

## **An audience with Ralph Vaughan Williams**

It was the sulky attitude of Monsieur Jaccottet that convinced me. “Concentrate on revision: French O level exams are next week: music can wait.” Even though I wasn’t really interested in music, that comment meant that my hand was the first in our classroom to be raised to ensure my presence at the talk at my Essex school by Dr Vaughan Williams in 1955. French revision could definitely wait.

He was 83 years of age, older than anybody I’d met before. He had an impressive physical presence: a leonine head, a handsome face, slightly tousled white hair. It did seem a little bizarre that such a famous composer should be wearing a hearing-aid. There were 25 or 30 of us in the School Hall, mostly in our mid to late teens. Unusually for an older person, he immediately talked to us as adults. After a brief introduction he began his talk. I had expected that he would speak about symphonies and concertos. Not a bit of it. He had been provided with a Dansette-type record player. This caused a difficulty as the Hall had only one electrical socket – a long way from Dr Vaughan Williams. Eventually it was plugged in and we listened to what were told was an old Essex folk song. What I remember is a series of old men with scratchy voices, singing some unintelligible words. They may as well have been recorded on the moon. Only many years later did I read that Dr Vaughan Williams had been the saviour and preserver of a whole canon of English folk songs. Nevertheless, the chief benefit, that of missing French revision, had been achieved.

In 1997 I spent some birthday money on a series of concert tickets at the Birmingham Symphony Hall with its wonderful acoustics. The first item on the bill was Vaughan Williams’ London Symphony. I found this work to be quite intriguing and can still remember the anticipation and thrill of the opening movement which gave me the sense of a mighty city stirring and awakening. Later, I could hear the jaunty, cheerful footsteps of those going about their daily business.

In 2012 I joined Hastings & Rother U3A and attended the AGM. In the interlude before tea a small ensemble of members began to play the unmistakeable melody of Vaughan Williams’ ‘Linden Lea’. I was quite unprepared for the rush of emotion which suddenly overtook me. Later that day, I found the words and listened to a YouTube recording of a mixed voice choir from an Oxford College singing the beautiful harmonies with that special spirit of young people on the brink of adulthood and serious life.

More recently I listened to a TV documentary programme about Ralph Vaughan Williams (and his contemporary and friend Gustav Holst). The presenters drew attention to his work in preserving the English folk song, but then moved on to talk about his study of the English composer Thomas Tallis. Tallis had lived – and survived – through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I. Why was that so difficult? It seems that religious considerations seriously affected the work of musicians in that era. There was indeed a ‘Catholic’ and a ‘Protestant’ style of composition. As the nation switched religions in successive monarchies, being in the wrong place when the music stopped could be fatal – quite literally – for a composer

who was out of step. Evidently, Tallis was adept enough to keep his head on his shoulders. Vaughan Williams had studied Tallis' work extensively and this resulted in 'Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis'. Once again, I found a recording on YouTube, and I play this haunting piece often for its calm serenity.

And my French O level? A pass with 62%. So, thank you for that M. Jaccottet, but also for introducing me to a favourite composer.

Robert Hadland

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If you are interested, the pieces mentioned above are available on YouTube:

- 'The London Symphony' performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor, Sir Roger Norrington (45 minutes).
- 'Linden Lea' performed by The Choir of Somerville College Oxford (3 minutes). The lyrics are below.
- 'Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis', performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conductor Sir Andrew Davis (17 minutes). This recording was made in Gloucester Cathedral, where Vaughan Williams himself conducted the first performance in 1910.

**'Linden Lea' - A Dorset Song Lyrics – later set to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams**

Within the woodlands, flow'ry gladed,  
By the oak trees' mossy moot,  
The shining grass blades, timber-shaded,  
Now do quiver underfoot;  
And birds do whistle overhead,  
An water's bubbling in its bed;  
And there, for me, the apple tree  
Do lean down low in Linden Lea.

When leaves, that lately were a-springing,  
Now do fade with the copse,  
And painted birds do hush their singing,  
Up upon the timber tops;  
And brown-leaved fruit's a-turning red,  
In cloudless sunshine overhead,  
With fruit for me, the apple tree  
Do lean down low in Linden Lea.

Let other folk make money faster  
In the air of dark-room'd towns;  
I don't dread a peevish master,  
Though no man may heed my frowns.  
I be free to go abroad,  
Or take again my homeward road  
To where, for me, the apple tree  
Do lean down low in Linden Lea

William Barnes (1801-86)