

SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

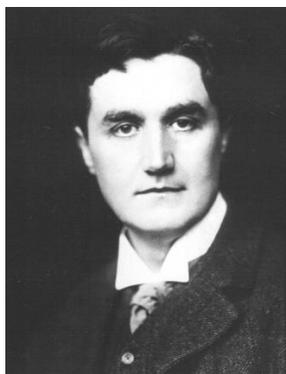
ABOUT THE MUSIC

SHOWCASING OUR OWN | DEC 4, 5 & 6, 2021

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis



COMPOSER: born October 12, 1872, Down Ampney, England; died August 26, 1958, London

WORK COMPOSED: 1910; rev. 1913, 1919

WORLD PREMIERE: Vaughan Williams conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in the premiere performance at Gloucester Cathedral on September 6, 1910, for the Three Choirs Festival

INSTRUMENTATION: Two string orchestras of unequal size, the first consisting of approximately 40 players, including a solo string quartet. The second orchestra is more like an expanded string quartet, with 2 first violins, 2 second violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos and a double bass. Vaughan Williams also specified in his score that the second orchestra should be physically separate from the first and from the solo quartet.

ESTIMATED DURATION: 17 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

In 1906, Ralph Vaughan Williams was asked by Percy Dearmer, secretary of the London branch of the Christian Social Union, to undertake a revision of the Anglican hymnal. A life-long atheist, Vaughan Williams was startled by this invitation but nonetheless agreed. During this time, Vaughan Williams was also developing an interest in the English musical tradition, and he knew the best examples of this tradition lay in the wealth of English folk and religious music. Dearmer assured Vaughan Williams the job would take about two months and would probably only cost him a few pounds in expenses. In reality, Vaughan Williams spent over two years and 250 pounds – a considerable amount of money in early 20th-century England – before the revised hymnal was completed.

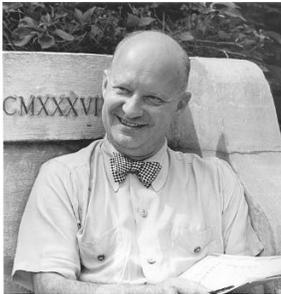
Despite the length and expense of the assignment, Vaughan Williams considered it time and money well spent. As a young composer, he had studied composition with Max Bruch and Maurice Ravel, from whom he learned valuable compositional techniques. However, Vaughan Williams realized he would need to develop his own musical language if he were ever to be successful. He remarked, “I know now that two years of close association with some of the best (as well as some of the worst) tunes in the world was a better musical education than any amount of sonatas and fugues.”

As he worked on the hymnal, Vaughan Williams discovered Renaissance composer and organist Thomas Tallis’ setting of “When Rising from the Bed of Death.” Vaughan Williams was taken by the gentle lyricism and quiet melancholy of the music, and used its main themes to craft his own set of variations. These Variations became the

first of Vaughan Williams' works to definitively establish him as a composer with a unique voice. Critics and audiences warmed to the unusual modal sonorities of the music and its rich expansiveness. At its premiere, the London *Times* music critic wrote, "The work is wonderful because it seems to lift one into some unknown region of musical thought and feeling ... one is never sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new ... it cannot be assigned to a time or a school, but it is full of visions."

PAUL HINDEMITH

Concerto for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Harp and Orchestra



COMPOSER: born November 16, 1895, Hanau, near Frankfurt; died December 28, 1963, Frankfurt

WORK COMPOSED: 1949. Commissioned by the Alice M. Ditson Fund at Columbia University in New York for the fifth annual Festival of Contemporary American Music.

WORLD PREMIERE: Thor Johnson led the CBS Symphony Orchestra on May 15, 1949, at Columbia University

INSTRUMENTATION: solo flute, solo oboe, solo clarinet, solo bassoon, solo harp, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, solo trombone, timpani and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 15 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Paul Hindemith had an unusual ambition: to write a solo concerto for every instrument in the orchestra. The overall lack of concertos for non-traditional solo instruments provided an opportunity for Hindemith to create concerto literature for these often-overlooked instruments. Hindemith eventually completed concertos for violin, viola, cello, clarinet, horn, trumpet, organ and piano, as well as a concerto for full orchestra and several concerto grosso works for small ensembles (woodwinds and brass), with chamber orchestra.

Hindemith pursued several successful musical careers. He was an excellent violist, and as a young man supported himself with orchestra section work and extensive concert tours. He was also a noted pedagogue who taught at Berlin's prestigious Hochschule für Musik. Hindemith and his wife fled Germany in the late 1930s and eventually came to America, where he taught at several universities, most notably Yale and Cornell. Hindemith's students at Yale included Lukas Foss, Norman Dello Joio and Mitch Leigh, among many others.

For most of his musical life, Hindemith championed the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* (utility music). The term has several meanings, including music written for a specific purpose or occasion, and music written for talented amateurs rather than virtuosos. At the root of this meaning is the belief that making music should be an inclusive activity, rather than something only for top-level professional musicians. To this end, Hindemith's style of *Gebrauchsmusik* incorporates old genres (like the Baroque concerto grosso) with clear contrapuntal writing and the harmonic language of his own time.

Hindemith's Concerto for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Harp and Strings exemplifies this style. As with Baroque versions of the concerto grosso, Hindemith features a small group of soloists who play with – and sometimes against – the full orchestra.

When Hindemith found out the Festival of Contemporary American Music coincided with his 25th wedding anniversary, he asked that the premiere take place on May 15, the exact date. As a surprise for his wife

Gertrude, Hindemith based the third movement on the opening phrase of Mendelssohn's famous "Wedding March" from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Throughout the brief final movement, we hear this delightful musical homage, first in the clarinet and later in other instruments.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 5



COMPOSER: born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia; died August 9, 1975, Moscow, U.S.S.R.

WORK COMPOSED: Shostakovich began writing his fifth symphony on April 18, 1937, and finished it on July 20 of that year

WORLD PREMIERE: Yevgeny Mravinsky led the Leningrad Philharmonic on November 21, 1937, in Leningrad, as part of a concert commemorating the Bolshevik Revolution

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, orchestra bells, snare drum, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, xylophone, celeste, piano, 2 harps and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 46 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Everyone in the concert hall in Leningrad on that chilly night in November 1937 knew that Dmitri Shostakovich's artistic reputation, and very possibly his life, were on the line. They were there to hear the premiere of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony. Before the night was over, they also witnessed the dramatic rehabilitation of Shostakovich as the Soviet Union's preeminent composer.

Earlier in the decade, Shostakovich had been fêted as the darling of Soviet cultural critics, but in 1936 the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* published a vicious denunciation of Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. Shostakovich's response to the *Pravda* review was to immediately withdraw his Fourth Symphony, which he was then rehearsing. (He did not perform it in public until 1961, eight years after Joseph Stalin's death.) This was not an overreaction; Shostakovich had many friends and associates who were "disappeared" or executed for reasons far less public. Any response Shostakovich made to his critics had to be meticulously planned, lest he suffer the same fate. With his Fifth Symphony, which a reviewer famously called a "Soviet artist's response to just criticism," Shostakovich both mollified government critics and simultaneously reasserted his artistic integrity.

Although the Fifth Symphony is an "absolute" piece of music (i.e., there is no extra-musical story or narrative attached to it), Shostakovich did include a brief description of "a lengthy spiritual battle, crowned by victory" in the program notes. The *Moderato* sets the tone for that "spiritual battle," beginning with the strings' menacing theme. Its dotted rhythms suggest a bitter march toward an implacable foe. Later, the violins introduce a lyrical second theme, in contrast to the angular rhythmic quality of the first.

The playful *Allegretto* juxtaposes frisky winds with stentorian brasses. In the trio section a solo violin teases and flirts, before being interrupted by the full orchestra, which transforms the violin's merry tune into a pompous, galumphing parody of itself. A whiff of something grotesque permeates this music.

The *Largo* is the emotional core of the Fifth Symphony, and its power lies in its poignant melodies. Here Shostakovich gives the brass section a rest and showcases other instruments: first strings, then a solo flute and

finally the full orchestra, *sans* brasses. Wistful cries from the oboe, a sobbing upwelling of notes from the clarinet and a brief comment from the flute follow before the whole orchestra comes together, amidst quivering string tremolos, in heart-wrenching sadness.

The *Allegro non troppo* opens with a firestorm, announced by pounding timpani and a blazing brass fanfare. Shostakovich returns to this theme again and again, and unleashes his seemingly endless power of invention with defiant abandon. In a quiet interlude that directly precedes the coda, Shostakovich quotes a song in the violins (later in the harp) that he set to words of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin: “And the waverings pass away / From my tormented soul / As a new and brighter day / Brings visions of pure gold.” Despite this quotation and the blast of brassy triumph that ends the Fifth Symphony, Shostakovich, perhaps enigmatically, called the conclusion an “irreparable tragedy.”

At the end of the premiere, a member of the audience remembered: “The whole audience leapt to their feet and erupted into wild applause – a demonstration of their outrage at all the hounding poor Mitya had been through. Everyone kept saying the same thing: ‘That was his answer, and it was a good one.’ [Shostakovich] came out white as a sheet, biting his lips. I think he was close to tears.”

The Fifth Symphony also succeeded as a musical work, despite negative responses from some critics who saw it as a musical capitulation to the restrictions placed on artists’ works, or a shameful compromise by a world-class composer with the dictatorial political system in which he worked. *Pravda*, unsurprisingly, termed it “a farrago of chaotic nonsensical sounds.” However, audiences both within and outside the Soviet Union hailed the Fifth Symphony as a masterpiece, and it has become Shostakovich’s most popular and most frequently performed symphony.

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years, and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Ms. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR’s “Performance Today” (now heard on American Public Media).

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