

Toward the Unknown Region

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958)

After the death of Purcell in 1695, English music went into a long period of decline that lasted until the late 19th century. Eventually the tireless efforts of Charles Stanford, Hubert Parry and others brought about the long-awaited English musical renaissance, which reached its full flowering with the emergence of Edward Elgar. He was followed by a whole new generation of talented composers, the leading figure of which was Ralph Vaughan Williams, who for half a century remained one of the most influential figures in English music. Like Elgar, he too was a late developer, reaching his mid-thirties before attracting serious attention as a composer.

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the work of the American poet Walt Whitman seemed to many to capture the essence of the new age, portraying an optimistic vision of a world inspired by human and scientific endeavour and the spirit of adventure. As well as Vaughan Williams, several other British composers - notably Holst and Delius - turned to Whitman's groundbreaking collection, *Leaves of Grass*, for inspiration. The radical, humanistic philosophy of Whitman's verse held a particular appeal for Vaughan Williams. He had already produced some songs to Whitman texts when in 1903 he began to think about writing something on an altogether larger scale. One of these projects was to become the *Sea Symphony*, the great choral and orchestral work which, more than any other, put Vaughan Williams firmly on the musical map when it was first performed in 1909.

Two years earlier a much shorter piece to a Whitman text, *Towards the Unknown Region*, was premièred. At its first performance in Leeds in 1907 it made an immediate impression on the public and the critics, and identified Vaughan Williams as a new and important voice in English music. The work's enduring success stems from its remarkable marriage of music and text, the unmistakable quality of Vaughan Williams' inspired music perfectly encapsulating Whitman's noble, humanistic aspirations.

programme notes by John Bawden

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