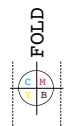


HEAD



One doesn't have to be English to know 'Greensleeves', a tune which has been in existence since at least the 16th century. Ralph Vaughan Williams used it several times in his works, including as an entr'acte in his Falstaffian opera *Sir John in Love*. (In the last act of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the fat knight cries, 'Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to the tune of "Green-sleeves"'. In 1934, five years after the premiere of *Sir John in Love*, Ralph Greaves (supervised by the composer) adapted it for strings, two flutes, and harp. The famous tune is quoted at the beginning and the end, and in the middle section, we hear the folk-tune 'Lovely Joan', which Vaughan Williams had collected during his travels in Norfolk three decades earlier.

England's Arcadian charms were more elusive during World War II, and works such as Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony and his unfairly overlooked Oboe Concerto can be heard as longing attempts to recapture the pastoral, even Utopian, peacefulness that had been shattered by German air attacks and bombs. In fact, the premiere performance of the Oboe Concerto in 1944 had to be moved from London to Liverpool because of threatened German V-1 rocket attacks. The concerto was composed for oboist Léon Goossens, a member of one of England's most musical families. There is a

relationship between the concerto and the Fifth Symphony, as material discarded from the symphony's second movement was incorporated into the new work. To facilitate the 'carrying' power of the small-voiced oboe, Vaughan Williams reduced the accompaniment in this concerto to a smallish orchestra of strings, and even then, he uses them sparingly.

Vaughan Williams wrote his unlikely Tuba Concerto in 1954 when he was in his eighties but still up for a challenge. The tuba's propensity for clowning is not ignored, yet Vaughan Williams does not content himself with mere slapstick, and in the central movement, the soloist is given the opportunity to show his instrument's mellow and romantic side. (Later, he arranged this Romanza for cello and orchestra.) Of the finale, Michael Kennedy writes that it is 'surely Falstaff and the Fairies in instrumental terms.' The first performers were soloist Philip Catelinet and the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. Here, it is played by Arnold Jacobs, who for many years was Principal Tuba of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Between 1916 and 1921, Vaughan Williams wrote a haunting yet unsentimental *Pastoral Symphony*. That masterpiece was anticipated by *The Lark Ascending*, a short 'romance for violin

and orchestra' composed in 1914, and inspired by the eponymous poem by George Meredith. Meredith's lark

'rises and begins to round,
he drops the silver chain of sound
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake'

and both his flight and his song are unmistakably described by the solo violin. The work was dedicated to violinist Marie Hall, who first performed it in 1920.

Most individuals are moved, at a very basic level, by the first harbingers of spring; an early crocus, for example, promises the Earth's green resurrection. Frederick Delius depicted the quiet thrill of a similar moment in *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, the first of 'Two Pieces for Small Orchestra' composed in 1911-12. A clarinet sings the notes of the welcome bird. Listeners often assume that the music is 'set' in England. However, Delius wrote it in France (in the village of Grez-sur-Loing), and one of the themes is taken from a Norwegian folk-song, 'In Ola Valley', also used by Edvard Grieg in his *Norwegian Folk-songs* for piano (Op. 66).

Its companion piece is the equally seasonal *Summer Night on the River*. Hearing it, one can imagine the gentle rocking of a small boat, water dripping from its oars, and in a cello solo,

the scent of flowering bushes wafting over the surface of the river. It should be noted, however, that Delius is said to have disliked program music. 'Music's job was to express what couldn't be expressed any other way,' writes Gloria Jahoda in her biography of the composer. "'Otherwise," [Delius] would say with a shrug, "you might just as well write a piece called 'Good morning, it's a fine day.'"

By 1932, the year of the *Two Aquarelles*, syphilis had left Delius blind and paralyzed, and he was unable to compose without the assistance of his amanuensis Eric Fenby, who took the composer's musical dictation. It was Fenby who arranged these works for string orchestra from two wordless songs for unaccompanied chorus that Delius had composed in 1917. The first was originally titled 'To be sung of a Summer Night on the Water', and its devotional mood complements the more illustrative *Summer Night on the River*. The second muses over a sprightly tune suggestive of an English folk-song. (An aquarelle, incidentally, is a kind of watercolour painting – a fine metaphor for these two delicate works.)

The opera *Fennimore and Gerda* (1910) is based on a novel by Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen. This work came as something of a

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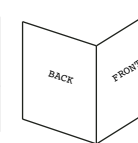


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