

# RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS SOCIETY JOURNAL

WIDENING THE KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF THE MUSIC OF RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

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The programme notes for both the Vaughan Williams and the Walton were written by Michael Kennedy.

For anyone visiting the Philharmonic Hall, I can thoroughly recommend the Rubato baguettes!

Michael J Gainsford

### PASSION IN THE STOCKS AT HIGHGATE

In November, Hampstead Garden Opera (HGO) presented *Hugh the Drover* or "Love in the Stocks" in a version re-scored for chamber orchestra – with the support of the Vaughan Williams Charitable Trust – by Oliver-John Ruthven, who also conducted. The reduced score is to be retained by Faber and is available for hire by other groups. Since the venue was a theatre over the Gatehouse pub at Highgate, I had expected to see about three acoustic instruments and a keyboard, so I was pleasantly surprised to see a real chamber orchestra comprising fourteen first-class players. The one slightly alien feature was a piano, which enabled the battery of percussion in the full score to be reduced to something fitting the space – and the effect was marvellous. At no point was I conscious of anything missing from the full score.

Having got the reduction out of the way, what about the opera? With eight principals, a chorus of twenty-one and assorted morris dancers, this was not in any way reduced. Five of the principals were double cast and, if your programme is to hand, I got to see those in the left hand column.



A singer and dancer herself, Angela Hardcastle was directing her first opera, and did a fantastic job. There are some big ensembles in *Hugh* and everything worked smoothly. There were no gimmicks: the scenery was a simple evocation of a Cotswold town. I had not realised that you could do stonework and cobbles so convincingly just with paint.

I like small opera companies like this, and the reason is both simple and obvious: the singers playing young, attractive, passionate lovers are generally young, passionate, often attractive, and also cheaper. Something happens to a voice as it matures sufficiently to fill Covent Garden; of course the result, at its best, is wonderful, but something is lost, and that is the ability to convince as a love-struck teenager.

I am always drawn to the lead soprano, Mary, and I am delighted to say that Elaine Tate did not disappoint. Her expressive face lent itself to anguish, and sometimes to anxiety, and Mary has plenty of that to deal with. The pain as she realised that she was to be married on a Tuesday morning was palpable, and if my eyes watered now and again I put it down to my cold. The same face radiated joy and passion as she fell in love, and at last allowed the drover to claim his bride. The singing was beautiful; I was impressed by the range as well the power of her voice.

David de Winter as Hugh was very good indeed, with a powerful tenor voice. David, like Elaine, is young, both having just graduated from the Royal Academy of Music. He has many productions, and a small recorded repertoire, to his credit and will go far. The boxing match is a central part of the opera;





Above: Elaine Tate as Mary and David de Winter as Hugh.

Facing and following pages: costume designs for *Hugh the Drover* by Charlotte Tymms.

though vicious, it can just teeter on the brink of comedy. So, perhaps to draw attention away from the boxers ducking and feinting, the chorus crowded round the ring on all four sides. Sitting in the front row with my feet on the cobbles, I prepared my lap for what seemed the inevitable descent of a soprano into it, but it was not to be! Even so, that proximity enabled me to experience opera as never before.

All the principals were good; there was never any sense of second best. Camilla Bull made a sensitive Aunt Jane. She is probably a bit too young to be Mary's aunt, and sounded all the better for it. Barnaby Beer played the Showman and the Sergeant, impressing with both singing and showmanship. The horns under the bowler hat were a good idea, and a further useful point about the French was made by the Napoleonic doll, a sort of "guy", uncomfortably impaled on a pike.

The excellent Ed Ballard as John looked a bit sad as he was booed at the end; I had warned HGO's Chairman, Alastair MacGeorge, to tell him to expect it every night, but it must come hard after a convincing performance as one of the nastiest villains in all opera; the audience identifies with the character. The opera's story really does convince: Vaughan Williams was a master of the stage as well as the symphony hall. This is the

most nearly conventional of his five operas, and I tell you (again) that it will eventually earn the acclamation due to it.

Was there a disappointment? Only that I did not get a chance to see the other principals. Would I have fallen in love with Philippa Murray as Mary? Yes, of course I would! And did Zachary Devin acquit himself well as Hugh? I understand that he did. Was it worth staging this opera in a theatre that seated only 104? Unquestionably! I've said it before: opera is about passion, this one particularly so; that was conveyed in full measure. My wife, daughter number two and boyfriend agreed with me that such an experience might one day be equalled, but never bettered. We owe an enormous debt to HGO and those who made this production possible.

The cold confined me to quarters next day, and I listened to both of the available recordings in an attempt to see which I prefer. In 1979 Sir Charles Groves cast Robert Tear (then 40) and Sheila Armstrong (37) as Hugh and Mary, Michael Rippon (40) as John, with Helen Watts (52) as Aunt Jane. This is currently available only as part of the 30-CD EMI Collector's Edition,

which is a real bargain at £35 or so if your existing collection overlaps it by anything less than 90%. Matthew Best, in 1994 (on Hyperion), cast Bonaventura Bottone (44), Rebecca Evans (31), Alan Opie (49) and Sarah Walker (51) in those parts. Stephen Connock endorsed the Matthew Best recording in the very first edition of the *Journal*, but now speaks very warmly of the Groves. "Buy both!" was his suggestion then, and that's still good advice seventeen years on. Both of the mezzos as Aunt Jane are on the fruity side, but not unmusically so. I'm going to stick to my guns and suggest that the younger Rebecca Evans is most nearly convincing as the bride, and recommend the more recent set on those grounds alone. Accuse me of sentimentality if you must, but not inconsistency.

It has been a privilege to see three enjoyable productions of this opera in the past four years (with York Opera in 2007 and New Sussex Opera in 2010). I hope there will be more like this one to come – ideally in theatres that allow the experience to be shared with somewhat bigger audiences, and perhaps resulting in a "live" DVD since this is, technically, the twenty-first century. Well done Hampstead Garden Opera; please don't let this be your first and only Vaughan Williams opera.

John Francis

**Mark Hammett** attended the same performance and writes: I went for two reasons – the first being that The Gatehouse was once one of my “locals” and it was great to revisit the area, and secondly because I had not yet witnessed a Vaughan Williams opera. After a disappointing early experience with opera I was persuaded to try again, and I absolutely loved the evening. In that intimate environment, you felt totally part of the action and, even from my seat which was sideways on to the stage, you could not help but be enthralled, and the balance between vocals and chamber orchestra was just right. The stage setting was simple yet effective, representing the town square, which became crowded when the full cast was present. The evening seemed to pass very quickly, and I was doing quite well until Mary’s father, the Constable who had disowned her when she kicked John the Butcher into touch for Hugh, once again called her “daughter” as she and Hugh were leaving for ever, at which point it appeared that someone had misplaced a lump and left it in my throat! It was a very special evening and I would dearly like to see the other Vaughan Williams operas, but the jury is still out on operas by other composers, especially in a foreign language!

**Graham Muncy** saw the same cast: I’m very pleased that I got to Highgate for the wonderful production, the day after John and Mark. Like Mark, I was sideways on with a good balance between singers and orchestra. Everything seemed very well thought out with the chemistry between performers and

of this opera as it could appeal to good amateur companies as a welcome change from *Merrie England* or Gilbert and Sullivan. Vaughan Williams’ time as a major opera composer has yet to come, but I’m sure that it will with superb and memorable productions like this. The Gatehouse, by the way, is a fine venue with the best theatre bar I’ve ever come across!

**David Chandler** saw the “other” cast and wrote an enthusiastic review for *Opera Today*. It’s worth tracking this down online for an interesting discussion of why the opera has not been taken up by professional opera companies (essentially the libretto and the lack of “psychological interest”). He writes “It would perhaps be a slight exaggeration to suggest that all the problems surrounding *Hugh the Drover* have been solved at a stroke by Hampstead Garden Opera, but it is close to the truth. Their production feels absolutely right. Altogether, while I can imagine technically more polished versions of *Hugh the Drover*, I find it hard to imagine a better one and, now that it has been adjusted to the needs of smaller companies and venues I hope it will become more widely recognised for what it is: not a great opera, but great operatic entertainment, with melodies that lodge themselves in your head for days.”

#### ACCADEMICO IN BIRMINGHAM

My wife & I attended a rare and very beautiful performance of the Violin Concerto (*Concerto Accademico*) on 23 November 2011 in Birmingham’s wonderfully restored Town Hall. The Orchestra of the Swan under their energetic conductor David Curtis gave an all-English programme of Elgar and Ireland and were joined by the young violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen who not only gave the perceptive interpretation of the concerto but also of *The Lark Ascending*. The latter was slightly spoilt by the rather powerful horn player but the sixteen sweet strings of the Swan Orchestra and the appropriate winds plus triangle more than just accompanied – the atmosphere of the English countryside on the cusp of changing forever was perfectly caught.

My main reason for attending this concert was the chance to hear the concerto, long a favourite from my teens when I imported an LP recording by Joseph Fuchs, and then later Nora Grumlikova on Supraphon, an even better recording. I can even just remember one live performance, again in Birmingham with the Orchestra da Camera in the City Art Gallery. I think the soloist was Kenneth Page, with Adrian Boult conducting.

It is an underrated work and long overdue for a definitive recording. The Buswell/Previn recording is poorly balanced and the soloist is clearly not at ease with the improvisatory nature of the glorious slow movement. Bradley Creswick on Chandos is very edgy in tone, although Hickox brings out the orchestral part with understanding, battling against a cavernous acoustic, the recording not really up to Brian Culverhouse’s usual standard.

So please can someone invite Tamsin Waley-Cohen to record her heartfelt interpretation, preferably with David Curtis and his Swan Orchestra? She wrote on my miniature score – bought by my wife for 4/6d as a Valentine gift in 1967! – “I hope you enjoy this wonderful work”, and David Curtis wrote, wistfully, I think, “Here’s to our recording”. If you don’t know the work, track it down, you won’t regret the effort.

*Stephen Hayford Morris*



audience at a high level. With one or two reservations (the bells in Act 2) the reduced orchestration was brilliant and the band played with real flair and commitment. Was there some music cut from the *London Symphony* somewhere at the beginning of Act 2? This reduced version should enable further productions

## From the Chairman

This Christmas and New Year period has been full of excitement about the BBC 4 film on *The Lark Ascending*, and we were delighted that the Society was able to be involved in it. It was a pleasure and a privilege to return to Shirehampton Hall, where the work was premiered in 1920, for a televised performance, and after several lengthy phone conversations with the producers discussing the music, I am glad that the Society was acknowledged in the credits – although we do not take the blame for a couple of small errors that crept into the script! The inclusion of our much-loved President, Michael Kennedy, was a highlight of the programme, as he imparted, as usual, insightful gems to the viewers. The programme has been widely viewed and praised. Owning no television myself, I have now been instructed by several older friends in the delights of i-player: who says that older generations are less computer-savvy than younger ones!

This time of year sees me frantic with preparations for the forthcoming English Music Festival, and this year our highlight is the world premiere performance of Vaughan Williams' rather spectacular piano *Fantasia*. Recently recorded and released on Somm (and celebrated with a joint RVW Society/Somm launch, at which I was happy to see many Society members present), this work again offers us a new insight into the fledgling composer. Although it may have been his first proper essay in writing for full orchestra – he began work on it in 1896 – it is remarkably assured, and combines bold and impassioned statements with gossamer music of great tenderness. It does not refute the generally-held belief that Vaughan Williams took some time to find his musical voice, but it does impress us with the realisation that he was, nevertheless, a composer with both a wonderful imagination and the necessary skills of orchestration and musicianship to implement his musical ideas. If you have not yet heard this piece, I urge you to purchase the disc or, if you can, come along to the live performance at the EMF in June with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Mark Bebbington, the soloist on the recording.

May I also recommend to you, if you don't already have your copy, our latest Albion disc *On Christmas Day*. Yes, I know, Christmas seems a world away now, but these folk carols and folk songs are too gorgeous to be reserved exclusively for the Yuletide season. And whilst on the subject of Christmas, may I thank the many of you who were kind enough to purchase my book, *Music in the Landscape*, as Christmas gifts and comment favourably upon it? I was touched by the hugely positive feedback I received from Society members.

*Em Marshall-Luck*



Mark Bebbington is the soloist for Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia*, to be performed at the 2012 English Music Festival.

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