

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 11TH MARCH 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

When Vaughan Williams met Shakespeare

I think **Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958)** has the accolade of being the composer to get the most mentions in these newsletters! I make no apology for this, or for bringing his music to your attention again this week! I'm going secular for a change, and focusing on some of his music which uses the words of **William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)**. I'm going slightly off track this week as the first piece isn't technically written for a choir, so it isn't choral, but it could be... and is often sung by choirs with four soloists.



Before we get to our first piece of music, a little history of the English conductor **Sir Henry Wood (1869 - 1944)**, best known for his association with London's annual series of promenade concerts, known as the Proms. Indeed, it has been said that Henry Wood made the Proms and the Proms made Henry Wood! Wood studied at the Royal Academy of Music and at first seems to have intended a career as a composer, but his conducting abilities were to win out, particularly from 1895 when still only 26, he assumed the conductorship of a new series of Promenade Concerts to be given at the recently built Queen's Hall in Langham Place. Nobody would have guessed that the series would survive two world wars and (hopefully) a pandemic! That it did was testament to Henry Wood's devotion and sheer hard work over a 50-year period. He conducted virtually every Prom himself between 1895 and 1943. Though very much a national figure, Wood also acquired an international reputation. He actually turned down the conductorships of the Boston Symphony and the New York Philharmonic orchestras.



In 1938, Henry Wood celebrated his golden jubilee as a conductor. A special commemorative concert was given on 5th October 1938 (outside the Prom season) which included a new work dedicated to Wood "*in grateful recognition of his services to music*" by Vaughan Williams, setting lines from "The Merchant of Venice" (Act 5, scene 1) praising the power and beauty of music. The Serenade to Music was introduced to the Proms by Wood in 1941 and has been repeated often. This piece can be best described as a *luminously evocative nocturne*. The original sixteen soloists (four each of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses) comprised a roll-call of the most prominent British singers of the time.

Here are the names of the "original sixteen" (not to be confused with The Sixteen conducted by Harry Christophers, or the "Winchester Sixteen" for that matter!) See how many you recognise!

Sopranos	Isobel Baillie, Stiles Allen, Elsie Suddaby, Eva Turner
Altos	Astra Desmond, Mary Jared, Mary Balfour, Muriel Brunskill
Tenors	Walter Widdop, Frank Titterton, Heddle Nash, Parry Jones
Basses	Harold Williams, Roy Henderson, Robert Easton, Norman Allin



YouTube has really come up trumps for recordings this week! I highly recommend this 1969 recording conducted by **Sir Adrian Boult (1889 - 1983)**. Helpfully, this version is with the score so you can see the dots. Notice the initials next to the voice parts, indicating which singer sung which notes in the original performance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDYi4JgQA2I>

My introduction to this piece was through this 1996 recording conducted by **Sir Roger Norrington (b.1934)** with soloists that might be more familiar to you (listed below):



Sopranos	Dame Felicity Lott, Lisa Milne, Rosa Mannion, Yvonne Kenny
Altos	Ann Murray, Diana Montague, Della Jones, Catherine Wyn-Rogers
Tenors	Anthony Rolfe Johnson, John Mark Ainsley, Toby Spence, Tim Robinson
Basses	Stephen Roberts, Christopher Maltman, Michael George, Robert Lloyd

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bm_w298Vo1Y

Finally, if you want to hear the "original sixteen" in action, recorded ten days after the premiere, you can! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq8sczVU5o8> and amazingly, here they are in rehearsal! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAOIvXBiVik>



At the "Henry Wood Commemoration concert" in 1938, **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 - 1943)** played in the first half of the concert as soloist in his Second Piano Concerto. When he heard the Serenade from his place in the audience, he was so overcome by the beauty of the music that he wept. I'm not sure if I would go quite that far, but ***it does make it into my top 5 favourite choral works!***

If I haven't managed to persuade you to listen to it, here's what my friend and colleague Sachin Gunga (Sub-Organist at Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral) has to say about it: *"If I had to choose one [choral piece to take to a desert island], it's a piece which combines beautiful poetry, brilliant colourful orchestrations, luscious choral writing and music that ranges from tranquil to exuberant, from sombre to sparkling: Vaughan Williams' "Serenade to Music". I also happen to know that the accompaniment works well for organ and solo violin, two instruments that have personal significance to me (the violin was originally my first instrument)".*



For some more Vaughan Williams / Shakespeare collaborations(!), you might like to listen to the Three Shakespeare Songs composed for unaccompanied choir as test pieces for the 1951 National Competition Festival of the British Federation of Music. They are firm favourites especially with chamber choirs. Listen out for the tolling bells in [Full fathom five](#), the parallel chords which are classic Vaughan Williams and the strange chord... the ultimate intonation test of [The cloud capp'd towers](#) ... and the tongue twisters in [Over hill, over dale](#), which isn't a million miles away from the choral-scherzo (third movement) of Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony.

That's all for this week folks, I hope you're still enjoying (reading) the newsletters.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham