

*London and the Modern City**Alain Frogley*

Our composers are much too fond of going to concerts. There they hear the finished product; what the artist should be concerned with is the raw material. Have not we all about us forms of musical expression which we can take and purify and raise to the level of great art? For instance, the lilt of the chorus at a music-hall joining in a popular song, the children dancing to a barrel organ, the rousing fervour of a Salvation Army hymn, St Paul's and a great choir singing in one of its festivals, the Welshmen striking up one of their own hymns whenever they win a goal at the international football match, the cries of the street pedlars, the factory girls singing their sentimental songs? Have all these nothing to say to us?¹

Vaughan Williams penned this attack on the 'elevated' continental models conventionally used in the training of native composers in 1912. It appeared in an essay provocatively entitled 'Who Wants the English Composer?', and published, equally provocatively, in the magazine of the Royal College of Music. While his words have been widely quoted, they remain striking, even startling, coming from a composer still associated so strongly with the pastoral and rural life: all the 'raw material' of national music proffered in this litany is *urban*, in performative social setting if not always ultimate origin. He had for the previous decade been deeply immersed in rural folk music (as a collector, scholar, and composer), and briefly posits its importance again in this essay – but then goes on, almost impatiently, to exhort English composers to open their ears and minds to the sounds of the city.

Vaughan Williams was at this time, as always, involved in multiple compositional projects, but the major work taking shape on his desk was *A London Symphony*, which would be completed during 1913 and given its first performance the following year. While he makes no mention of the

¹ Vaughan Williams, 'Who Wants the English Composer?' (1912), in *VWOM*, 39–42 (41).

nascent symphony in his essay, it is clear in retrospect that the two are intimately bound up, not least in the celebration of a diverse urban soundscape, so vividly detailed in this quotation: several specific elements, most notably the barrel organ and street pedlars' cries, are evoked explicitly in the symphony. Elsewhere in his manifesto Vaughan Williams writes, tellingly, that 'The composer must not shut himself up and think about art, he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community – if we seek for art we shall not find it.'² While 'the community' as a singular noun begs many social and political questions – as does the urge to 'purify' and 'raise' vernacular materials – the national community to which it refers here was by now primarily an urban one, at least as a statistical aggregate of where and how its people lived. And for most of his adult life, Vaughan Williams lived and worked in its throbbing heart, in the middle of London. In the 1920s, nervous about overly literal interpretations of the title of *A London Symphony*, and seeking to shift the focus from objective depiction to subjective experience, the composer suggested that it might better be called *Symphony by a Londoner* – an identification he had come to embrace himself.³

Vaughan Williams's wholehearted embrace of urban life is worth emphasizing, not least because his daily experience as a city dweller, and a Londoner in particular, is still so rarely acknowledged in the popular image of him prevailing in the wider musical world (even in more scholarly accounts it is usually mentioned in passing rather than closely examined). The reductive picture of an insular pastoralist, nostalgic dreamer, tweed-clad rural Rambler, and so on, has proved stubbornly resistant to several decades of revisionist attempts to dislodge or at least contextualize it. Myth often trumps evidence-based history, of course: each performs a very different kind of cultural work. But historians must continue to insist on as full a picture as possible, whatever its paradoxes and contradictions. As *The Lark Ascending* flies higher than ever in listeners' polls and a continuously swelling discography, it is perhaps time once again to take stock of some of the facts as they stand.

The London that Vaughan Williams knew, especially before 1914, was a thriving international megalopolis; as the hub of the largest empire in history, and of much of the globe's trade and finance, it was until well into

² Ibid., 42.

³ See the composer's two sets of programme notes for the symphony (1920 and 1925), reprinted in *VWOM*, 339–40.

the twentieth century regarded as the capital of the world.⁴ If it lacked the vibrancy of social mixture typified in the street and café life in many other European capitals, with its interactions stratified more narrowly along class lines, it was nevertheless a city of tremendous energy and a mecca of intellectual and cultural activity. Vaughan Williams relished this environment. Despite the contemplative quietude of works such as *The Lark Ascending* (1921) or the Mass in G minor (1922), in his daily life he was never an ascetic or solitary by inclination. He was profoundly sociable, liked parties, and enjoyed the pleasures of city living: attending concerts, visiting museums, going to the cinema and the theatre, eating out, and so on. Even in the domestic setting, the composer possessed an enviable ability to combine work and sociability; though neither of his marriages resulted in children, the households were frequently busy with visiting family and friends. Like most artists, he needed at times to retreat to less distracting surroundings to focus on his work, and trips to collect folk songs were another matter; but any such absences were rarely extended. While London could hardly be avoided by any British composer of the time, Vaughan Williams positively embraced his life as a metropolitan professional musician: in short, he lived the life he advocated in 'Who Wants the English Composer?' When in 1929 Adeline Vaughan Williams's increasingly disabling arthritis led the couple to move to Dorking – albeit barely twenty-five miles from central London – it was a considerable adjustment for the composer. According to his second wife, Ursula Vaughan Williams:

Ralph realized just how much more bother it was going to be, however excellent the train service, for him to enjoy from Dorking the musical life he had had for the past thirty years. He loved the country for walks, expeditions, and bicycling – but to go back and live in it, which he had not done since he left Cambridge, was a very different matter. He had long felt himself essentially a Londoner, and he never ceased to miss the town life.⁵

Although Vaughan Williams would become intensively involved with the local community (not least through his directorship of the Leith Hill Musical Festival), after Adeline died in 1951, and his subsequent marriage to Ursula Wood, he returned to London, and would die there at his home in 1958.

⁴ On the history of London during this period, Roy Porter's panoramic *London: A Social History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) and Jerry White's *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People* (London: Viking Press, 2001) remain invaluable.

⁵ UVWB, 179.

Vaughan Williams did begin his life in rural surroundings. Born in a Gloucestershire village, he spent most of his childhood at his mother's family home of Leith Hill Place in Surrey, just outside Dorking, with panoramic views across south-east England. After attending boarding schools in Sussex and Surrey, his first sustained experience of London (though for now commuting from home) came when he entered the Royal College of Music in 1890. In 1892 he went on to the University of Cambridge, and to greater independence. Though no modern metropolis, in social and intellectual terms Cambridge broadened enormously the young composer's horizons; it also introduced him to urbane sophistications, not least in food, drink, and clothes. Indeed, he developed a reputation as something of a dandy, a predilection not obvious from his own dress habits later in life, but reflected in a continuing interest in fashion, especially for the opposite sex. From 1895 to 1897 he continued his studies at the Royal College of Music, this time living in London, lodging first in Westminster and then in South Lambeth, where he took up a position as organist and choirmaster at St Barnabas Church. With his marriage to Adeline Fisher, late in 1897, he was finally ready to establish a more settled life in the metropolis – *de rigueur* for an ambitious young musician.

After an extended honeymoon, the couple moved initially to Lambeth, and then to Westminster, eventually leasing a small house at 10 Barton Street, where they would live from 1899 until 1905. Just over a hundred yards from Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, and within close earshot of the chimes of Big Ben (heard prominently in *A London Symphony*), this was the London of state and ecclesiastical gravitas and pageantry. In 1905 the Vaughan Williamses moved to a very different setting, at 13 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where they would remain for almost twenty-five years. One eminent historian of London has described Chelsea at this time as 'a fading flower of Bohemia';⁶ it was beloved of artists (especially painters) and intellectuals, and Cheyne Walk in particular, directly overlooking the river, boasted a storied roster of former residents, from Carlyle to Whistler. Chelsea was nevertheless a mixed neighbourhood in class terms, and poverty was never far away. While the location was chosen primarily for family reasons, as Adeline's mother lived close by, Ralph found much to commend it. In particular, his study, high up in the tall and narrow house, commanded a magnificent river view, including Battersea Park on the opposite bank and the towering chimneys of

⁶ White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, 23.

Chelsea's Lots Road power station. After the long years in Dorking, when Vaughan Williams finally returned to London in 1953 it was to a rather grander address, though with another scenic vista: 10 Hanover Terrace, part of a stately row of houses designed in the early nineteenth century by John Nash and overlooking Regent's Park and its boating lake.

Over the course of his life Vaughan Williams visited many other major European and American cities. On their honeymoon, he and Adeline lived for almost six months in Berlin, where he had arranged to study with Max Bruch; the young couple took full advantage of the city's pleasures, including concerts and opera, of course, but also plays, museums, and café culture. Aside from Berlin, the composer's most extended European stay was in Paris, where in late 1907 and early 1908 he spent three months studying with Maurice Ravel. But it was New York, the cutting edge of modernity, that he thought 'the most beautiful city in the world'.⁷ On his first visit there, in 1922, he found the New York skyscrapers more impressive than Niagara Falls. As he explained to Gustav Holst:

I've come to the conclusion that the Works of Man terrify me more than the Works of God – I told myself all the time that N'ga was the most wonderful thing in the world – & so it is – especially when you get right under it – but I did not once want to fall on my knees & confess my sins – whereas I can sit all day & look out of my windows (16 floors up) at the sky scrapers.⁸

Vaughan Williams had always had a profound interest in architecture, deepened by his undergraduate years reading for a History degree, and his remarks to Holst, despite their slightly tongue-in-cheek tone, reveal an intense, almost mystical appreciation of the modern built environment – here deemed more impressive than one of the wonders of the natural world. Indeed, his religious references rather knowingly invoke the trope of the urban sublime, whereby modern writers responded to cityscapes in terms hitherto reserved for depictions of the natural world at its most grandiose. He later counted his first sight of the New York skyline among the most striking imaginative encounters of his life, a select group that included his first visit to Stonehenge and, less surprisingly, his first encounter with English folk song.⁹

London in the early twentieth century could offer little to rival the architectural drama of New York. Away from the imperial pomp of Westminster and Whitehall and the natural grandeur of the Thames,

⁷ Quoted in *UVWB*, 348. ⁸ *VWL226*: ?5 June 1922.

⁹ Vaughan Williams, 'A Musical Autobiography' (1950), in *NMOE*, 177–94 (180).

haphazard private development, abetted by weak municipal government and a limited appetite for broader state intervention, had largely deprived the city of the kind of sweeping man-made vistas that characterized Paris or Berlin. But if London failed to impress with a purposeful civic vision, it inspired awe, and frequently horror, in terms of its sheer vastness. With a population that by 1900 exceeded those of Paris, Berlin, St Petersburg, and Moscow combined,¹⁰ a sprawling and ever-expanding geographical reach far beyond that of any of its peers, and a seemingly endless churning of development and redevelopment, observers increasingly resorted to metaphors of cancerous or fungal growth to decry the city's woes. Laissez-faire attitudes also hampered efforts to counter the existential challenges to public health and order that exploded during the nineteenth century – disease, pollution, crime – as desperate poverty and overcrowding co-existed with staggering wealth and luxury. Huge areas of the East End and beyond, with their rabbit-warren slums and terrible deprivation, were routinely dubbed 'Darkest London': here, in the heart of the empire, was a *terra incognita* as mysterious as any in the 'Darkest Africa' of the colonial imagination, a parallel which likewise encouraged dehumanization and exploitation on the one hand, but also missionary agendas and reformist zeal on the other. Visions of London as an unmappable, fog-bound, and hellish labyrinth had emerged as early as the work of Blake and De Quincey around 1800, and would proliferate in Dickens, Conan Doyle, Conrad, and others;¹¹ towards the end of the century, Walter Sickert and others would begin to represent the darker side of the city in painting. By then there had in fact been some amelioration of the worst of London's social ills, but anxiety about them, shot through with a fear of revolution, was reaching a new height – even a sense of panic.

Little explicit trace of this ominous backdrop, or indeed direct representation of London at all, is found in most British music of the period. The menacing shadows that cross Elgar's otherwise ebullient overture *Cockaigne (In London Town)* (1901) offer a rare exception. But 'Darkest London' looms large in Vaughan Williams's *A London Symphony* – to return to where we began. For all his appreciation of modern city life, and of London in particular, as a broadly Fabian socialist the composer was acutely aware of its human costs and growing crisis. Struggle and tragedy,

¹⁰ White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, 4–5.

¹¹ See Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998). In 1957 Vaughan Williams would set Blake's nightmarish poem 'London' as one of the *Ten Blake Songs* for voice and oboe.

along with a deep vein of compassion, run throughout *A London Symphony*, despite its many celebratory elements.

I have argued at length elsewhere for the landmark significance of this symphony, not only for Vaughan Williams and British music but for the broader relationship of early twentieth-century music to urban experience.¹² It is in scope and scale the most ambitious musical work to thematize the modern city composed anywhere before 1914. In doing so it evokes psychological and experiential tropes that by now had become central to modernism across the arts, but whose metropolitan roots had *in music* remained largely implicit – the collision of multiple social identities, temporalities, and spatial perspectives (reflecting in large part new technologies transforming concepts of time and space), and the associated alienation and even fragmentation of the unitary self. In making the urban connection *explicit*, the *London* employs a wider range of musical materials than the composer had ever made use of before – folk song among them, but now juxtaposed with ragtime rhythms, street noise, and much else – and in an environment of sometimes violent dissonance and rhythmic dislocation, often arising from divergent textural layers. The work also succeeds – remarkably, I would argue – in integrating these diverse materials within an overarching symphonic and tonal framework. Within the context of a symphony about London, world city, this created a powerful cultural and social metaphor; a metaphor perhaps more optimistic – though with heavy qualification – than was typical of high modernism’s engagement with the metropolis, and one that assimilated the past as much as it rejected it.

It is true that after the First World War, Vaughan Williams’s concept of musical nationalism narrowed, if more in his public pronouncements than in his music (here is not the place to unpack his broader attitudes to urban popular musics, which were always complex). He never engaged so directly again with the urban subject matter of his prewar symphony. Optimism about the modern world, and its urban crucible of the city, may have proved difficult to sustain after witnessing the horrors of mechanized slaughter. Nevertheless, as late as 1951 Vaughan Williams wrote of *A London Symphony*, ‘with all its faults I love it still – indeed it is my

¹² ‘Tonality on the Town: Orchestrating the Metropolis in Vaughan Williams’s *A London Symphony*’, in Felix Wörner, Ullrich Scheideler, and Philip Rupprecht (eds.), *Tonality 1900–1950: Concept and Practice* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 187–202. See also Frogley, ‘History and Geography: The Early Orchestral Works and the First Three Symphonies’, in *CCVW*, 81–105 (95–100).

favourite of my family of 6'.¹³ This should not be such a surprise: in fundamental ways, it articulated a comprehensive musical and spiritual vision that would underpin the rest of his varied career, and yet prove difficult ever again to embody within a single work. We would do well to remember that this vision originated in the streets of the world's largest metropolis as much as in the fields and hedgerows of rural England.

¹³ *VWL2277*: Vaughan Williams to John Barbirolli, 6 October 1951. Three more symphonies were to follow, but one suspects that this affection for the London work remained unchanged.