

## Why Ralph Vaughan Williams should be as revered as Shakespeare



Ralph Vaughan Williams, in 1957

**By Simon Heffer**

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It is always good to have an excuse to contemplate the condition of our culture, and the 50th anniversary of the death of Ralph Vaughan Williams, which falls next Tuesday, provides one.

For those of you who are sceptics about him, or who simply want a fight, let me assert this: that as an artist he deserves a position in our culture of the rank we accord to Shakespeare, Turner, Wren or Dickens.

It is futile to have the argument about who is Britain's greatest ever composer, since too much an element of *chacun à son goût* must come into it. There is, though, a more credible case to be made that, of all our great composers, Vaughan Williams was the greatest man.

And he was the greatest man precisely because of what he understood about the importance of having a culture, not just for its own sake, but for the illumination of the lives of everyone.

Some have noted that it is not ideal that Vaughan Williams has, in the past few years, come out of that deep freeze which seems to envelop all artists in the decades immediately following their death, and has become a "popular" composer. I am all for serious composers being popular, even if it means that they are known to a wide public only for a work or two.

In Vaughan Williams's case these are *The Lark Ascending*, *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* and *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. They are all very chocolate box, all about an idea of England and Englishness as a comfort zone, and they are not entirely representative of the composer. Vaughan Williams has been hijacked by the nostalgia industry.

For two reasons, I hardly think this matters. First, there is the irony that, long before the nostalgia industry hijacked Vaughan Williams, he, to an extent, hijacked it. His collecting of folk-songs in the first decade of the last century was an act of massive cultural importance.

His treatment of the material, and what he learnt from it about traditional means of writing music in this country, profoundly affected his own music, and that of his pupils.

It also provided the theme tunes to an idea of the past that was sedulously cultivated in the decades before the Second World War, and was to be found elsewhere in the Arts and Crafts movement, the architecture of Lutyens and the topographical series published by Harry Batsford.

Such cultural ideas had the same stimulus: that the past was disappearing and needed to be if not preserved, then recorded. Vaughan Williams went out into the field to collect folk-songs from elderly rustics and fishermen to ensure they were captured before the tradition died out and a part of the past was lost forever.

Yet the genius of Vaughan Williams lay not in his attachment to the past, but in what became his ability to articulate in music the temper of the present. He fiercely repudiated any suggestion that his music had specific "meanings".

When told that his Sixth Symphony, first performed in 1948 and laden with darkness and aggression, had been labelled a "war" symphony he was angry: yet only the obtuse could think it was about anything else. In the 1920s he wrote works that reflected on the loss sustained in the Great War.

In the 1930s he wrote works that warned of the error of a repeat. In the 1940s he harnessed that sense of national consciousness that grew up in a time of mortal peril and infused his music with it, and used his music to respond to and articulate it.

That is why he connected with such a large audience; that is why he remains, half a century after his death, a towering cultural figure. He remains a vigorous and irreproachable voice of the monoculture in a society that, we are repeatedly told, must no longer have a distinct and dominant culture of its own, borne out of the indigenous experience.

That is not all of his achievement, or his only legacy. He was a rich man even before the royalties from his works made him richer. Not wishing to have more than he needed, he engaged not just in works of noblesse oblige but also became a one-man arts council.

He funded his friend Gustav Holst for much of his career, and funded his widow after Holst's regrettably early death. Young composers came to him later in his life with a begging-bowl that rarely went unfilled, if they had any talent.

After his death, the Trust that bears his name disbursed (and continues to disburse) funds to ensure performances and recordings of music by scores of composers. That we have a musical life in England today, and will continue to have one, is, in part, down to his practical help.

Yet there is a charming letter in the collection of them about to be published by the Oxford University Press to commemorate his anniversary that, to my mind, seals the point of Vaughan Williams's massive importance to our nation and its culture.

Six weeks before he died, he wrote to the headmaster of a primary school in Norfolk to speak of the honour he felt in the school's proposal to name one of its houses after him.

He enclosed a message to be read out to the children that contains thoughts he had expressed in earlier writings, and frequently in conversation with others, and which seem to sum up the point of him, and of his work. "I believe that all the arts, and especially music, are necessary to a full life... Music will show you what to do with your life.

It is necessary to know facts, but music will enable you to see past facts to the very essence of things in a way which science cannot do. The arts are the means by which we can look through the magic casements and see what lies beyond."

To the English in particular, Vaughan Williams's music - however much he might have protested it had no "meaning" - is revelatory in this way. It reveals history, landscape, everyday life, the feeling that unites a homogenous group of people not just at times of great upheaval, such as during a war, but at all other times, too.

It is about the expression of a folk memory. It is a means of insight into the often-quoted, but rarely properly understood, notion of "living in an old country".

It is not about giving the lives of people (whether composers or listeners) meaning. It is about providing the insight and stimulation that reveals the meaning latent within them. No one has done this for the English better than Vaughan Williams: no one has ever come so close to opening up the spirit of our country, its long past and its people more than he did.

And if somebody unaware of all this comes to him through hearing a snatch of *The Lark Ascending* on television, then so much the better than never coming to him at all. What is important - and this was his message - is that the journey of discovery should not stop there.

The mind of the listener can then be opened by the nine symphonies, the four operas, the various concertos, cantatas, and, of course, the wealth of songs. It all serves to open our lives and our consciousness up to us, and to witness and revere the greatness of Vaughan Williams.

*'Vaughan Williams', by Simon Heffer, is available from Faber Finds.*