

Introduction

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To explore Vaughan Williams in context is a peculiarly appropriate project for a figure who famously declared: ‘The composer must not shut himself up and think about art, he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community’.¹ Indeed, this quotation will be encountered frequently throughout this book. Across a career that stretched from the 1890s to the late 1950s, Vaughan Williams produced a huge and varied body of music; he also worked to promote and more deeply embed music within social and cultural life in England and Britain more broadly, achieving this through his compositions for amateur as well as professional musicians, and through his related work as a folk-song collector and arranger, hymn editor, writer, lecturer, radio broadcaster, administrator, conductor, and musical-, educational-, and social activist. By the interwar years Vaughan Williams was regarded as the most important English composer of his time, and, by the end of the Second World War, he had become a national if not an international celebrity.

Yet, in spite of Vaughan Williams’s prominence within twentieth-century music, culture, and society, his life and work were neglected by scholars in the decades after his death in 1958.² Prompted in part by Alain Frogley’s revisionist *Vaughan Williams Studies*, a revival of scholarly interest gathered force from the mid-1990s onward, and continues to flourish today. Especially influential has been Frogley’s proposition that Vaughan Williams’s posthumous scholarly neglect owed largely to his simplified reputation as a nationalist. In this reading, a disproportionate focus upon the ‘English’ aspects of his work and outlook, especially during the last years of his life, led to a backlash in the years surrounding his death. In the context of a mid-century aesthetics that privileged certain kinds of avant-garde

¹ ‘Who Wants the English Composer?’ (1912), in *VWOM*, 39–42 (42).

² For an overview see Alain Frogley and Aidan J. Thomson, ‘Introduction’, in *CCVW*, 1–6.

musical processes and internationalist agendas, Vaughan Williams's national focus was broadly viewed as outmoded and unpalatable.³

In the wake of Frogley's study there emerged a number of edited volumes, scholarly articles, monographs, and master's and doctoral dissertations, followed more recently by new biographies and musical editions, publications of rediscovered works, world premiere recordings, and radio and television documentaries, as well as a huge number of press articles, blogs, and other materials. Collectively, such work has enabled a wider appreciation of Vaughan Williams in the public domain, as well as a deeper scholarly understanding of the stylistic range of his music, and of the complexities of his life, work, and reception.⁴

If some of this new research demonstrates that Vaughan Williams's reputation remains contested, this is unsurprising. He was a complex figure whose musical activities and career can appear contradictory, especially as considered in their contemporaneous contexts. The progressive and forward-looking nature of Vaughan Williams's socialist views, for instance, sits awkwardly with his connections to the social and intellectual elite and the paternalistic assumptions such standing encouraged. His preoccupations with the historical past and with spiritual themes and texts may appear to contrast incongruously with the twentieth century's heightened modernity and secularization. Finally, his ideas about music as autonomous may seem in tension with his embrace of 'social', everyday musical materials and practices (such as folk song), and with his insistence upon promoting a democratic musical culture in which classical music should be accessible and intelligible to all.

Yet, by detailing, examining, and contextualizing such apparent contradictions, scholars have in recent years unsettled portraits of Vaughan Williams as an aesthetic and political conservative, and continue to challenge his image as an escapist, reactionary figure divorced from the social, political, and cultural realities of his time. Indeed, Vaughan Williams is today increasingly regarded as a distinctly twentieth-century figure. And, if

³ Alain Frogley, 'Preface' and 'Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in *VWS*, xi–xvii, and 1–22. The contexts, politics, agents, and institutions involved in the complex shaping of Vaughan Williams's image at the mid-century invite continued discussion; see, for example, Kirstie Asmussen, 'Biographical Revisionism: Hubert Foss's Conflicting Portrayals of Vaughan Williams', *Journal of Musicological Research* 38/3–4 (2019), 285–97.

⁴ A list of key Vaughan Williams literature is provided in the Further Reading section of this book. For a bibliography of recent scholarly work, see David Manning et al. (eds.), 'Ralph Vaughan Williams: An Annotated Bibliography, 1996 to the Present (2022)', The Ralph Vaughan Williams Society (2022, website), <https://rvwsociety.com/bibliography/> (accessed 7 June 2023).

some revisionist work has argued for Vaughan Williams's participation in the musical world around him by highlighting his connections with continental modernisms, we are also reminded that while Vaughan Williams's reception has been subject to distortion, he himself helped to define the terms on which his work was received and understood:

Vaughan Williams was not the narrow nationalist claimed by advocates and detractors alike, but neither was he the rootless internationalist valorized by twentieth-century theories of modernist art. This is a man who entitled his most important book of essays *National Music* [. . .] Even allowing for the possibility that popular acclaim prompted him to exaggerate his English influences and downplay his continental ones, his lifelong devotion to England's musical heritage as composer, conductor and teacher cannot be disputed.⁵

A more nuanced understanding of Vaughan Williams's music and career has been enabled by a contextualization of his cultural nationalism, as well as by new understandings of the relationship of twentieth-century British music and musical culture to aesthetic modernisms and modernity.⁶ Concurrently, scholars of twentieth-century British literature, culture, and society have demonstrated how preoccupations with landscape and ruralism, community, and an array of engagements with the historical past might be understood less as evasions of than responses to modernity: responses that often renewed or renegotiated connections with, rather than severing ties from, those pasts.⁷ Many of the authors here are influenced by these scholarly perspectives, initiating and encouraging new interdisciplinary dialogues. Our aim for the book as a whole is less to make a case for Vaughan Williams's progressivism or to shore up his modernist credentials, and more to promote a capacious understanding that allows and examines

⁵ Julian Onderdonk, 'The Composer and Society: Family, Politics, Nation', in CCVW, 9–28 (10).

⁶ See, for example, Sarah Collins, 'Nationalisms, Modernisms and Masculinities: Strategies of Displacement in Vaughan Williams's Reading of Walt Whitman', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 14 (2017), 65–91; and Daniel M. Grimley, 'Landscape and Distance: Vaughan Williams, Modernism and the Symphonic Pastoral', in Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism, 1895–1960* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 147–74. On British music and musical culture more broadly, see, for example, Heather Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Past: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷ See, for example, Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton, and Paul Readman (eds.), *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London: UCL Press, 2020); Paul Readman, *Storied Ground: Landscape and the Shaping of English National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010); and Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

Vaughan Williams's embrace of a striking multiplicity of musical styles, artistic practices, and cultural traditions. In this, we seek to avoid perpetuating reductive images, instead viewing the composer's life, work, and reception through the lens of a twentieth-century world that itself was often characterized by rapid change and refigured traditions.

To this end, authors map historical and cultural contexts as starting points from which to approach anew key aspects of Vaughan Williams's work and career. The volume draws together an interdisciplinary team of scholars active variously in the study of British music, history, visual art, dance, literature, and culture. Drawing upon recent scholarly work within and beyond musicology, authors also mine fresh research materials pertaining specifically to Vaughan Williams, some made available or more accessible only relatively recently, and especially since the death in 2007 of the composer's authorized biographer and second wife, the poet Ursula Wood. The fiftieth anniversary of Vaughan Williams's death in 2008 saw the publication of new volumes of his writings and letters, the latter leading to the expansive Vaughan Williams Letters database, where the composer's extant correspondence – notoriously illegible and scattered among various sources – has been gathered and transcribed for free consultation online.⁸ The present volume is one of the first to begin to mine these and other materials. It is our aim not simply to assimilate recent scholarly perspectives, but to reveal important new topics and findings while pointing to directions for future research.

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Chapters in the book's first Part, 'Biography, People, Places', examine a number of significant and sometimes overlooked aspects of Vaughan Williams's life and work, both in the under-documented early years of his career, and in the decades thereafter. Authors explore topics including the lifelong centrality of London and urban experience for Vaughan Williams's music and outlook; of Cambridge and the influential network of colleagues and intellectual ideas he encountered there as an undergraduate and in the years before the First World War, and that helped to sustain aspects of his career for many years to follow; and the friends, students, and correspondents with whom he engaged across his long career. In the chapters on his personality and relationships, authors bring to the fore

⁸ VWOM, and Hugh Cobbe (ed.), *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895–1958* (Oxford University Press, 2008). The online letters are available on the Vaughan Williams Foundation website, <https://vaughanwilliamsfoundation.org/discover/letters/> (accessed 1 June 2023).

some of the contradictory features of Vaughan Williams's life and music that we have highlighted in this Introduction.

Part II, 'Inspiration and Expression', examines the sources of Vaughan Williams's creativity, the contexts for his conceptions of musical expression, and the musical, intellectual, social, and political ideas that shaped his work and outlook. A chapter on his eclectic early musical development – which included a confluence of European and English influences and training – is followed by a detailed exploration of his relationship with nineteenth-century romanticism, another legacy of a European orientation. Other chapters explore more specifically English contexts, including performance traditions of his music, and the pivotal role of amateur musicians and music-making within his compositional strategies and overall musical thought. The section concludes with an examination and contextualization of the relationship between Vaughan Williams's music and ideas about landscape and nature, categories central to his work and imagination.

Part III, 'Culture and Society', centres around politics – broadly conceived – by interrogating the simplistic ways in which Vaughan Williams's engagement with nineteenth- and twentieth-century English life has often been seen. Authors examine and contextualize his family background, political beliefs (including his connections to Christian socialism), nationalist writings, commitment to early English music and history, and interest in landscape and rural themes – so often the basis for perceptions of his conservatism – to propose more nuanced, balanced readings. Included here are explorations of Vaughan Williams's contributions to the twentieth-century English Folk Revival, historical pageantry, and the land-preservation movements, as well as an account of his activities during the two world wars. These chapters frequently demonstrate Vaughan Williams's acute responsiveness to the society in which he lived and worked.

Engagement with contemporary developments is also a theme of Part IV, 'Arts'. In chapters on Vaughan Williams's interactions with English literary culture, visual art, theatre, dance, and film, authors demonstrate how the composer was influenced by, contributed to, and was active in helping to shape some of the major artistic and cultural developments of his day. Several of these forms and practices – many of which have hitherto received little or no attention – reached or involved large facets of the population (as did other projects and initiatives examined elsewhere in this book). Demonstrating his commitment to an array of artistic media, movements, and technologies, the chapters in this section provide further

correctives to the image of the composer as somehow out of step with, or disengaged from, the twentieth-century world around him.

In Part V, 'Institutions', Vaughan Williams's engagement with modernizing developments – and with attendant ideas about nationality and modernity, 'high' and 'low' culture, and associated communities of production and consumption – becomes the focus of many chapters. Authors explore Vaughan Williams's interactions with a number of important institutions, all of which were deeply embedded within and contributed to intertwined musical, cultural, social, and political debates. Chapters illuminate the economic conditions in which British composers worked, and the network of concerts, festivals, repertoire programming, and technologies that together functioned to shape and promote some of Vaughan Williams's music and musical ideals, as well as building and framing his prominent role within contemporaneous British life. Especially important here were the Royal College of Music and Oxford University Press, as well as the Arts Council of Great Britain and, perhaps most important of all, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

By the end of the Second World War Vaughan Williams had become something of an institution himself, an image made possible through his contacts with these actual institutions (here we might add the documentary film industry and the British Council). The crisis of war had brought about the conflation of 'community' with 'nation' – long-standing preoccupations of the composer's writings, music, and musical project – and, perhaps inevitably, Vaughan Williams was catapulted into the centre of a series of cultural negotiations. His production of both stylistically accessible and more challenging works – a feature of his music throughout his career, as different chapters of the book variously show – provided the BBC with a means of delivering its mandate to inform, educate, and entertain, finding in Vaughan Williams's music a model through which to strategically negotiate its cultural ideals. Here, paternalism mingled equally with democratic idealism, and by examining mutually defining relationship, including the ways Vaughan Williams operated within it, the final chapters of Part V demonstrate how the composer's work became entangled with the formation of cultural hierarchies in mid-century Britain.⁹ This led, in turn, to the consolidation of his prominence and influence, and had far-reaching consequences for the creation and reception of his music.

⁹ Onderdonk, 'The Composer and Society', 20–1. For the interweaving of educational, technological, and institutional contexts in the construction of such hierarchies generally, see Kate Guthrie, *The Art of Appreciation: Music and Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

Though questions of reception preoccupy authors at various points in the book, Part VI tackles this topic head-on. A chapter on early recordings of Vaughan Williams's music demonstrates how the production, distribution, and marketing processes of the recording industry inflected a reception that promoted now-familiar associations with folk song, ruralism, and nationalism, and occasionally also with notions of 'modern music'. Elsewhere, chapters advance understandings of Vaughan Williams's reception in North America and continental Europe, the latter a virtually untouched field. The variety of ways in which listeners and critics responded abroad to Vaughan Williams's music points to the stylistic multiplicity of his work, too often obscured by his stereotyped reputation as a reactionary nationalist.

For in spite of the advances of recent years, it is still possible to encounter simplistic and distortive accounts of Vaughan Williams. For some, he remains a conservative, insular nationalist; for others, he is 'a modernist master of uncompromising originality', whose European connections are apparently unassailable.¹⁰ The persistently simplified nature of his reception suggests that the more balanced perspectives increasingly advanced by scholars are yet to find a firm footing within a wider public sphere. In some ways, ideological tensions surrounding Vaughan Williams's reception seem to have proliferated and intensified, not least since the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. At the same time, however, a number not just of scholars but of journalists, broadcasters, performers, and concert programmers are increasingly advancing portraits of a many-sided Vaughan Williams, acknowledging and challenging continued tendencies towards stereotyping, while drawing attention to the wider range, multiplicity, and complexity of his output than one-dimensional images allow.¹¹

While we are unable to take account of the full range of ongoing coverage during Vaughan Williams's 150th anniversary year, to say nothing

¹⁰ See Matthew Gilley, 'Vaughan Williams' Vision of Englishness Is Not the One We Need', *The New Statesman*, 15 July 2022, www.newstatesman.com/culture/music/2022/07/vaughan-williams-bbc-proms-2022-150-anniversary (accessed 31 October 2022); and Richard Bratby, 'Ralph Vaughan Williams: Modernist Master', *The Spectator*, 5 February 2022, www.spectator.co.uk/article/ralph-vaughan-williams-modernist-master (accessed 31 October 2022).

¹¹ See, for example, Andrew Manze, "'Like Seeing Stonehenge for the First Time': The Visionary Genius of Vaughan Williams", *The Guardian*, 26 July 2022, www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jul/26/ralph-vaughan-williams-visionary-genius-lark-ascending (accessed 31 October 2022). Setting aside the stringent claims made for Vaughan Williams's modernism and 'uncompromising originality', Bratby also advances a number of balanced images of the composer in 'Ralph Vaughan Williams: Modernist Master'.

of its implications for his reception and legacy in the longer term, what can be noted is that the anniversary has brought greater interest in, and attention to, his life and work than at any other time since his death. As his image remains subject to continued revision, we hope that one of the benefits of this book will be the provision of fuller and more detailed historical and cultural perspectives through which to contextualize recent and future debates. By seeking a greater understanding of Vaughan Williams's life, work, and reception within their own contexts, we provide richer perspectives for ours, too, and for our decisions about how to view, frame, and engage with that life, music, and legacy in the present and into the future.