

Vaughan Williams – A Sea Symphony

NOTES FOR THE CHORUS

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the work of the American poet Walt Whitman seemed to many to capture the essence of the new age, portraying an optimistic vision of a world inspired by human and scientific endeavour and the spirit of adventure. As well as Vaughan Williams, several other British composers - notably Holst and Delius - turned to Whitman's groundbreaking collection, *Leaves of Grass*, for inspiration. The radical, humanistic philosophy of Whitman's verse held a particular appeal for Vaughan Williams. He had already produced some songs to Whitman texts when in 1903 he began to think about writing something on an altogether larger scale. First came *Toward the Unknown Region* (1907), also a setting of Whitman. Then in 1909, after a gestation of nearly six years, he completed *A Sea Symphony*, the great choral and orchestral work which, more than any other, put Vaughan Williams firmly on the musical map when it was first performed in October 1910 (only a few weeks after his *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*).

The *Sea Symphony* is a remarkable achievement. Though in his thirties, he was still a relatively inexperienced composer and had so far made only a modest impression on the musical world, yet for his first symphony he chose to write a choral symphony, a hugely ambitious project and one with almost no precedent. True, Beethoven and Mendelssohn had both produced choral symphonies, but these are essentially orchestral works with the addition of soloists and chorus in the last movement. The closest parallel is Mahler's monumental 8th symphony. However, since this was premiered only a month before the *Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams must have been unaware of it for most if not all of the time that he was composing his own work.

Vaughan Williams proved more than equal to the challenging task he had set himself. British choral music had enjoyed a long and distinguished tradition, from Purcell and Handel through to Stanford, Parry and Elgar, but the striking originality of the *Sea Symphony*, the masterly handling of the orchestral and choral forces, its boldness, energy and vivid orchestration, set it apart as a wholly new and important addition to the choral repertoire. Even more significantly, it hailed the triumphant arrival of a new and powerful voice in English music. Vaughan Williams had succeeded in creating a definitive musical style drawn from genuinely English roots, rather than continuing, as his immediate predecessors had chosen to do, in the Austro-German tradition that had dominated European music since Beethoven's time.

The composer selected verses from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for the first three movements and from his *Passage to India* for the last. Whitman uses images of brave sailors exploring the vast oceans as a colourful metaphor for the voyage through life of the human soul, a universal message that must have held considerable personal significance for Vaughan Williams, who at that time was still striving for recognition.

General notes:

Cut all tied quavers, unless marked to the contrary

Movement Number	Page Number / Rehearsal figure	Bar reference	Parts	Instruction
1				STAND ON SIGNAL BEFORE START
	1	3	All	Run through after "Behold": Tenuto on "the"
	2	3	AB	Run through after "breast"
		5	ST	ε out after "ships". T also ε out after "sails"
		6	S	Run through after "sails"
			AB	ξ out after "wind": A also run through after "see"
	3	1	SAT	ε out at commas, but B run through after "see"
	4	4-5	All	Tenuto on quavers
	6	3	All	Run through after "Behold": Tenuto on "the"
		4	All	Run through after "sea"
		6	All	ε out after "itself"
	9	2-3	All	Breathe after "spray", but not "wind"
	10	4 / 8	All	"Seas" and "ships" should be full length
		last	ST	ε out after "spreading"
	11	6		Breathe after "spray", but not "winds"
	13	line 2	All	One breath for the whole phrase
	14	6	SAT	Ring p marking
		8	All	Run through after "surge"
	15	1	TB	Use a big "s" to mark the fp
		6-8	All	p but mark notes with slight accents
	16	9	All	ε out after "surprise"
	17	14	All	ε out after "ocean"
		line 3	ATB	Breathe at commas
	20	1.4 b.2	All	Run through after "ever"
	23	last	B	Run through after "spiritual"
	26	5/7	A	ε out after "captains" and "mates"
		9 on	S	1 st Sopranos only: ε out after "captains" and "mates"
		11	A	ε out after "them"
	27	1	T	Tutti tenors, but gentle – breathe at commas
		6	B	Run through after "captains"
	28-33		All	Breathe at commas
	33	8	T	Breathe after "death"
		12	S	
	34	6	S	Breathe after "man", then after "death" in b.10
		5-7	AB	Breathe after "death"
		6-7	T	Breath only after second "death"
	39	1	All	ε out after "universal"
	42	4	All	ε out after "sailors"
	43	3-4	All	ε out after "flag" and "rest"
		4	All	Molto tenuto
		6	All	Run through after flag
	44	3 on 5 on	A T	Run through after "Behold" and "sea"; dim on last note of phrase
	45	4 on	All	No visible breaths to the end – stagger!
II			All	SIT
	47	1.3	A	Tutti altos, but very gentle
	49	1.3	All	STAND
		1.4	All	Tutti but very gentle
	51	7	All	Run through after "souls"
	52	5/7	All	Run through after "souls"
	53	4	SB	Run through after "souls"
III				OVERDO ALL DICTION, especially in soft passages
	58	last (and A next bar)	ATB	Run through after "Below"
	59	4	ATB	ε out after "hastening"
	60	11	All	Big Diminuendo!
		12	SA	Run through after "flow"

	61	2	SA	ffzmp on "winds" then cresc where marked
		7-8	All	Small accent on start of "waves"
		11	All	ε out after "gurgling"
	62	penultimate	S	Run through after "Waves"
		13 on	TB	2nds sing lowest 1sts surnames a-l sing top, m-z sing middle Basses ignore 4 th part where it exists
	63	6	S	Run through after "Waves"
		12 on	AT	Run through after "liquid" & "uneven"
	65	16-19	All	Mark quavers with good articulation
	67	3	All	ε out after "ocean"
		15	All	ε out after "passes"
	68	2&8	All	ε out after "frolicsome"
	69	15 & 17	All	Lift slightly after "mot" to mark the rhythm
	70	12	All	Mark "fragments" staccato
	71	1	All	NB New, faster tempo
	72	8 on	All	THIS SECTION IS TO BE SUNG!
	75	7	TB	Add mp cresc marking
		7 on	All	Add accents to "low" and "my"
		8/10	All	Run through after "below"
	78	6	All	Mark dynamic as f
		7	All	Mark dynamic as mf
		8	All	Mark dynamic as mp
	80	16	All	Articulate "low-ing" clearly at the end
IV	81	2	All	Run through after "Rondure"
	82	6	SB	Run through after "day"
		10	SB	Diminuendo on last two notes
	84	13	All	Correct words to read "thought begins"
	85	10 & 13	TB	ε out after "descending" and "appear"
	86	2	B	Run through after "yearning"
	87	12-end	SA	Semichorus (also p.88/9)
	88	9	TB	θ out after "explorations"
	89	10	B	ε out after "mains"
	90	1	B	"t" on the rest – don't chop the quaver
	91	12	All	θ out after "Finally"
	94	4,5	All	θ out after "singing"
	95	1	All	SIT AT L
	101	line 3	All	STAND AT PIU LENTO
	102	end	All	ε out after "transcendent" (pronounce as "dunt" rather than "dent")
	103	5	All	"breath" needs to be full length – don't chop quaver
	104	3	All	ε out after "universes"
	106	16	All	θ out after "suns"
	107 – 110		All	Write your counting into your copy! Without fail!
	112	1	All	θ out before "steer"
	113	1 on	All	THIS SECTION IS TO BE SUNG!
	115	2	SA	Run through after "forth"
	116-117		All	Soft, but don't be late on these leads!
	120	6	All	Clear lift after "forth"
	123	9 on	ATB	Don't breathe at commas between "farther"s. Keep the Cs very bright indeed!

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