

## Musical Treasure Chest #41

We are starting to rev up for our CD release party on February 26<sup>th</sup> at Caffe Lena. Sten, our guitarist, has played there many times (usually in a non-classical genre, as he wears so many hats, so successfully), but for Norman and me this is a big deal. Caffe Lena is rightly called "an American treasure," and its stage has hosted amazing, legendary performers. When I stand on their stage, I feel the excitement and the responsibility to continue the tradition so-to-speak. We will play both repertory from our new CD recorded last summer in Hyde Hall and featuring some music from their archives as well as works of Beethoven (you can never celebrate his 250<sup>th</sup> birthday enough!), material from our first CD (recorded in the Schuyler Mansion) and, in keeping with the more usual fare at the Caffe, some delightful Scottish music (of course in an 18<sup>th</sup> century rendering). I was practicing the Scottish music this week, thinking how much fun it is to play (and not easy, by the way), and also thinking about its heritage. Folk songs and music are such a part of the classical idiom, only dressed up in fancy musical garb, that we can hardly separate the two.

**Ralph Vaughan Williams**, a composer I hold dear to my heart, loved the folk music of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. From his college years to the end of his life, he traveled through Great Britain, listening to, notating, and learning about his country's musical traditions. Many of his compositions took inspiration from this music, whether quoting a folk song or just relying on its essence to dictate a phrase or shape a melody. I taught a class a few years ago on Vaughan Williams to one of my favorite groups HILL (Higher Institute of Life-Long Learning in Bethlehem). During the six weeks of classes we explored the life and music of this giant among English composers. In my preparation for our sessions, I was repeatedly awed by this man, his development as a composer, his generosity, his kindness to other composers and his passion for life. He was long-lived and prolific writing in all genres, including opera, symphonic, chamber, vocal and film music. I loved every moment of learning about him.

I thought today, after my circuitous journey from our CD to Scottish folk music to

Vaughan Williams, I would offer you one of his pieces which I "discovered" while preparing for this course. I want to stay away from familiar works such as *The Lark Ascending* or *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*; these are so ubiquitous that they border on having entered the classical pops realm. But take a listen to one of his nine symphonies, or his dark opera *Riders to the Sea*, or his second string quartet these display such a unique musical voice and show such mastery of form that it is hard for me to understand why they are not in the canon of music regularly played by orchestras and chamber ensembles.

Today I will share with you his First Symphony, ***A Sea Symphony***. The longest of his symphonies and slow in gestation, this magnificent and exciting work is truly a choral symphony, expanding the use of the chorus and soloists even beyond what Beethoven did in his ninth and Mahler did in several of his. In four movements and scored for large orchestra, chorus, chamber chorus, soprano and baritone soloists, the chorus is featured in all four movements, while the soloists sing in all but the third movement. The text is from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, surprising given that Whitman's work wasn't well known in Edwardian England. Vaughan Williams was a voracious reader, and Whitman's free verse and humanist perspective appealed to him greatly. Of course other composers had written works inspired by the sea (Debussy, most famously), but Vaughan Williams' symphony expands the idea greatly. He worked on the piece from 1903-1909 and during that time studied with Maurice Ravel in Paris, whose influence on RVW's orchestration is evident. The premiere at the Leeds Festival in 1910 was a tremendous success and the piece's impact would forever change the development of the English symphony. I have selected a recording from the 1950s by Sir Adrian Boult, who was a close friend of RVW and frequently conducted his music. This recording may not be the newest, but there is something to be said for having the composer's input on a recording! And, I leave you with the words of Vaughan Williams widow Ursula who writes of this symphony and RVW's choice of Whitman: "...he was aware of the common aspirations of generations of ordinary men and women with whom he felt a deep, contemplative sympathy. And so there is in his work a fundamental tension between traditional concepts of belief and morality and a modern spiritual anguish which is also visionary."

If you want to read more about Vaughan Williams, the Vaughan Williams Society

website has excellent information.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BT0BIZK7lgA>