

“Music for the Church; Music for the Theatre; Music for the Soul.

Zane Dalal offers a fascinating commentary on works he will conduct –
26th February, 2014, Tata Theatre, NCPA, Mumbai.

The Editors of ON STAGE have once more asked me to share my thoughts on the forthcoming repertoire at the Symphony Orchestra of India. In particular they have asked me to encapsulate the concert of the 26th February at the Tata Theatre, which I will have the great pleasure of conducting. As our readers may know, it is always a pleasurable task for me, not only to write on music, but to write in support of our mission here at the NCPA and in particular the Symphony Orchestra of India that embarks on its sixteenth season of music making.

Just a quick ‘aside’ that seems as crucial as it was in the beginning. The Symphony Orchestra of India does not exist by chance, nor does it exist without considerable ‘heavy lifting’ and compared with almost all our global counterpart organizations, seems to exist despite the odds stacked against it. The climate for western classical music in India though showing incredible promise and uncharted potential is still identified with a little discomfort. There are many reasons one could attribute to this discomfort – some real, some political, some fictional, and some that are just tedious and unimaginative. But none of them matter as much as the support necessary to continue a new vision for a new institution in a new age. Compared with legacy orchestras the SOI is a brand new baby, and requires similar care. Your continued support of our orchestra is so very much appreciated. Do review this magazine for ways in which you can be a part of our communal strength.

Now to the music. The prospect of conducting Vaughan-Williams (VW) in Mumbai brings me full circle in some personal ways that I hope our readers will enjoy. It’s not just the music, which everyone rightly recognizes as extraordinary. Not only is it characteristically well crafted, but when it is not utterly spiritual and sublime, it is more often than not utterly gorgeous. This is particularly true of The Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis. Tallis had set to music the parts of a new Psalter, including the words of Psalm 2 – Verses 1 and 2. It was in Phrygian mode which is both elegant and evocative lending a cleanliness of spirit to Archbishop Parker’s new age Psalter. Matthew Parker was a founding father of Henry VIII’s protestant reform, along with Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley. He was also Anne Boleyn’s favourite churchman, and retained the favour of her daughter Elizabeth the new queen who appointed him archbishop in 1559. The Psalter was to provide for the uplifting virtues of the new Protestant faith in the new Elizabethan age. There had been so much bloodletting prior to Elizabeth’s accession, in the reign of her sister Mary, that Parker could not initially find four other churchmen to consecrate him to his new position. Tallis’ music and the language of the Parker Psalter are the beginnings of the great tradition that lead to the linguistic treasure of the King James Bible and the rich traditions of Anglican Church Music.

*Why fum'th in fight the Gentiles spite, in fury raging stout?
Why tak'th in hand the people fond, vain things to bring about?
The Kings arise, the Lords devise, in counsels met thereto,
against the Lord with false accord, against His Christ they go.
Psalm 2 – Verse 1 and 2*

Vaughan-Williams uses Tallis’ melody and four part harmony as a starting point for a string fantasia that is as reverent as its origin and thoroughly compelling in or out of an Anglican

church. The profound impact of a discovered love of folk melody follows VW's compositions in a permanent fashion. *In the fen country* and *Norfolk Rhapsodies* are testament to this flavour in his music. From around about the same time in 1904 VW began his great work on the English Hymnal which brought him into conscious proximity with a wealth of church tradition. This too, is never absent from his composition. By the time he wrote the Fantasia on the Tallis Theme, he had inextricably linked the two together. The Three Choirs Festival held in Gloucester that year premiered the Fantasia with VW conducting. There is such profundity and yet simplicity in this piece and it had an extraordinary effect as it reverberated in Gloucester cathedral. Other commissions were to follow, including the *Five Mystical Songs* written for Worcester on the strength of the Tallis Fantasia's success.

VW served in the Great War in the horrifying trenches of Northern France. Just as the experience had completely changed Elgar and Ravel his contemporaries, there must surely be a difference between the composer of the 1930's and the composer of 1910. The last prewar innocence is embodied in *The Lark Ascending* – a glorious work for violin. Paradoxically, the Tallis Fantasia sounds like a premonition of the weight and pressure of agony, whereas the *Greensleeves* Fantasia holds no mood to tie it with either the Great War or of the horrors of the Second War that broke out five years later.

Here's the personal part. Some of you may know that I have strong ties to Anglican Church Music having presided as Organ Scholar and Choirmaster at Oriel College, Oxford. One doesn't accidentally become an 'Oxbridge' organ scholar. I had attended Charterhouse and practiced at my skills as a church musician because the atmosphere allowed me to do so. It seemed perfectly natural when I was appointed a School Monitor, Head of the Choir and Head of Robinites, my old school house. By great shared fate, Ralph Vaughan-Williams was also at Charterhouse, also a School Monitor, Head of the Choir and Head of Robinites. I'm always aware of this most unlikely lineage when I take up his work. He, of course, went on to Cambridge as a Music Scholar. In 1982 I met the composer's second wife Ursula Vaughan-Williams who was 71. Her visits to the school were frequent and made us all realize that we were part of a greater whole, which included Vaughan-Williams, Herbert Howells – whose 90th birthday card I remember signing – Balfour Gardiner Basil Harwood and a great many more.

The remaining works on the evening of the 26th, are by Haydn and Mozart. Haydn is a composer generally categorized in the 'Classical' era, because it is convenient to have a comparison point that links his music to that of his exact contemporaries Mozart and Beethoven. However, Haydn gets short shrift in the dinner party conversations that compare him to Mozart and Beethoven and don't go any further. Similarly, the old Victorian penchant for comparing Bach to Handel is equally unqualified unless one is prepared to go deeper. Haydn was a genius in his own way. There was a refined palette from which Mozart derives his style, and a dramatic force coupled with 'whimsy' from which Beethoven derives his. Hadyn lived long for his time. His life 1733 to 1806 completely encompassed Mozart's life and was long enough to connect the Baroque period to Early Romanticism. We must therefore concede that there would be different styles and periods in his output. His symphonies as they are numbered can chart this style quite clearly. His early period is obvious. The symphonies

numbered in the 40's represent a concurrence with the great German expressionism of ' Sturm und Drang', forceful experimentation and remoter keys. There is a rebalance which then delivers a marvelous period marked by symphonies from No. 68 to No. 92 of which No. 88 is a part. There is great craftsmanship, perhaps as great as Mozart. There is also a necessary relaxation in style since Haydn has nothing more to prove, already fêted in high society and revered by musicians around him. Then there is the real Haydn, a mischievous prankster with a glint in his eye that reminds us all to be human. Symphony No. 88 is the embodiment of this style, and more personally for me, was the first symphony I ever conducted in concert. The year, quite by chance happened to be 1988.

Readers will need little reminder that Mozart was at the top of his game as he wrote his 38th symphony, named for the city of 'Prague'. One can hear it in every note. It is worth examining why this was so. We are continually aware that Mozart's music represents a sort of unworldly perfection. Even the earliest compositions show true merit. So it is hard to pinpoint one or other piece, or moment in Mozart's all too short life that might represent an apotheosis. For Beethoven, the writing of the Eroica represented the connection between his many different strengths, all coming together for the first time. His ability to create a melodic idea from the smallest cellular construct and then transform it into building blocks of a scale much larger or grander than had been seen before. All the while, there is a technique driven virtuosity in the writing, a full romanticism in the moments of pathos and a gargantuan vision that forces its realisation at every performance. All that is present in the Eroica, his great third symphony, his historical 'eureka'. For Mozart it is the 38th symphony.

His style had become masterful. He had decided that symphonic works could be judged on their own musical merit, and no longer needed a dance. The minuet is gone, replaced by a completely perfect middle movement of such sonority, depth, size and structure that one might believe that the minuet or scherzo never existed. The first, second and final movements are all in a spectacular A.B.A form, standing like Greek temples. And then comes the fun. Mozart was also the consummate master of operatic form. There is nothing he didn't know about the voice, and nothing he didn't know about how to set an orchestra to accompany it. Also around this time, his legendary relationship with his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte was to deliver three gems, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. All three share in the audacious style of da Ponte's text mirrored in near perfect music. Figaro was a hit in Vienna, but when it came to Prague, it was a box office smash as had never been seen before. The city was abuzz with the tunes, which were completely popularized in taverns and on the streets. The success of Figaro led to the writing and show stopping performances of *Don Giovanni* and gave Mozart a much needed financial boost. The extraordinary Symphony No. 38 is a dedication of thankfulness to the people of Prague for their glorious support of his work. The first movement has a grandeur that evokes the opening of *Don Giovanni* the germination of for which had already begun. As if that wasn't enough, he quotes in the finale of the symphony from the already beloved Figaro in a way so recognizable and playful that the audience must have gone wild.