had a special appeal to me as an Englishman.” Such music, he says, unites the culture at all levels from that of the musical virtuoso in the concert hall through practitioners in the schools and choral festivals to “those who play and sing for their own spiritual recreation in their own houses.” So the national life is founded on “those great tunes, which, like our language, our customs, or laws, are the groundwork upon which everything must stand.”

Thus, as with so much of Ralph Vaughan Williams' work, again one directly connects the concept of magnanimity with another more specific and peculiar to the composer—the idea of music and community. And thus one is not surprised to know that *Dives and Lazarus* was the selection chosen to begin a Westminster Abbey memorial service for him service in 1958. *Five Variants on Dives and Lazarus*: composed exactly at the darkest moment of mid-passage in the four decades of life the composer was vouchsafed after 1918, and played once more at the end, no better selection could have honored the musical memory of what he had fervently wished be both his own and his century's long journey out of war.