

Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis

The music of Vaughan-Williams is quite rightly recognized 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. Sometimes certain composers are associated with their native land to such an extent that you can see the landscape and taste the salt of the earth when you listen to their music. 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 English 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 Anglican Church tradition. This too, is never absent from his composition. Vaughan-Williams, perhaps even more so than Elgar proves to be quintessentially English, as much as Copland embodies *Americana*. By the time he wrote the *Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis*, he had inextricably linked the two together. 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 famous Three Choirs Festival alternates between the great cathedrals of Gloucester, Worcester and Hereford. 1910 saw the premier of the Fantasia with VW conducting at Gloucester. Other commissions were to follow on the strength of its success, including the *Five Mystical Songs* written for Worcester. There is such profundity and yet simplicity in this piece and it has an extraordinary effect if it is played as VW intended, in a reverberating cathedral acoustic and the ability to place its divided players antiphonally.