



CHANDOS :: intro

CHAN 2028

*an introduction to* Ralph Vaughan Williams





*Classical music* is inaccessible and difficult.

It's surprising how many people still believe the above statement to be true, so this new series from Chandos is not only welcome, it's also very necessary.

I was lucky enough to stumble upon the wonderful world of the classics when I was a child, and I've often contemplated how much poorer my life would have been had I not done so. As you have taken the first step by buying this CD, I guarantee that you will share the delights of this epic journey of discovery. Each CD in the series features the orchestral music of a specific composer, with a selection of his 'greatest hits' played by top quality performers. It will give you a good flavour of the composer's style, but you won't find any nasty surprises – all the music is instantly accessible and appealing. The discs are beautifully presented, and very good value for money, too.

I sincerely hope this CD marks the start of your own lifelong passion for classical music.

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Classic FM presenter



## Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

- |   |  |              |
|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | Overture to 'The Wasps'*<br>from the 'Aristophanic Suite' of incidental music<br>to the play | 10:16        |
| 2 | Fantasia on 'Greensleeves'†<br>Arranged by Ralph Greaves (d. 1966)                           | 4:34         |
| 3 | The Lark Ascending‡<br>Romance for Violin and Orchestra<br>Michael Davis solo violin         | 15:36        |
|   | A London Symphony§<br>(Symphony No. 2)   | 47:41        |
| 4 | I Lento – Allegro risoluto   | 14:49        |
| 5 | II Lento   | 11:11        |
| 6 | III Scherzo (Nocturne) – Allegro vivace  | 8:21         |
| 7 | IV Andante con moto – Allegro – Epilouge   | 13:19        |
|   | <b>Total time</b>  | <b>78:09</b> |

London Philharmonic Orchestra\*  
London Symphony Orchestra†‡§  
Ashley Arbuckle† ▪ Lennox Mackenzie§ leaders  
Vernon Handley\*  
Bryden Thomson†‡§



*overture to 'the wasps'*

Unlike the music of a great number of his contemporaries, that of Ralph Vaughan Williams has found a place in the hearts of both concert goers and musicians. It speaks directly to the emotions, and the composer was not afraid to depict, musically, his innermost yearnings. He was a poet of nature, but his approach was highly individual: he was a symphonist, and nearly all his works are laid out in a recognisably symphonic style; relying on accepted classical forms, he would rarely allow himself simply to follow his musical heart wherever it would lead him.

Vaughan Williams was born in 1872. His father was a Gloucestershire village rector and his mother a member of the Wedgwood family who were famed for their pottery. He spent his childhood mostly in the Home Counties and London, with later periods of study at the Royal College of Music and Cambridge University. He was drawn, early on, to composition, and developed an abiding interest in English folksong, which led him to tour the country collecting traditional melodies. Although he travelled to Paris for lessons with Ravel, in order to acquire some 'French polish', as he put it, he spent almost the whole of his long life in his home celebrating and enriching English cultural life.

By the time he was asked by the Greek Play Committee at Cambridge to write the incidental music for a performance of Aristophanes's comedy *The Wasps*, in 1909, he had already composed a significant body of work, including the song cycles *On Wenlock Edge* and *Songs of Travel*. Contenting himself with displaying the immense humour of the play, in his own very down-to-earth terms, Vaughan Williams created music which is at one with the play. Whilst today we seldom hear the complete incidental music or the 'Aristophanic Suite' that the composer drew from it, the Overture to *The Wasps* has always proved a winning curtain raiser in the concert hall. It commences with

the angry buzzing of wasps, the sound of which becomes more ludicrous with the various changes of orchestral colour, before the overture 'kicks off' with a jaunty tune punctuated by comic ejaculations from cymbals and bass drum. The progress of the music is straightforward, and after a dreamy middle section Vaughan Williams combines all his ideas to create a rollicking mood that prevails to the end.

© Robert Anthony Briggs

*fantasia on 'greensleeves'*

The Fantasia on the traditional melody 'Greensleeves' originated in Vaughan Williams's opera *Sir John in Love*; although probably the most familiar piece of music associated with the composer's name, it was arranged in its present form, for strings, harp and flutes, by Ralph Greaves and first heard on 27 September 1934 with Vaughan Williams conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

© Max Harrison

*the lark ascending*

Vaughan Williams wrote *The Lark Ascending* in August 1914 but revised it in 1920, then again before publication of the full score in 1926. Hence it should be considered part of his post-World War I output. It is described as a 'Romance for Violin and Orchestra' but there are also reductions for chamber orchestra and for violin and piano, and it was in this last form that the piece was first heard in public, from Marie Hall, the dedicatee, and George Mendham at Shirehampton Public Hall on 15 December 1920. The premiere of the orchestral version was given in the Queen's Hall, London on



14 June 1921 by Marie Hall with the British Symphony Orchestra under Adrian Boult.

The work begins magically, with the orchestra sustaining a soft ninth chord as the soloist essays phrases that are indeed like birdsong and grow into the main theme. This melody seems capable of infinite extension, there being no apparent limit to the variants on its basic four-note idea. An agitated central section and a folk-like tune for full orchestra follow, then the violinist gathers everything together in what becomes a final rapturous flight.

The score is prefaced by some lines from *The Lark Ascending* by George Meredith (1828–1909), and although the music was inspired by the poetry, the poetry could just as easily have been a response to the music:

He rises and begins to round,  
He drops the silver chain of sound,  
Of many links without a break,  
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.

For singing till his heaven fills,  
'Tis love of earth that he instils,  
And ever winging up and up,  
Our valley is his golden cup,  
And he the wine which overflows  
To lift us with him as he goes...

Till lost on his aerial rings  
In light, and then the fancy sings.

In its birdlike quality, and even coolness, the solo part really does suggest the detachment of an observer high above land, and the violin writing is unique in Vaughan Williams's output. Among other works for violin and orchestra the sustained, rapt meditation

has no parallel either. The mood of the piece as a whole finds an echo in *Merciless Beauty*, settings of words attributed to Chaucer, also first heard in 1921, and *The Lark Ascending* points clearly to the three major works that soon followed, the *Pastoral Symphony*, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* and the Mass in G minor.

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### *A London Symphony*

Like the opera *Hugh the Drover*, on which Vaughan Williams worked at the same time, *A London Symphony* expresses his pre-World War I nationalism and his desire, set forth in 1912 in his article 'Who wants the English Composer?', to make music out of materials immediately to hand. He wrote:

Have we not about us forms of musical expression which we can purify and raise to the level of great art? For instance, the lilt of the chorus at a music-hall joining in a popular song, the children dancing to a barrel-organ...

He earlier had sketched a symphonic poem about London, which apparently was subsumed in this far more ambitious symphony, on which he began working in 1912. It was the largest purely orchestral work that Vaughan Williams had undertaken thus far and, along with the opera, marked the end of one phase of his development. The first performance was at the Queen's Hall, London on 27 March 1914 with the Queen's Hall Orchestra conducted by Geoffrey Toye. There were later 'premieres' in 1918, 1920 and 1934 because this was a work revised several times. But already in 1914 it was recognised as an important and extremely individual piece, and in that more civilised age, when newspapers gave more space to the arts, it was much discussed in the press.



It is a programmatic symphony, yet like all good programme works it stands perfectly well as absolute music. The London landmarks to which it refers were described by Vaughan Williams as 'accidentals, not essentials', and though it is called *A London Symphony* he said it ought to have been titled 'A Symphony by a Londoner'. This last, incidentally, disposes of the once-prevalent notion that it embodies a countryman's view of London. Vaughan Williams lived in the city for long periods and this symphony is a commentary on London, as it once was, by somebody who knew it very well indeed.

In the *Lento* introduction we see the city just before dawn, and the Westminster Chimes are evoked by the harp. London, and the orchestra, stirs, then after a hushed pause an overwhelming phrase sends the *Allegro risoluto* on its way. Fragments of other themes are glimpsed, but everything changes with the second subject, which turns the music towards suggestions of Hampstead Heath on an August Bank Holiday. Vaughan Williams said that the slow movement was 'Bloomsbury Square on a November afternoon', and it is a beautiful example of his powers of tone painting and delicate orchestration. Again there are several themes – on cor anglais, on flute and trumpet – and a viola dialogues with the woodwind. The hansom-cab's jingle is heard, but soon the mood becomes darker and the music rises to a great climax.

The composer's is the best introduction to the Scherzo:

If the listener 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 flaring lights, it may serve as a mood in which to listen to this movement.

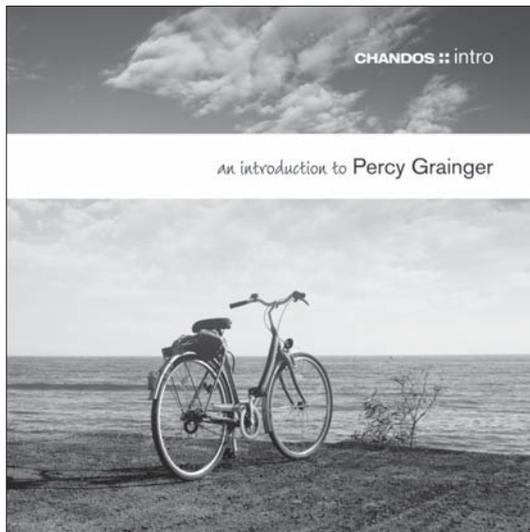
And it does. The finale is a complex and superb piece which gets into its stride with a quite sombre march. There is an *Allegro* section but the march returns, generating three climaxes which lead to the

reappearance of the main *Allegro* theme of the first movement. A clock chiming the third quarter signals the Epilogue, which was prompted by the novel *Tono Bungay* by H.G. Wells, in which the narrator sails down the Thames at night to the open sea.

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an introduction to Percy Grainger  
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## Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

*Vaughan Williams was the foremost English composer of the first half of the twentieth century. Strongly influenced by English folksong, which he collected, he developed a musical style that is highly individual, yet owes something to the delicate French manner of Ravel and Debussy. The wide range of orchestral colour, visionary quality and power achieved in his music represent the essence of 'Englishness'.*

|     |                            |       |
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