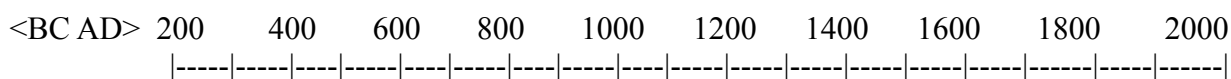


Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)¹



Vaughan Williams was an English composer whose music was influenced by English folk-song and Tudor music. When he was a young man both these things were undergoing something of a discovery or rediscovery. English folk-song was being noted down and collected by Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, Sabine Baring Gould and others. Collections of folk song were being published so that songs which had been known, for instance, only in a very localised area could be enjoyed by everyone. If you have sung the “Wraggle Taggle Gypsies” or “Blow Away the Morning Dew” you have Cecil Sharp and his friends to thank for publishing them.

At the same time scholars were becoming more interested in the music of the Elizabethan era.² There was a realisation that this old music was anything but primitive in its construction and that it was well worth playing, singing and listening to it.

Although he claimed to be an agnostic³ or atheist,⁴ Vaughan Williams spend a great deal of his musical life editing the music for hymn books. He wrote a number of very well known hymn tunes such as “*Sine Nomine*” (“For All The Saints”⁵) and “Monks Gate” (“He Who Would Valiant Be”⁶) himself. He rejected Christianity but because he loved all the traditional things – especially traditional country things – that made English life what it was, he loved Christian tradition. He was “... a first generation atheist with a deep attachment to the past, which means a disappointed theist.”⁷

All his life Vaughan Williams was fascinated with John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and for thirty years he worked on a opera⁸ based on this book. However, as there was little prospect of such a work being performed he used the *Pilgrim’s Progress* music he had written in his other works. Eventually he did complete the opera and it was performed. People were surprised to find music with which they were familiar in Vaughan Williams symphonies and choral works was actually originally written for *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Sing “Thou Wast O God”. This hymn tune by the Tudor composer Thomas Tallis was used by Vaughan Williams as the theme for his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* for string orchestra. A string orchestra version of the tune is also on this CD in an electronic form.

Now find a recording of *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and listen to how Vaughan Williams uses the tune.

1 Mark Vaughan Williams' life on the time line.

2 See the Unit on Elizabethan music on CD8 of *The Mothers' Companion*.

3 Someone who claims they do not know whether there is a God. In practice this is atheism.

4 Someone who claims not to believe that there is a God.

5 361 in 1977 edition of *Christian Hymns*.

6 This was written for a “recasting” of John Bunyan’s “Who Would True Valour See” from *Pilgrim’s Progress* by the hymn book editor Percy Dearmer. It is to be found in the 1977 edition of *Christian Hymns* where it is set to Bunyan’s original words (745) and in many other hymn books.

7 Ottaway, Hugh, *Vaughan Williams Symphonies* (BBC Music Guides, 1972) p.7. A theist is someone who does believe in the existence of God.

8 A sung stage play.