

Longwood Symphony Orchestra – March 19, 2011
Kechley & Vaughan Williams
Program Notes

DAVID KECHLEY
WAKEFUL VISIONS/MOONLESS DREAMS

Notes by David Kechley

A Symphony in Four Movements

I. Whirlwind

II. Notari Notari

III. Something Wicked

IV. Moments

Dreams can sometimes seem quite real while visions experienced in the light of day may seem completely unreal. Dreams or visions can be frightening, comforting, spiritual, playful, and so many other things. Each movement of *WAKEFUL VISIONS/MOONLESS DREAMS* explores some of these qualities and finds its point of departure in a suggestive literary source.

Whirlwind, as the title suggests, is a fast and furious musical reaction to the well-known biblical quote: "For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind..." (Hosea 8:7). Regardless of its original Old Testament context this phrase clearly applies anytime human actions produce dire consequences, which are ultimately beyond the limits of human control or understanding, i.e., irreversible. The movement opens quietly, bubbling below the surface, but quickly becomes explosive with rhythmic interjections, which constantly threaten the stability of the driving triplet rhythms. The transition to a more lyrical, but still foreboding mood is sudden and the harp and marimba continue to provide the underlying rhythm for more sustained and complete thematic statements by solo and tutti strings. The explosions return, but the final texture ultimately implodes as the movement crashes to an abrupt finish.

Notari Notari is inspired by the following haiku:

Haru no umi
Hinemosu notari
Notari kana

Behold! The spring sea undulates
And undulates the whole day long.

"A delightful picture of the halcyon spring sea rises to the mind's eye at once. As far as the eye can travel, the ocean swells and sinks gently and regularly all day long." This is the description by Asataro Miyamori, the translator of this beautiful poem by Buson (*An Anthology of Haiku Ancient and Modern*, ©1932). "...The chief merit of this verse [is] the pleasing rhythm of *notari-notari* which cannot adequately be reproduced in a translation." The imagery and rhythm of these words are points of departure, but the music moves beyond them as the flute begins an expansive and lyrical solo. All the musical ideas, including some from the first movement, continue to expand into broad and climatic statements. A dialog between cello and piccolo provides the opportunity for return to the opening mood and imagery.

The musical imagery for *Something Wicked* is suggested by Act IV, Scene I, in which the three witches are chanting as they circle the bubbling caldron. Just before Macbeth enters, the second witch says,

*By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.
Open, locks,
Whoever knocks!*

Because of its playful although not really dance like rhythms, perhaps this serves the role of a traditional symphonic third movement. It might even be call a scherzo in a somewhat grotesque and twisted sort of way. Percussion and various orchestral effects are employed to create a sense of malevolence and occasional chaos from which the ultimate outcome is not entirely clear.

Moments is, among other things, about looking back and wondering if what we remember really happened or if it may have been a dream. Musical fragments from previous movements return in original form while others continue their transformative journey and create new connections with one another in a different musical reality, the reality of the present moment.

The moments of the past do not remain still; they retain in our memory the motion which drew them towards the future, towards a future which has itself become the past, and draw us on in their train.-- Marcel Proust

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

A London Symphony (Symphony No. 2)

Notes by Steven Ledbetter

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 second symphonic work, which he always referred to simply as A London Symphony without giving it a number, in 1911 and worked at it all through 1912 and 1913. The first performance took place in Queen's Hall, London, on March 27, 1914, under the direction of Sir Geoffrey Toye. The composer revised and cut the symphony for performances under Adrian Boult in 1918. When he published it in 1920, he dedicated the score to the memory of George Butterworth. The composer made further cuts in the 1930s; Sir Thomas Beecham led the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the premiere of the definitive version on February 23, 1934. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, side drum, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, harp ("doubled if possible"), and strings.

The three earliest symphonies of Ralph Vaughan Williams bore programmatic titles. The first, known as the *A 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. Both of these experiences gave him firsthand experience with some of the best tunes ever written and (as he admitted later, with reference to the old Victorian hymnals he was bent on replacing) with some of the worst. 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*, which was less a symphony than a grand symphonic cantata. But he had not yet written a large-scale work for orchestra alone.

The impetus came from a seemingly chance remark dropped by Vaughan Williams' friend George Butterworth, a talented young composer who was killed on the Somme in 1916. At the end of an evening spent with Vaughan Williams in 1911, Butterworth remarked abruptly, “You know, you ought to write a symphony.” Vaughan Williams couldn't get the idea out of his head. And he found an approach to writing what became his most colorful symphony that responded to some of his most basic feelings about national music. As he put it in an article published in 1912:

Is it not possible that the English composer has something to say to his own countrymen that no one of any other age and any other country can say? Have we not all about us forms of musical expression which we can purify and raise to the level of great art?

And he found those “forms of musical expression” in the sights and (especially) the sounds of the London that he loved: the Westminster chimes, street-cries, folk songs, traffic noise, and the popular instruments of Cockney music-making. Yet in none of this is the symphony explicitly programmatic. The composer insisted that the title might be clearer if he called the work “*A Symphony by a Londoner*”; the listener would perhaps expect some local references without assuming that there was any attempt to tell a story, however much its picturesqueness may hint at one. Certainly Vaughan Williams drew inspiration from Elgar's musical depiction of London, *Cockaigne*, as well as from some of Debussy's works; and he knew Monet's paintings of London at night and H.G. Wells' novel *Tono-Bungay*, which describes the Thames as the symbol of England. With all this wealth of sources and ideas, Vaughan Williams created a symphony that reflected his early idealism, that revealed his ability to handle large-scale musical forms, and that showed his mastery of evocative orchestral color. In 1951, when he was revising the orchestration of the six symphonies he had composed to that date, he wrote to Sir John Barbirolli that he must leave the *London* alone, since it was “past mending, though indeed with all its faults I love it still—indeed it is my favourite of my family of six.” (He was to compose three more symphonies in the decade between his seventy-fifth and eighty-fifth birthdays.)

The first movement is in a fairly straightforward sonata form with an evocative slow introduction beginning with a quiet motive based on a rising fourth that seems to suggest London in that quiet time just before dawn. The Westminster chimes sound the half-hour (harp) and the movement explodes in an outburst of lamenting chromatic cries shouted by the full orchestra. What follows is rich in thematic ideas, most of which are further worked out in the development, which begins with the chromatic outcry of the exposition. Some of the themes might be identified as the impatient cry of a cabby, the whistling of a street urchin, or any number of other sights of the city; more to the point is their sheer overwhelming energy.

The second movement, a point of respite in the hectic urban activity, was described by Vaughan Williams as "Bloomsbury Square on a November afternoon." The principal theme is repeated and richly harmonized. A snatch of melody played by the viola in a slightly faster tempo leads to a brief quotation (clarinet and violas) of the lavender-seller's cry. An impassioned climax leads to a rather mysterious, hushed conclusion.

The scherzo (subtitled "Nocturne") is again a lively and well-filled movement, with many themes and fragments of themes appearing and disappearing helter-skelter. Throughout there is a feeling of night and mystery, though with a few lively outbursts before the mood becomes more serious. Vaughan Williams offered this comment: "If the hearer will imagine himself standing on Westminster Embankment at night surrounded by the distant sounds of the Strand, with its great hotels on one side, and the 'New Cut' on the other, with its crowded streets and flashing lights, it may serve as a mood in which to listen to this movement."

The last movement begins with another expressive explosion that soon turns into a slow march. An Allegro provides contrast in the middle of the movement, but the return of the march grows to a crisis which, after rising to a climax, dies away just as the harp imitates the Westminster Chimes again, now sounding the three-quarter. This is the beginning of the epilogue, which, although it recalls the opening of the symphony, does so in the way that experience recalls innocence. Michael Kennedy once asked the composer about the "meaning" of the epilogue and was referred to the last chapter of H.G.Wells' 1909 novel *Tono-Bungay*, the chapter entitled "Night and the Open Sea," which contains the following passage:

Light after light goes down. England and the Kingdom, Britain and the Empire, the old prides and the old devotions, glide abeam, astern, sink down upon the horizon, pass--pass. The river passes, London passes, England passes....Through the confusion something drives, something that is at once human achievement and the most inhuman of all existing things...something we draw by pain and effort out of the heart of life, that we disentangle and make clear....I see it always as austerity, as beauty. This thing we make clear is the heart of life. It is the one enduring thing.

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