

PROGRAM NOTES

By Steven Ledbetter

EDWARD ELGAR (1857-1934)

March: *Pomp and Circumstance*, in D major, Opus 39, No. 1

Edward Elgar was born at Broadheath, near Worcester, England, on June 2, 1857, and died in Worcester on February 23, 1934. He composed the first, and most famous, of his five Pomp and Circumstance marches in 1901. The first performance took place in Liverpool under the direction of A. E. Rodewald, on October 19, 1901. The choral version, also used as a finale for the Coronation Ode for Edward VII, was premiered in London at the Royal Albert Hall on June 21, 1902, a few months before the premiere of the full Coronation Ode in Sheffield, under Elgar's direction, that October 2. The score calls for two flutes, piccolo, and optional second piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, tambourine, sleigh-bells, cymbals, bass drum, optional glockenspiel, two harps, organ, and strings. Duration is about 8 minutes.

Soon after rising to national fame with his *Enigma Variations* and the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius*, Elgar surprised many listeners by turning out a set of brilliant marches in a popular style—the last thing they expected of a composer of so “serious” a piece as the virtuosic set of orchestral variations. But Elgar knew perfectly well what he was doing. He liked a good march, and he commented that “all the marches on the symphonic scale are so slow that people can’t march to them.” He set out to change that. On May 10, 1901, he declared to a young musical friend, “I’ve got a tune that will knock ‘em flat!”—and he played her the first of his *Pomp and Circumstance* marches.

He was right. When Sir Henry Wood conducted the first performance in London, “the people simply rose and yelled. I had to play it again,” the conductor recalled later. But still they wouldn’t let him go on with the program until he had performed it a third time. When Elgar was commissioned to write a piece for the coronation of King Edward VII, no less a personage than the King himself suggested that put words to the big tune from *Pomp and Circumstance* and insert it into the *Coronation Ode*. It is still sung that way in England, as “Land of Hope and Glory.” In whatever version, it has gone around the world as one of those great melodies that, once heard, seems always to have existed.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

A Sea Symphony

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born on October 12, 1872, at Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, England, and died in London on August 26, 1958. He began planning his first symphonic work, which he referred to simply as A Sea Symphony without giving it a number, in 1903 and completed it in 1909. The first performance took place at the Leeds Festival on October 12, 1910 with the festival chorus and orchestra conducted by the composer. Vaughan Williams continued to revise it here and there through 1923. The work, dedicated to “R.L.W.” (the composer’s cousin, Sir Ralph Wedgwood), draws upon several poems by Walt Whitman, detailed below. The score calls for soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, and an orchestra consisting of two

flutes, two oboes (one optional) and English horn, three clarinets (one optional) and bass clarinet (optional), two bassoons and contrabassoon (optional), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, side drum, bass drum, cymbals), two harps (one optional), organ (optional), and strings. Duration is about 63 minutes.

The three earliest symphonies of Ralph Vaughan Williams bore programmatic titles. The first, known as the *Sea Symphony* (1903-09), was in fact a choral work that had grown from the composer's intention to compose some settings of Walt Whitman as hearty "songs of the sea." The next two, though their titles suggest programmatic elements, are nonetheless abstract symphonic works: the *London Symphony* (1912-13) and the *Pastoral Symphony* (1921). At that point, Vaughan Williams turned, for his next three symphonies—after a lapse of ten years—to the purely abstract instrumental genre, identified only by key and number. Yet critics could not be prevented from attempting to read programmatic ideas into these works, no matter how vehemently the composer insisted that they were intended to make their statements purely as music.

Soon after the turn of the century, Vaughan Williams had begun to establish a name for himself as a composer of tuneful songs and a writer of articles in journals. Then two things happened to turn him into the "great, rugged, individual composer" (in the words of Michael Kennedy) who could create the nine symphonies and other large-scale works that he left: he was fired with an enthusiasm to collect English folk songs, and he accepted an invitation to edit the music for a new hymnal. The experience proved liberating, and by 1910, when he was almost forty, he produced his first completely original masterpiece, the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*. By then he had already written *A Sea Symphony*, less a symphony than a grand cantata, though far more "symphonic"—that is, growing out of specific thematic ideas that recur, develop, and shape the whole – than the term cantata implies.

The *Sea Symphony* is Vaughan Williams's first really large-scale work, and its accomplishment took him a full half-dozen years. Though he began work on it in 1903 as a simple collection of "Songs of the Sea" for chorus and orchestra, by 1906 he was referring to it as the "Ocean Symphony," which meant that he was taking particular pains to give it a greater coherence than that of a simple collection of songs linked by subject matter. We should remember that, when he began work on *A Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams was not only projecting his own first major work, he was doing it in an English context that was virtually devoid of symphonies. The greatest of his older contemporaries, Edward Elgar, had still not written his First Symphony (it appeared in 1908, when the essential shaping of Vaughan Williams' work was largely completed, so that the Elgar and Vaughan Williams works may be regarded as jointly providing the impetus that sparked the rich development of symphonic composition in twentieth-century England).

During the symphony's lengthy gestation, Vaughan Williams himself grew as a musician through an astonishingly diverse series of connections and experiences that shaped him personally and his work. First of all, he had thoroughly absorbed the solid but conventional choral style of Parry and Stanford (whose works are still heard in England far more often than elsewhere). His sense of melody, and in particular his love for the old modal forms of melody, had been heightened by the first intense experience of folk-song collecting on the one hand and by his editorship of *The Hymnal* (published in 1906), on the other. Spending two years in editorial duties for a collection of hymns might seem to be a waste of time for a young composer, but Vaughan Williams found it among the most valuable experiences of his life. He later remarked that two years' close association with some of the best--and worst--tunes ever written

had come him more good than any amount of academic study of fugue. He greatly admired two Elgar masterpieces – the *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius*—that preceded his own work on the *Sea Symphony*; an Elgarian color can be sensed here frequently, such as soon after the beginning in the surging billows of orchestral sound and choral counterpoint to the words “and on its limitless heaving breast...” But after immersing himself in the work of his English predecessors, in the rather Germanic approach in his formal instruction, and in the English tradition of folk and hymn tunes, Vaughan Williams decided that he needed further polishing of his orchestration, so he studied for a time with Maurice Ravel in Paris. This was in 1908, when the *Sea Symphony* was well advanced, yet Ravel’s influence surely shows in many of the most delicate points of sonority and color. (And unlike most of Ravel’s students, Vaughan Williams used what he learned to write in his own manner, as Ravel himself noted when he called Vaughan Williams “the only one of my pupils who does not write my music.”)

Equally significant in shaping the character of the *Sea Symphony* is the English tradition of setting Walt Whitman to music. When William Rossetti edited selections from *Leaves of Grass* for English publication in 1868, he inspired a whole generation of English composers (Americans, for the most part, did not discover Whitman for music until after World War I). Among the most important predecessors of the *Sea Symphony* must be counted Charles Villiers Stanford’s *Elegiac Ode* (1884) and Delius’s *Sea Drift* (premiered in 1906). What attracted these and many other composers was Whitman’s combination of vivid pictorial imagery, visionary themes (treated in a way that Whitman himself likened to thematic development in music), and galloping free verse, which definitively shattered the tidy metrical forms of so much polite and elegant nineteenth-century poetry.

Vaughan Williams was a lifelong devotee of Whitman. The composer’s biographer, Michael Kennedy, reports talking with Vaughan Williams just a month before his death about some of his literary enthusiasms that had come and gone. Kennedy asked if Whitman fell into that category. The composer replied, “I’ve never got over him, I’m glad to say.” That lifelong enthusiasm was responsible for the creation of works ranging from songs for solo voice and piano to large works for chorus and orchestra (*Toward the Unknown Region*, and *Dona nobis pacem* in addition to the *Sea Symphony*). Vaughan Williams created his own text by selecting and assembling various passages from “Song of the Exposition” (for the first movement), “Sea Drift” (first three movements), and “Passage to India” (final movement). He did not hesitate to pull lines out of context and reassemble them in building the framework for his musical structure. Though he began the work thinking of it simply as a collection of “songs of the sea” (a plan that might still be perceptible in such moments as the baritone’s first solo—“Today a rude brief recitative”—which certainly have the savor of salt sea air), he soon began to face the problem of shaping all of this material in a larger framework.

He found the key to organizing this large score in its first musical gesture, an exhilarating sweep of sound on two striking chords leading from the brass fanfare to the entrance of the full orchestra. As James Day put it in his discussion of the *Sea Symphony*, this “has the effect of an enormous curtain being swept majestically aside.” What is striking about these two chords is their oblique relationship. The opening movement is in the key of D major (which is the *second* chord); but the brass fanfare sounds a darkly distant B-flat minor. The sudden appearance of D, *fortissimo*, sweeps away the clouds into full sunlight with rolling waves and surging foam. This gesture, the basic harmonic progression, recurs in each of the four movements of the work in some guise or other as a unifying feature, though rarely as extrovert as here. This opening movement, “A song for all seas, all ships,” is crafted with a magnificent rhetoric. But it also

looks forward to later movements. The hushed, visionary ending of the movement will characterize the end of the entire symphony, and the last appearance of the words “behold the sea itself” will come in the key of C minor--strikingly dark in the context of D major, but anticipating the final close of the entire symphony, as well as the opening phrase of the next movement. The procedure is symphonic in essence, though it appears to be linked primarily to the setting of a text.

The second movement (“On the beach at night, alone”) is cast for baritone solo and semi-chorus; it opens with a dark C-minor chord resolving to E major--precisely the same relationship (though how different in mood!) as the chords that open the first movement. The movement has the simple and basic A-B-A pattern, but with the striking element that the second A section is, but for a single phrase from the baritone, totally instrumental, a echo of remembrance rather than a simple repetition, closing serenely and magically in E major.

For the symphony’s scherzo (“The Waves”), Vaughan Williams leads with a brief trumpet fanfare and a choral phrase built on two chords, the first minor, the second major. This immediately harks back to the opening of the first movement, but with the striking difference that these chords are very closely related (G minor, B-flat), unlike the two chords in the first movement. The scherzo plays between these two keys, with the great tune in the middle of the movement, an emotional culmination, in B-flat before closing back in G, but now in the major. The movement is the only one in the symphony in which Whitman’s text completely avoids the metaphysical element, and Vaughan Williams sets it as a lively and invigorating contrast to the darkness of the second movement and the expansiveness of the finale. Here, if anywhere, we are closest in spirit to the composer’s original conception of a collection of sea songs. The finale is by far the largest movement, as long as the next two longest put together. The text now moves from concrete images of ships and waves and flags (with their lightly philosophical extension concerting the interconnection of all nations to a far more extended metaphysical vision, in which “great vessel” sailing on the sea is man himself. The opening of the movement gives to the chorus one of those wonderfully singable tunes that Vaughan Williams crafted so often, in which a hymn-like simplicity perfectly matches the text. Ironically, this is the passage about which Vaughan Williams himself said it was inspired by several hours’ study of Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius* score at the British Museum. In a later article he expressed astonishment at how much he had unwittingly “cribbed” from Elgar in his early music, “probably when I thought I was being most original.” This was not, of course, plagiarism, but the sincere flattery of imitation. “Real cribbing,” wrote Vaughan Williams, “takes place when one composer thinks with the mind of another, even when there is no mechanical similarity of phrase.”

Following this “Elgarian” opening, a modal passage contemplates the creation of mankind and questions the “unsatisfied soul.” The poet’s answer inspires the climactic moment of the finale in a great choral outburst:

Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

This vision is not yet the end, however. The soprano and baritone soloists sing a duet of lavish beauty adjuring the soul to set sail, to find the distant goal. Eventually soloists and chorus alike rouse to enthusiasm for the bold journey: “Away, O soul, instantly hoist the anchor,” and they set out to steer for the “deep waters only.” This might have served for a grandiose, tub-thumping ending. But Vaughan Williams has a much more powerful idea in store. After a pause, on which

we are invited to contemplate the heroism of the journey, the soprano quietly adds, “O my brave soul! O farther sail!” And this close moves beyond the simple vigor of immediate activity to a renewed and unending--but progressively hushed--search for a goal too far to be more than dimly perceived, and the “sailors” vanish into deep silence.

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RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
A Sea Symphony

Text taken from Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

1. A Song for All Seas

Baritone, Soprano, Chorus

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 some.
Behold, the sea itself,
And on its limitless, heaving breast, the ships.

Baritone

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
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.

Soprano

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 all that went down doing their duty,
Reminiscent of them, twined from all intrepid captains young or old.

Baritone

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

2. On the Beach at Night Alone

Baritone, Chorus

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 similitude spans them, and always has spanned,
And shall forever span them and shall completely hold and enclose them.

3. The Waves

Chorus

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 towards the tracks 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.

4. The Explorers

Baritone, Soprano, Chorus

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,
Covered 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,
Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning, with restless explorations, with questionings,
baffled, formless, feverish, with never-happy hearts, with that sad
incessant refrain, — *'Wherefore unsatisfied soul? Whither O
mocking life?'*

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?
Who speak the secret of the 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 crossed,
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.

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, O Soul),
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 walking in the night,
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death, like water flowing,
Bear me indeed as through 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 I Soul, thou actual me,
And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,
Thou matest 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!
Reckless O Soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
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!

Walt Whitman