

PROGRAM NOTES

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was enjoined by his mentor, the composer Hubert Parry, to “write choral music as befits an Englishman and a democrat.” In the works of the great American poet of democracy, Walt Whitman (1819–1892), Vaughan Williams found an important inspiration for this lifelong project. A copy of *Leaves of Grass* given to him by Bertrand Russell, his friend and contemporary at Trinity College, Cambridge, traveled with the composer through the 1890s, and opened new pathways for his imagination. In words he repeated later in life to his own students, Whitman taught him to “know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you”. In *A Sea Symphony*, we hear the results of this youthful collision between Vaughan Williams and Whitman—a “Big Bang” moment that produced a thrilling result.

Walt Whitman did not work in small, private gestures. Possibly the boldest of all the Transcendentalist writers, his extravagant, burgeoning verse took in the parade of America’s expansion, the excitement of its greatest city, and the tragedy of its Civil War. He depicted New York as a sea of humanity, with Grace Church at the corner of Tenth Street:

so adroitly placed that its tall, tapering spire shows down the very center of the busiest three miles of Broadway, like a ghostly lighthouse looming up over the porpoise-backs of the omnibuses, as they lift and dive in that unquiet sea, and over the tossing spray of ribbons and plumes that give back rainbows to the eyes of him that gazes on the living waves.

When Whitman looked at nature, he found the reflection of human emotion. And when he looked inside himself, he found the universe. For him, the soul was sovereign, the sea, a representation both of nature and humanity, and the sea-ship, a vessel for the soul.

Vaughan Williams needed Whitman’s self-assurance to embark on a work as ambitious as *A Sea Symphony*. In a laconic program note to the symphony’s first London performance, the composer described its development as follows:

The first sketches for this work (namely, parts of the Scherzo and slow movement) were made in 1903, and it was gradually worked out during the next seven years. It was first produced at the Leeds Festival in 1910, and has since been performed (in a slightly revised form) at Oxford, Cambridge and Bristol. There are two main musical themes which run through the four movements: First, the harmonic progression to which the opening words for the chorus are sung. Second, a melodic phrase first heard at the words ‘and on its limitless heaving breast, the ships’. The plan of the work is symphonic rather than narrative or dramatic, and this may be held to justify the frequent repetition of important words and phrases which occur in the poem. The words as well as the music are thus treated symphonically. It is also noticeable that the orchestra has an equal share with the chorus and soloists in carrying out the musical ideas.

The composer’s understatement belies the tremendous originality and difficulty of his task. Choral symphonies had been written

before, but mostly involved the chorus in a “special guest star” role, usually in the closing movement. Mahler’s *Symphony No. 8* (1907) was an exception, with a double quartet of soloists shouldering more of the burden. As Vaughan Williams implied, *A Sea Symphony* is not an oratorio either, although the chorus is in on the action from beginning to end. In writing the work, Vaughan Williams professed a debt to Edward Elgar, as can be heard especially in the opening of the fourth movement. French composers of the day, in particular Ravel and Debussy, whose symphonic poem *La Mer* (1903–1905) contains important parallels, also influenced the work’s musical syntax. The pentatonic scale (D–E–F#–A–B) that spins throughout the entire symphony is characteristic of Debussy. In its orchestration, the work bears the stamp of the composer’s 1908 study with Ravel. Vaughan Williams wrote that Ravel taught him “how to orchestrate in points of colour rather than in lines.” Charles Villiers Stanford’s use of the sea-shanty in *Songs of the Sea* (1904)—originally Vaughan Williams’s own working title for *A Sea Symphony*—was perhaps another useful source.

A Sea Symphony transcended its many influences and emerged fully in the composer’s own voice. In the first movement, Vaughan Williams and Whitman show us a sea surging with humanity, Man intertwined with Nature, chosen and leveled by the sea, and joined with the sea in life and in death. The baritone and soprano soloists play off the chorus, signaling important dramatic shifts in the poem and, ultimately, weaving in to the choral–orchestral texture as musical strands from the opening are gathered up towards a powerful conclusion. “On the Beach at Night, Alone,” is a nocturne for baritone soloist, chorus and orchestra, a reflection on Man’s relation-

ship to the cosmos. The altos of the chorus sing a cradle-song that evokes the earlier image of the sea as “husky nurse;” we glimpse a haunting scrap of melody on the text “at night, alone” that returns, more fully developed, in the final movement; a great choral outburst gives voice to the poet’s epiphany, followed by an extended orchestral postlude.

The Scherzo, “After the Sea–Ship,” is pure, sparkly fun, depicting “living waves” that follow a ship slicing through the ocean. Shimmering orchestration and virtuosic choral writing are perfectly suited to this exuberant poem. The cantata-length fourth movement bears Vaughan Williams’s own title, “The Explorers”. Here, composer and the poet ponder “the vast terraqueous globe, given, and giving all”. In their skillful hands, Creation both justifies, and is justified by, the sovereign soul, the “actual Me” who, having “stood here like a tree in the ground long enough,” is cut loose to explore beyond the frontier of human understanding.

No account of *A Sea Symphony* would be complete without an appreciation of the critical role of the choral singers who helped bring it about in the first place. As an “Englishman and a democrat,” and through decades of work with English festival choirs, including the Leeds Festival chorus who gave *A Sea Symphony* its premiere, Vaughan Williams grasped the potential of choral singing to build the bonds of community. He delighted in working with enthusiastic, arts-minded men and women “whose voices were [often] not equal to their zeal,” and from them he drew major life lessons as well as astonishing results. In the words of one of his singers, “he draws out of you what you know isn’t there.” By cultivating his close and affectionate bond with the musical citizenry—every last soprano, alto, tenor and

bass among them—he both ensured an audience and helped himself “keep the necessary proportion between the world of facts and the world of dreams,” between the erudition and metaphysical qualities of his masterpieces and the practical difficulties of their implementation.

Those who have sung in choruses will have experienced the sensation of becoming a part of something greater than themselves. In a program note for a 1951 performance of *A Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams wrote that “the philosophy of choral singing is comprised in the mathematical formula $2 + 2 = 40$.” Drawing on an analogy to sport, “a good footballer requires to sink himself in the whole, to coordinate carefully with his opposite number, to desire not personal glory but the success of the whole. So it is with a good choral singer. These qualities it is true refer more to the craftsman than the artist, but if craft without art is dead, art without craft is impotent. The expert [the virtuoso performer] is the foam on the top of the wave, but the force of the water must come from our own effort.”

The force of the wave derives from the audience as well as the chorus. Springing from its own community, a good chorus has a built-in affinity with its listeners that allows a live performance to “produce an atmosphere of living art in which alone the great leaders of music can survive. Flowers cannot grow on a barren soil.” Poet, composer, chorus, soloists, orchestra and audience are co-creators of this experience of living art. Vaughan Williams’s great song of Sea and Soul and Self calls out to all of us, as Whitman did to him, “a wide, untried domain, awaits, demands you!”

—John Maclay

TEXTS

**SYMPHONY NO. I, "A SEA SYMPHONY" (1910) Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1872–1958)**

All texts were selected by the composer from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass and are printed here unabridged, with italics used to indicate passages omitted by the composer. For movement four, only the relevant sections of "Passage to India" are reproduced.

I. A SONG FOR ALL SEAS, ALL SHIPS

Behold! The sea itself!

And on its limitless, heaving breast, the [thy] ships:

See! where their white sails, bellying in the wind, speckle the green and blue!

See! thy steamers coming and going, steaming in or out of port!

See! dusky and undulating, their long pennants of smoke!

— from "Song of the Exposition"

To-day 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.

Pick'd sparingly without noise by thee, old Ocean, chosen by thee,

Thou Sea that pickest and cullest the race, in Time, and unitest Nations!

Suckled by thee, old husky Nurse, embodying thee!

Indomitable, untamed as thee.

(Ever the heroes, on water or on land, by ones or twos appearing,

Ever the stock preserv'd, and never lost, though rare—enough for seed preserv'd.)

Flaunt out O sea, your separate flags of nations!

Flaunt out, visible as ever, the various 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 all intrepid sailors and mates,

And all that went down doing their duty;

Reminiscent of them—twined from all intrepid captains, young or old;

A pennant universal, subtly waving, all time, o'er all brave sailors,

All seas, all ships.

— "A Song for All Seas, All Ships" (entire)

2. ON THE BEACH AT NIGHT, ALONE

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 spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets, comets, asteroids,

All the substances of the same, and all that is spiritual upon the same,

All distances of place, however wide,

All distances of time—all inanimate forms,

All Souls—all living bodies, though they be ever so different, or in different worlds,

All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes—the fishes, the brutes,

All men and women—me also;

All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,

All identities that have existed or may exist, *on this globe, or any globe;*

All lives and deaths—all of the past, present, future,

This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd, and shall forever span them, and compactly hold *them*, and enclose them.

—"On the Beach at Night, Alone" (entire)

3. SCHERZO—THE WAVES

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 toward the track 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.

—“After the Sea-Ship” (entire)

4. THE EXPLORERS

* * *

O, vast Rondure, swimming in space!
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty!
Alternate light and day, and the teeming, spiritual darkness;
Unspeaking high processions of sun, and moon, and countless stars, above;
Below, the manifold grass and waters, *animals, mountains, trees*;
With inscrutable purpose—some hidden, prophetic intention;
Now, first, it seems, my thought begins to span thee.

Down from the gardens of Asia, descending, *radiating*,
Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
Wandering, yearning, *curious*—with restless explorations,
With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish—with never-happy hearts,
With that sad incessant refrain, “Wherefore unsatisfied Soul?” and
“Whither O mocking Life?”

Ah, who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?
Who speak the secret of impassive Earth?
Who bind it to us? What is this separate Nature so unnatural?

What is this earth to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb to answer ours; cold earth, the place of graves.)

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 cross'd, (*as they seem already cross'd,*)
After the great captains *and engineers* have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors—*after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,*
Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name;
The true Son of God shall come, singing his songs.

*Then, not your deeds only, O voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,
All these hearts, as of fretted children, shall be sooth'd,
All affection shall be fully responded to—the secret shall be told;
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up, and hook'd and link'd together;
The whole Earth—this cold, impassive, voiceless Earth, shall be completely justified;
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by the Son of God, the poet,
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,
He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose;)
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
The true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them.*

* * *

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.

*With laugh, and many a kiss,
(Let others deprecate—let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation;)
O soul, thou pleasest me—I thee.*

*Ah, more than any priest, O soul, we too believe in God;
But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.*

O soul, thou pleasest me—I thee,
Sailing these seas, or on the hills, or waking in the night,
Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time, and Space, and Death, like waters flowing,
Bear me, indeed, as through the 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!
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving!
Thou moral, spiritual fountain! affection's source! thou reservoir!
(O pensive soul of me! O thirst unsatisfied! waitest not there?
Waitest not haply for us, somewhere there, the Comrade perfect?)
Thou pulse! thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space!

How should I think—how breathe a single breath—how speak—if, out of myself,
I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

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, O 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;
—*What love, than thine and ours could wider amplify?*
What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours, O soul?
What dreams of the ideal? what plans of purity, perfection, strength?
What cheerful willingness, for others' sake, to give up all?
For others' sake to suffer all?

Reckoning ahead, O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
(The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,)
Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
As, fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

* * *

Passage to more than India!
O secret of the earth and sky!
Of you, O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!
Of you, O woods and fields! Of you, strong mountains of my land!
Of you, O prairies! Of you, gray rocks!
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!
O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon, and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!
Passage to you!

Passage—immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!
Away, O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?
Have we not grovell'd here long enough, eating and drinking like mere brutes?
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long enough?

Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!
Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;
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!

—“Passage to India” (sections 6, 11 and 13)