

NAXOS

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Piano Concerto

The Wasps • English Folksong Suite • The Running Set

Ashley Wass, Piano

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra • James Judd



Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Piano Concerto in C • The Wasps • English Folk Song Suite • The Running Set

Ralph Vaughan Williams studied at the Royal College of Music, where he met his lifelong friend Gustav Holst, and at Cambridge. His teachers included Parry and Stanford and later on Ravel in Paris. From the outset of his career he determined to write music that would break away from the domination of European traditions; this desire led him to English folk-song and the music of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods from which his own style was to emerge. In 1901 the song *Linden Lea* first brought him to attention and in the immediate years that followed he was an assiduous collector of folk-songs and the editor of *The English Hymnal* (1906). To these apprentice years also belong *Toward the Unknown Region* (1904-06), *On Wenlock Edge* (1908-09) and *A Sea Symphony* (1903-08), the first of nine symphonies that form the backbone of his achievement.

The *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910), the first expression of his mature voice, was followed by *A London Symphony* (1911-13) and the opera *Hugh the Drover* (1910-14) before World War I interrupted his career. To the interwar years belong *A Pastoral Symphony* (1921), which has been described as Vaughan Williams's 'war requiem', the tempestuous *Fourth Symphony* (1931-34), the 'masque for dancing' *Job* (1927-30), the operas *Sir John in Love* (1924-28) and *Riders to the Sea* (1925-32) and choral works such as *Sancta Civitas* (1923-25). The spiritual *Fifth Symphony* (1938-43) was seemingly the definitive statement of an artist reaching the autumn of life, so that the equally individual character of the *Sixth Symphony* (1944-47), with its bleak, desolate *Epilogue*, caught critics by surprise. A commission to write music for the film *Scott of the Antarctic* led to the *Seventh Symphony* (*Sinfonia antartica*, 1949-52), and to these final years belong the completion, after forty years gestation, of the opera *The Pilgrim's Progress*, completed in 1949, the light, often humorous *Eighth Symphony* (1953-56) and the visionary *Ninth* (1956-58).

'Visionary' and 'spiritual' are descriptions often

attached to Vaughan Williams's music, words that are apposite for a man whose personal philosophy embraced nineteenth-century free-thinking radicalism, a profound sense of the past, an agnostic stance which nevertheless valued the richness of religious thought and in particular the Anglican tradition, and the works of three writers in particular, Whitman, Blake and Bunyan.

In 1909 Vaughan Williams wrote incidental music for the Cambridge University production of Aristophanes's *The Wasps*. The play is a satire on the Athenian legal system, the 'Wasps' of the title being those who delighted in spending hours deciding verdicts, especially since the longer they deliberated the more they were paid. The music Vaughan Williams composed for it shows how English folk-song had been fully assimilated into his voice; none of the melodies quotes traditional tunes yet they sound wholly authentic. The *Overture* has become a popular concert item independent from the rest of the suite; it opens with suitably waspish buzzing leading to rumbustious fast music to set the scene for the comedy to follow. Contrast is found in the middle with a serene melody, which in the play is associated with the reconciliation between Anticleon and his father Procleon. It is utterly English in spirit and one of the composer's loveliest inventions. The first *Entr'acte* with its puckish, rather mischievous theme, is followed by the droll *March Past of the Kitchen Utensils* which accompanied a scene when a pot, pestle and water-jug solemnly bear testimony to the worthy qualities of a dog accused of theft. The second *Entr'acte* has a noble quality, whilst the *Final Tableau* is a romp, in which the three sons of the poet Carcinus, a rival to Aristophanes, are forced to dance and the main theme of the *Overture* returns to crown the proceedings.

The *Piano Concerto* was conceived for the formidable skills of the British pianist Harriet Cohen, its first two movements being sketched in 1926 and the

Finale added in 1930. Cohen with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Adrian Boult, gave the première in 1933. It was only a partial success; many of the conservative audiences of the time found the work too dissonant and disliked the percussive nature of much of the piano-writing. Critics also commented that the solo piano part seemed swamped by the orchestration; it had its admirers though, Bartók among them. In consequence the composer recast the work in 1946 for two pianos in collaboration with Joseph Cooper. In recent years pianists have begun to opt again for the original version, as recorded here. Cohen was the mistress of Arnold Bax, Vaughan Williams's friend and fellow composer, and in the third movement of the original version he had included a quotation from Bax's *Third Symphony* to symbolize the friendship between the three of them. After the first performance, however, Vaughan Williams came to the conclusion that the quotation did not work and cut it out. When he came to revise the work for two pianos he also changed the ending of the work to conclude quietly and this revision applies also to the published solo piano version.

A major influence on the work were the piano transcriptions of Bach by the composer/pianist Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), as can be heard in the exuberant opening *Toccata* in which the main thematic ideas appear in quick succession starting with an emphatic rising theme on the strings, set against virtuosic piano figuration. The percussive chords that the soloist pummels out are important too, as is a jaunty phrase passed initially from woodwind, to piano, then strings. An elated folk-song-like phase introduced by flutes, clarinets and violas forms the main contrasting idea. The *Toccata* is linked to the *Romanza* by a short cadenza in which the bar lines are omitted allowing the soloist to play without rhythmic constraints. This sense of freedom characterizes the first part of the movement in which the music hovers around a single note played over florid arpeggios. Its heart, however, is a tender rocking reverie of melting loveliness, which includes a rapt theme descending stepwise, heard first on the woodwind. Surely this movement is one of the

composer's finest inspirations? Towards the end, the oboe's downward phrase, echoed by solo viola, hints at the principal theme for the finale, *Fuga cromatica con finale alla tedesca*. This opens with a crisp explosion of trombones and tuba outlining the fugue subject (or theme), which is introduced in full by the soloist. Having run its dynamic course, the fugue reaches a powerful climax as fragments of its subject, some extended, some shortened, pile up frenetically upon each other. A fulsome cadenza follows, providing the bridge to the barn-storming dance of the *Finale alla tedesca* (a term for German dances since the fifteenth century). The music culminates in a cascading descent and a gong stroke to usher in another cadenza. The mood turns reflective once more as the theme of the *Romanza* is recalled until finally the principal theme of the *Finale alla tedesca* is softly played by pizzicato strings against the soothing chords of the piano.

The *English Folk Song Suite* (1923) came about through the efforts of John Somerville, Commandant of the Royal Military School of Music who, during the 1920s, commissioned several leading composers to write works for military band. Gordon Jacob transcribed the work for orchestra in 1924. Its three movements are all based on well-known folk-songs which are skilfully varied and combined with evident relish on the composer's part.

According to Vaughan Williams's preface on the score, *The Running Set* is 'a dance of British origin still performed in the remoter parts of the United States'. Founded, he commented, 'on traditional tunes', the work was composed in 1933 for a massed performance of the dance for the annual festival of the English Folk Dance Society the following year. As the dance had lost its original tune, Vaughan Williams combined several of the folk-songs associated with the dance into one continuous movement. The tunes he used to form this ebullient sequence are *Barrack Hill*, *The Blackthorn Stick*, *Irish Reel* and *Cock o' the North*. Listening to it, one suspects it must be pretty exhausting to dance to!

Andrew Burn

Ashley Wass



Photo: Jack Liebeck

Described by *The Gramophone* as possessing 'the enviable gift to turn almost anything he plays into pure gold', Ashley Wass is the only British pianist to have won First Prize at the London International Piano Competition and is also a former BBC New Generation Artist. He is Naxos's first ever exclusively contracted solo artist, and his recent surveys of piano music by Bridge and Bax have been heralded as 'unmissable' and 'the yardstick against which all future recordings will be judged'. He has given performances at most of the major venues in Britain, including the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms, and also appeared in a gala concert at Buckingham Palace to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee. Concerto performances have included collaborations with Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, Philharmonia, Bournemouth Symphony and all the BBC orchestras. Ashley Wass is also much in demand as a chamber musician and has toured the United States and Europe with violinist Sarah Chang appearing at venues such as Philadelphia's Kimmel Center and Carnegie Hall in New York. He is Artistic Director of the Lincolnshire International Chamber Music Festival.

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra



Photo: Jon Barraclough

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra is Britain's oldest surviving professional symphony orchestra. It gives over sixty concerts from September to June at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, as well as presenting concerts across Liverpool city region and throughout the United Kingdom. The orchestra has also toured to the United States, the Far East and Europe. Since 2001 the RLPO has been Classic FM's Orchestra in North West England, a relationship extended until 2012. In 1998 the orchestra became the first in Great Britain to launch its own recording label, RLPO Live. Many RLPO Live recordings are currently being reissued by Avie Records. Other recordings by the orchestra appear on the EMI, Naxos, Nimbus, Universal and Virgin Classics labels. Latest releases are listed at

www.liverpoolphil.com. Musicians of the RLPO are involved in the orchestra's award-winning learning and engagement programmes, providing all ages with exciting opportunities to enjoy and take part in live music-making. Vasily Petrenko became Principal Conductor in September 2006, with a contract extended until 2012. In 2009 the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and its new music group Ensemble 10/10 were joint winners as Ensemble of the Year in the Twentieth Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards.

James Judd



Photo: New Zealand Symphony Orchestra

British-born conductor James Judd has amassed an extensive collection of recordings on the Naxos label, including an unprecedented number in partnership with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, where he is Music Director Emeritus. His previous directorships include Principal Guest Conductor of the Orchestre National de Lille in France and a groundbreaking fourteen years as Music Director of the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra. His acclaimed recordings in New Zealand include works by Copland, Bernstein, Vaughan Williams, Gershwin and many others, and he has brought the orchestra to a new level of visibility and international renown through appearances abroad, including the New Zealand Orchestra's first tour of the major concert halls of Europe, culminating with a début appearance at the BBC Proms and the Concertgebouw in August 2005. A graduate of London's Trinity College of Music, James Judd came to international attention as the Assistant Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, a post he accepted at the invitation of Lorin Maazel. Four years later, he returned to Europe after being appointed Associate Music Director of the European Community Youth Orchestra by Claudio Abbado, an ensemble with which he continues to serve as an honorary Artistic Director.



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The popular overture from Vaughan Williams's incidental music for Aristophanes's *The Wasps* introduces a suite whose mischievously witty, noble and farcical movements underline the play's satire of the Athenian legal system. A similar vivacity characterises his *English Folksong Suite* and *The Running Set*, where Vaughan Williams relishes setting tunes such as *Barrack Hill*, *Irish Reel*, *The Blackthorn Stick* and *Cock o' the North*. Folksong-like melodies also feature in his magnificent *Piano Concerto*, in which the magisterial influence of Bach and Busoni may also be heard.



Ralph
VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
(1872-1958)

The Wasps (Aristophanic Suite)

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|----------|--|--------------|
| 1 | I. Overture | 26:05 |
| 2 | II. Entr'acte | 10:02 |
| 3 | III. March Past of the Kitchen Utensils | 2:43 |
| 4 | IV. Entr'acte | 2:57 |
| 5 | V. Ballet and Final Tableau | 3:43 |
| | | 6:41 |

Piano Concerto in C*

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|----------|---|--------------|
| 6 | I. Toccata: Allegro moderato – | 27:39 |
| 7 | II. Romanza: Lento | 6:48 |
| 8 | III. Fuga cromatica con finale alla tedesca: Allegro – | 9:15 |
| | Lento – Largo sostenuto – Andante sostenuto – | |
| 9 | IV. Finale | 4:57 |
| | | 6:40 |

English Folk Song Suite (orch. Gordon Jacob)

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|-----------|---|-------------|
| 10 | I. March: Seventeen come Sunday | 9:17 |
| 11 | II. Intermezzo: My Bonny Boy | 2:57 |
| 12 | III. March: Folk Songs from Somerset | 3:15 |
| 13 | The Running Set | 3:05 |
| | | 6:36 |

Ashley Wass, Piano*

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra • James Judd

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