THE SYMPHONIES OF

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

SYMPHONY No. 8
IN D MINOR

PARTITA FOR
DOUBLE STRING ORCHESTRA

SIR ADRIAN BOULT
conducting
THE LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

SYMPHONY No. 8 IN D MINOR

SIDE No. 1

First Movement: Fantasia (Variazioni senza Tema)
Second Movement: Scherzo alla marcia (Per strumenti a fiato)
Third Movement: Cavatina (Per strumenti ad arco)
(Solo violin: Harold Parfitt)

SIDE No. 2

Fourth Movement: Toccata

PARTITA FOR DOUBLE STRING ORCHESTRA

First Movement: Prelude (Andante tranquillo)
Second Movement: Scherzo ostinato (Presto)
Third Movement: Intermezzo (Homage to Henry Hall)
Fourth Movement: Fantasia (Allegro)

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SYMPHONY No. 8 IN D MINOR

Vaughan Williams’s Eighth Symphony is the only one of the series in which there is no discernible programme as the ultimate source of inspiration. Written in 1955, in the composer’s eighty-fourth year, its structure and lay-out are determined by a youthful interest in the orchestra as a box of tricks. The parallel with the late Bartok of the Concerto for Orchestra, as elsewhere with the early Bartok of the folksong movement, will not escape notice. The firm attribution of the number eight is an indication that A Sea Symphony, which is a cantata, and the Sinfonia Antartica, which is frankly programmatic in the manner of a tone-poem, are to be accepted into the canon of symphonies as the first and seventh respectively. The four movements of No. 8 are entitled Fantasia, Scherzo alla marcia, Cavatina, and Toccata, and are so scored as to secure the predominance of the wind in the Scherzo, the strings in the Cavatina and percussion in the Toccata. What of the first movement?

This is described as Variations without a Theme and is scored for the usual full orchestra amplified by some of the percussion instruments that are to dominate the finale. Thus the first sounds to be heard after the enunciation of a four-note motif by the trumpet are chords from the vibraphone and runs from the celesta; in short this is to be a symphony of, at or any rate with, bells. There may be no theme, just as in Alice in Wonderland there is a grin without a Cheshire cat in which to incorporate it, but the four-note motif is no less capable of materializing into a melody than is the grin into a cat. The variations all play round themes stemming from that motif. How many there are of them depends on how they are counted, for while there are sharply delineated boundaries, such as double-bars and changes of signature, to mark off the main divisions, the internal sub-divisions sometimes blur them. But six variations seem a just computation—six variations seem a just computation. This open exposition—we must not call it a theme, for it is really a development of the germinal motif—and the concluding coda, which is, in the original tempo, a dissolution of the melody back into the motif. The exposition consists of the motif, the bells, melody, counter-melody and recapitulation of motif, in some forty bars. Variation 1 is quick, staccato and in flatter keys. The second is a rather solemn march in A minor, andante sostenuto. No. 3 states a proper tune evolved out of the motif, embodying the rhythmic device called hemiola, and enunciated by woodwind in imitation until the full orchestra is involved. No. 4 is rather like No. 2 but in the tonality of E. No. 5 is martial, quick and in the idiom the composer usually associates with sinister forces. No. 6 is a varied recapitulation of Nos. 2 and 4, in two sections, of which the second, marked largamente, is the climax of the movement and gives way to the coda in tempo primo.

The Scherzo (with a slower and quieter Trio) is scored exclusively for wind and is grotesque in character. The slow movement, scored for strings alone, contains the most heartfelt music of a symphony which in the main is emotionally extrovert. It evokes memories of the Tallis Fantasia and The Lark Ascending but resembles neither. Being called a Cavatina, it consists of a long cantilena with the melody passed from part to part, but it is in spite of its apparently rhapsodical character—three main ideas are spun out and then briefly recapitulated—firmly organized in a modified sonata-form. The cello begins the melody, the upper strings intervene with descending phrases and then themselves take up the 'cello's tune. This is the first subject in E minor. The second subject shows a change not of mood, but of manner of speech and key; it consists of twenty-four bars of a fully harmonized formal tune in E flat. There is no development, but instead a substantial section in or about A minor, the chief feature of which is a violin solo. The recapitulation follows in the same keys as the exposition, but the two ideas in the first subject are now telescoped, the second subject is abbreviated and the coda, in which a 'cello solo alludes to the middle section, ends in E major.

The final Toccata is a field-day for the percussion. Three tuned gongs, such as Puccini uses in Turandot, are prescribed; the tubular bells are required to execute glissandi; celesta and xylophone, glockenspiel and vibraphone are recalled to their labours from the first movement; and the harps are percussively busy. The thematic material for the exploitation of this battery is one of Vaughan Williams’s jubilant tunes over an energetic bass such as he uses for “Let all the world in every corner sing” and sundry psalms of praise. No attempt is made at sublety; it is simply a joyful noise unto the Lord, though, be it noted, all the percussion instruments emit notes of definite pitch.

PARTITA FOR DOUBLE STRING ORCHESTRA

This short suite is a revision of a double string trio in D minor which, though it had a few years of independent life, was never satisfactory in presenting its antiphony to the ear—it used to turn itself into a sextet. In the revised version of 1948 it approximates more nearly to a concerto grosso, in which the First Orchestra has the functions of a concertino and contains solo passages for all three instruments—there are no second violins—while the Second Orchestra acquires the character of a ripieno from the fact that it alone possesses double-basses. Even more than a study in antiphony, the Partita is a study in rhythm—it abounds in strong, simple rhythms, elaborate cross-rhythms, hemiolas, displaced accents and other similar devices. Significant too is the fact that its third movement; Intermezzo, is sub-titled “Homage to Henry Hall”, the dance-band leader. The other movements are a Prelude of loose construction based on two ideas, a Scherzo ostinato constructed, as its name implies, on one idea, which however undergoes one or two transformations, including augmentation, for its Trio section. The finale is a Fantasia in the Elizabethan sense of a concatenation of congruent ideas in a madrigal, though it is more animated and not fugal in texture.

FRANK HOWES

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MADE IN ENGLAND
Band 1: Vaughan Williams: Symphony No. 8 in D Minor
4th Mov.: Toccata

Band 2: Vaughan Williams: Partita for Double String Orchestra
1st Mov.: Prelude (Andante tranquillo); Scherzo (Presto)
2nd Mov.: Intermescale (Accademia); Fantasia (Allegro)
3rd Mov.: Fantasia (Allegro)
4th Mov.: Fantasia (Allegro)

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