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Ralph Vaughan Williams: Violist and Composer **Jonathan Karanikas**

Contact the author care of the ANZVS Journal Editor,
Olwyn Green cogreen@actrix.co.nz

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Ralph Vaughan Williams: Violist and Composer

Jonathan Karanikas

Prelude

Few would deny the monumental importance of Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) in the history of our western musical tradition, and in English music in particular. Although Elgar succeeded in producing music with a definite 'English' quality, his style was generally continental, sharing an affinity with the composers of Germany. Vaughan Williams, however, created a style that was 'purely' English, rooted in the very heart of English language and culture: folk song. Due to his assimilation of folk song, his music is primarily melodic in nature, with the other elements of music, especially harmony, seeming to flow out of the innate qualities of melody. It was his "essentially melodic approach to music"¹ that has determined his success as a composer and his popularity among audiences. RVW, as he was referred to by his friends, besides being a composer, was also active as a musician in various other capacities: he was a conductor, conducting the London Symphony Orchestra and London Philharmonic Orchestra on certain occasions, and also contributing an article on conducting to the 1904 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. He was a teacher, at the Royal Academy of Music, training many of the next generation of England's leading composers, including Gordon Jacob and Sir Arthur Bliss. Also an editor, he edited the English Hymnal, two volumes of Purcell's odes, and a set of folk songs which he had collected. He was a writer and a critic, writing on a wide variety of musical topics from folk song to fugue. Vaughan Williams, in addition to being a composer, conductor, teacher, writer, and critic, was also a violist. Indeed, it is interesting to note how many other composers of the first rank were viola players, among them J.S. Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Glinka, Dvořák, and Elgar. However, Vaughan Williams' viola playing, unlike that of the aforementioned composers, was a significant element in the creation of many of his musical masterpieces.

¹ Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1961), p. 208

Vaughan Williams the Violist

Like Elgar, who at first aspired to be a professional solo violinist, Vaughan Williams initially intended a career as a professional performer: not as a soloist, but an orchestral violist.² He trained as a violinist during his years at Rottingdean Preparatory School; after commencing studies at Charterhouse in 1887, he switched from violin to viola, and played in the school orchestra. His experience in the orchestra fermented his love of music and caused him to direct himself toward a career as an orchestral musician. As the end of his school studies approached, his mother and other relatives asked him what career he would like to pursue. The young Vaughan Williams replied, that "music was all he cared for",³ and that he wished to earn his living as an orchestral violist. His parents, belonging to an upper-class British family that named Charles Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood among its forebears, were naturally disinclined to accept their son's choice of an occupation that was, to their social standing, of a lower class. Despite Vaughan Williams' determination, his parents would not allow it, but compromised by allowing him to study to be an organist. He eventually abandoned the organ in favour of composition. However, as a violist, though he never rose to the same level of technical proficiency as other composer-violists (such as Dvořák or Hindemith), he remained a viola player all his life. He continued to play the instrument in various orchestral ensembles, during and after his lengthy period of tertiary studies.⁴ He even managed to continue his viola playing while serving in World War I.⁵

² Michael Hurd, *Vaughan Williams*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 19

³ Ibid

⁴ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: a Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 35, 56, 75, 161

⁵ Ibid, p. 119

⁶ A short autobiography of himself, written as a contribution to Hubert Foss' biography of the composer.

Vaughan Williams considered his experience as an orchestral violist to be the first instruction that he received in the art of orchestration. He recalled, in his *Chapter of Musical Autobiography*,⁶ the first example of such instruction. It occurred during a school rehearsal of the 2nd movement of Beethoven's *First Symphony*: due to the seating position of the violas (there were only two: Vaughan Williams and a teacher from the school) in the centre of the orchestra, Vaughan Williams was able to absorb the combination of the instrumental sounds. Particularly striking, he noted, was the sustained horn note which enriched the viola's repeated notes.⁷ He referred to this experience as his "first practical lesson in orchestration."⁸ (This episode seems to give credit to the view held by some that violists make better composers due to their orchestral seating position; if not better composers then at least better

⁷ Possibly mm. 75-81

⁸ Hubert Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams*, (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1950), pp. 19-20

orchestrators.) Vaughan Williams highly valued his orchestral experience; he regretted, later in his career, that he did not have as much orchestral experience as his friend Gustav Holst. However, he remained a life-long viola player, and his love of the instrument was to be evidenced by his special treatment of it in his music.

The Viola in Vaughan Williams' Music

Vaughan Williams' special fondness of the viola led him to assign to it many prominent parts in his compositions. His output includes solos for the viola in almost every genre in which he composed: symphony, concerto, opera, chamber music, and art song. From his early days as a composer he was writing for his own instrument: a sketchbook kept during his formative years at Cambridge reveals sketches for a "viola piece".⁹ Even during his youth he was interested in composing for the instrument. Sometime between 1879 and 1883, the young Vaughan Williams sent a letter to his nurse's brother, Henry Wager, an organist and teacher, enquiring about writing for the viola. He received a reply explaining the fundamentals of writing for the viola, illustrating the range of the instrument with a musical example. Along with the letter Wager enclosed a copy of the viola part of a Schubert quintet.¹⁰

⁹ Michael Kennedy, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 404

Vaughan Williams' contributions to solo literature for the viola¹¹ are his *Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra* (1934), *Flos Campi* (1925) for viola, small wordless chorus, and small orchestra, and the *Romance* for viola and pianoforte (Date of composition unknown). Of his chamber music, the *String Quartet No.2 in a-minor* (1944), and the *Four Hymns* (1914) for tenor voice, viola obbligato, and pianoforte give marked prominence to the viola. His symphonic and orchestral compositions also abound with solos for the leader of the viola section.

¹⁰ Ursula Vaughan Williams, pp.13-14

¹¹ Although others of Vaughan Williams' works are published for viola, including the *Six Studies in English Folk Song* and the somewhat spurious *Fantasia on 'Greensleeves'*, they are not part of his original contribution to the viola repertoire and are therefore not discussed here.

Vaughan Williams' use of the viola as a solo instrument, in various musical genres, began with orchestral viola solos. Throughout his compositional career, it became a habit of his to give a prominent role to the leader of the viola section. "Such a viola solo is almost peculiar to Vaughan Williams' scores," wrote British violist Bernard Shore. "So much has Vaughan Williams made the effect his own that we think of him whenever another composer ventures to make use of it."¹² His inclusion of such solos seems to be an innovation of his own. There is no precedence for it to be found among the works with which he would have been familiar as a developing composer or studied at some time. There are no examples of viola solos in the orchestral works of his teachers Stanford and Parry, nor in the music of Elgar and Brahms, among others, whose music he carefully studied. One of the earliest examples of such a solo in Vaughan Williams' music is found in his 'symphonic impression' *In the Fen Country* (1904), written a few years after he concluded his final period of study at Cambridge University. This work ends with a benedictory viola solo, creating an effective closing for the tranquil, mysterious atmosphere of the work. The *Norfolk Rhapsody No.1* (1906), based on folk songs Vaughan Williams collected in the Norfolk county (on the eastern side of England), opens with a lyrical viola solo (see Example 1 below), lightly accompanied, marked "freely, as if improvising." The solo (16 measures long) is an elaboration of the folk song "The Captain's Apprentice".

¹² Bernard Shore, *Sixteen Symphonies*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949), p. 295

Example 1: *Norfolk Rhapsody No.1*, mm.17-21, viola solo



Throughout his symphonies, there are numerous solos for the principal violist; the most notable of which are found in *A London Symphony* (1913) and *A Pastoral Symphony* (1921). His first mature work and arguably one of his finest, the *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis* (1911), also includes an important part for solo viola. This is perhaps the most lengthy and most well known of Vaughan Williams' orchestral viola solos. The *Fantasia* includes solos for two violins, viola, and cello; however, the viola solo stands apart from the others, as

it has more of an individual function in the work. Vaughan Williams' orchestral viola solos are most often in the middle register of the instrument, rhapsodical, "free" in regard to time, and sparsely accompanied. His habit of giving such orchestral solos to the viola was not unconnected to his own experience as a violist, and lasted throughout his entire compositional career: the last composition on which he was working and left unfinished at his death, *The First Nowell* (1958), a nativity play for soloists, chorus, and orchestra, includes an extensive solo for the viola.¹³

In much of his chamber music, Vaughan Williams gave to the viola a prominent position in a variety of instrumental combinations. In the meritorious *Four Hymns* (c.1914), he included an obbligato part for viola alongside the pianoforte and tenor voice. The viola part includes much double, triple, and quadruple stopping, revealing his understanding of the instrument. Vaughan Williams' first two string quartets, an early, but significant, unpublished *Quartet in c-minor* (1898), and his first numbered work in this genre, the *Quartet No. 1 in g-minor* (1908), do much to highlight the viola's individuality in such an ensemble. The second movement of the c-minor Quartet begins with a melody, reminiscent of folk song, played by the viola. The g-minor Quartet, more musically imaginative than its predecessor, opens with the viola's statement of the theme, which is then presented in various other colours and moods rather than developed. In this work, Vaughan Williams adopted a practice of marking certain passages with the word 'solo' to indicate to the players when their part was to be most prominent. Perhaps Vaughan Williams' best quartet, the *Quartet No.2 in a-minor* (1944) 'For Jean on her Birthday', is well known for its prominent viola part. The viola presents the main melodic material in each of the four movements and closes the first two; the viola is also the only un-muted instrument in the Scherzo (a similar instance to Brahms' *Quartet in B-flat, Op.67*), and has a cadenza in that movement. The 'Jean' of the dedication was Miss Jean Stewart, violist in the Menges Quartet, who had suggested to Vaughan Williams that he should write something for the Quartet to play. Vaughan Williams' sent the first two movements, the *Prelude* and *Romanze*, to her as a birthday present in February 1943, with a note, saying "Alas the Scherzo refuses to materialize and will have to wait for next birthday".¹⁴ The work was completed within a year and first performed by the Menges Quartet at the London National Gallery on 12th October 1944. It was given two performances in the same concert. His *Phantasy Quintet* (c.1912), scored for the same ensemble as Mozart's string quintets, assigns to the two violas an important position of centrality in the structure of this four-movement work. The first viola begins the work, unaccompanied, with a ten-measure pentatonic theme that is used in every movement. Here also, Vaughan Williams marks the word 'solo' in the parts to remind the players to bring out certain passages.

¹³ Kennedy, p. 614; the manuscript is in private collection

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 261

Vaughan Williams' only work for viola and pianoforte is the *Romanze*. It is a lyrical piece of music, featuring wide-ranging melodies exploring the different sonorities of the instrument; it also presents numerous technical challenges to the performer. The date of composition of this work is unknown. The manuscript was found among the composer's papers after his death, with no clue as to his intentions for it. Unlike virtually all of Vaughan Williams' works, it lacks a dedication, although both Michael Kennedy and Bernard Shore believe that it was intended for Lionel Tertis. The MS (held in the British Museum [Catalogue No.: Add.50863]) is extant in a copy by his first wife, Adeline Vaughan Williams; thus, it could have been written no later than 1951 (the year of her death). The few manuscripts of his music extant in her hand are from the 1930's (such as the MS vocal score of *Riders to the Sea* [1932]), and it is not improbable that the *Romanze* also comes from that decade, and was perhaps a discarded movement from the *Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra* (1934). These two works bear close similarities in structure, texture, and harmonic style. The fact that the manuscript is complete with pianoforte accompaniment is not uncommon to Vaughan Williams' method, like that of his teacher Ravel, of writing orchestral works or accompaniments first for pianoforte or pianoforte duet, and then orchestrating them. (There are some passages in the *Romanze* accompaniment which seem to indicate that it was intended to be orchestrated: for example, see mm.62-69.) The composition of the *Viola Suite* was quite difficult for Vaughan Williams; at one time he doubted that he would ever finish it,¹⁵ and it most likely underwent many revisions before the first performance. It is highly probable that the *Romanze* was a discarded movement from the *Viola Suite* (intended perhaps as a third movement for Group 2, the only group in the *Suite* with two rather than three movements).

Vaughan Williams' two 'concerti' for viola, the *Viola Suite* and *Flos Campi*, are both scored for an orchestra of relatively small proportions. The viola is the centre of attention, with the

¹⁵ Ursula Vaughan Williams, p. 203

orchestra providing a colourful background but not contributing much thematically, unlike other concertante works in more traditional forms. Neither *Flos Campi* nor the *Viola Suite* are concerti in the 19th-century application of the term, being on a smaller scale and not adhering to traditional formal procedures. They are both a diverse yet unified set of shorter, concise movements: six in *Flos Campi* and eight in the *Viola Suite*, organized into three ‘groups’.¹⁶ Both works exemplify the melodic nature of Vaughan Williams’ compositional style. *Flos Campi* could almost be described as pure melody: a combination of long melodic strands masterfully woven together to create a remarkable musical fabric. The *Viola Suite*, not as intricately designed as *Flos Campi*, is structured as a relatively homophonic presentation of attractive thematic material, by the viola, enhanced by imaginative harmonies and the colourful scoring of the orchestral accompaniment. His wonderful orchestration in this work, as Frank Howes has said, “contributes a great deal to its beauty...and value”.¹⁷ Both works are examples of Vaughan Williams’ fluent writing for his own instrument.

¹⁶ Group I: Prelude, Carol, Christmas Dance; Group II: Ballad, Moto Perpetuo; Group III: Musette, Polka Melancolique, Galop.

These two works, *Flos Campi* and the *Viola Suite*, in addition to having been inspired by his fondness of the instrument, were also due in part to the influence of the virtuoso who dominated British viola playing during the first half of the 20th-century, Lionel Tertis. Tertis was both the dedicatee and first performer of the *Viola Suite* and *Flos Campi*. Although Vaughan Williams usually composed his concerti with a certain performer in mind, only the *Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra*, and not *Flos Campi*, was originally written with the intention of having Tertis as its first interpreter. Vaughan Williams, in a letter (7th February 1951) to Hubert Foss correcting certain errors in Foss’ biography of the composer, wrote: “*Flos Campi* was not written for Tertis, though it was first performed by him. The *Viola Suite* was composed for him.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Frank Howes, *The Music of Vaughan Williams*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1954), p. 115

Technical Writing in Vaughan Williams’ Viola Music

View on Virtuosity

Vaughan Williams’ viola music is accessible to a competent and mature performer; it is both comfortable to play and suitable to the instrument. It is free from what Sir Henry Wood called ‘black patches’, that is, certain unplayable or unnatural passages, often found in works by certain composers for instruments which they do not play. Even though his viola music is technically challenging, it does not approach instrumental virtuosity. Vaughan Williams was evidently aware of this, though he made no effort to alter it, for it was rooted in his long-held belief that the music was far more important than display of technique. Virtuosity was to him mostly a superficial element. As a result, he harboured a lingering distrust of virtuosos which he never fully overcame.¹⁹ All of his concerti are unlike the larger-scale, virtuosic works of his contemporaries; the technical challenges that are contained in his works are only subsidiary to the musical content. Vaughan Williams did struggle in finding what might be the right balance between music and technical ornamentation. He betrayed this and his disinclination toward virtuosity in a letter (1932) to Holst, describing John Ireland’s early violin sonata as “a little spoilt by the desire to shine and show that he [Ireland] understands the instruments. I wonder how much a composer *ought* [sic] to know of instrumental technique”.²⁰ He then went on to add a similar criticism of fellow violist-composer Frank Bridge, describing his music as “the deepest abyss of writing “effectively””. To Vaughan Williams, writing ‘effectively’²¹ had been taken by composers to represent the need to display the technical potential of the instrument (and its performer), regardless of the musical result. He saw truly effective writing more as a matter of writing for the instrument in a way that enhanced the musical material itself, avoiding virtuosic display just for its own sake. Though his viola music is technically challenging, it emphasizes the melodic potential of the instrument rather than its technical capabilities alone.

¹⁸ Kennedy, p. 211

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 164-166

Technical Style and Features

Vaughan Williams, in his compositions, treated the viola primarily as a melodic instrument. His viola works make it apparent that he was mainly concerned with exploring the instrument’s tonal possibilities. Though he was not a technical innovator, his music evidences a fluent handling of the instrument, without a doubt due to his own viola playing.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 376

²¹ Ibid

The technical features in Vaughan Williams’ viola music are, like many of his harmonic procedures, directly related to melody. They originate and grow out from melody, and function to enhance and strengthen it. Consequently, the amount of technical elaboration at a given moment in one of his viola works will nearly always be inversely proportional to the

importance of the melodic entity being presented at that time. This is especially noticeable when a new theme is presented (see, for example, *Viola Suite*, movt. III, mm.29-38, 78-87). The melodies that the viola presents usually begin in the middle register of the instrument and often encompass a wide range, due to different phrases of the melody being placed in different registers. Example 2, from the 4th movement of the *Viola Suite*, illustrates this, where (a) is the same melody as (b), but spread over three octaves:

Example 2: *Viola Suite*, movt. IV (Ballad): (a) mm.38-43; (b) mm.3-8

(See also *Viola Suite*: movt. I, mm.19-23; movt. VIII, mm.4-20; *Romance*, mm.65-71; *Four Hymns*, movt. IV, mm.14-16). Another noticeable feature of his melodies is the frequent and



‘Suite for Viola and Orchestra (Pianoforte), Complete’ by Ralph Vaughan Williams © Oxford University Press 1936. Extracts reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

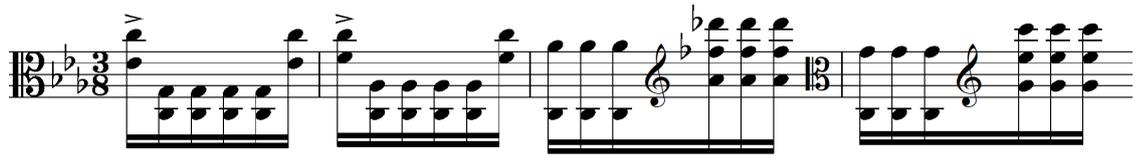
characteristic use of leaps of large intervals (e.g., *Romance*, mm.17, 21, 38, 48; *Viola Suite*, movt. III, mm.80, 84; movt. IV, mm.103-104; movt. V, mm.62, 146-147).

It is apparent that the most significant and recurring technical element in Vaughan Williams’ solo and chamber music for viola is the use of multiple-stopping. Double-stopping is generally employed more frequently than either triple or quadruple-stopping. Though consecutive octaves or sixths do occur (e.g., *Romance*, mm.73-76), passages of double-stops in succession are usually a combination with respect to interval (see Example 3). Double-stopping, marked *non div.*, also occurs in his orchestral viola parts (e.g., *Fourth Symphony*, movt. III, mm.92-94; *London Symphony*, movt. III, mm.39-50).



Example 3: *Viola Suite*, movt. VII (Polka Melancolique), mm.78-82

Triple-stopping occurs less often than double-stopping, but more than quadruple-stopping. It occurs consecutively (e.g., *Viola Suite*, movt. III, mm.3-5, 33-37), and in combination with double and quadruple-stops (e.g., *Four Hymns*, movt. I, mm.50-55). He writes triple-stops with a variety of different spacings. Quadruple-stopping is, naturally, the most widely spaced. While consecutive 4-note chords occur frequently in the viola of other composers (e.g., Walton, *Viola Concerto*, movt. I, mm.70-72), they are not often employed in Vaughan Williams’ viola music. (Measures 97-103 of the *Viola Suite*, movt. III are one of the very few examples.) Vaughan Williams instead often implies the presence of consecutive quadruple-stopping by dividing 4-note chords into pairs of double-stops. This is evident in the following example from his *Viola Suite*, where the pairs of double-stops in each measure imply a single 4-note chord.



Example 4: *Viola Suite*, movt. V (*Moto Perpetuo*), mm.145-148

Natural and artificial harmonics occur in Vaughan Williams' major viola works, usually at the end of a movement, and most often unaccompanied (e.g. *Viola Suite*, movt. VII, Cadenza, m.96). However, they are not as often employed as one might expect from a 20th-century composer who was influenced by Impressionism. Even in a work like the *Pastoral Symphony*, where due to the character of the work harmonics might be expected, Vaughan Williams' uses them in neither the viola part nor the other string parts.

In his viola music there are no notable difficulties in bow technique, apart from a few measures of ricochet in the 8th movement of the *Viola Suite* (mm.21-22), and consecutive down-bows (e.g., *Viola Suite*, 3rd, 7th, and 8th movts.; *Four Hymns*, 1st movt.). The only real challenge is the *Moto Perpetuo*, 5th movement of the *Viola Suite*.

The range of his viola music is generally three octaves from the lowest open string, though his solo works reach the minor 3rd above that, while his orchestral and chamber viola parts approach only the major 3rd below. Vaughan Williams uses the mute often, sometimes for short passages (e.g., *Romance*, mm.80-94), or for whole movements (e.g., 6th movement of *Viola Suite*; 3rd movement of *Four Hymns*). He also includes several cadenza-type passages: two are contained in the *Viola Suite* (movts. VII and VIII) and one in the 3rd movement of the *Quartet No.2*. The beginning of the 1st movement of *Flos Campi* is an unmeasured duet with solo viola and oboe; the *London Symphony* contains an unaccompanied viola solo, as does the *Tallis Fantasia* and the 3rd movement of *Flos Campi*.

Vaughan Williams writing for the viola section as a whole is also worthy of note. He was fond of dividing the section (e.g., in the *Fourth Symphony*, 1st movement), or assigning parts to the first or first and second desks (e.g., *Pastoral Symphony*, 4th movement; *Sea Symphony*, 2nd movement). He frequently gives melodic prominence to the viola section, as in *Job*, the orchestral version of *On Wenlock Edge*, and *A Sea Symphony*; he begins both *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Job* with a melody played by the viola section.

Epilogue

From his first mature composition until his last work left unfinished at his death, from the *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis* to *The First Nowell*, Vaughan Williams wrote numerous solos in various ensembles for his own instrument, the viola, “. . . an instrument which [he] enjoyed playing, and for which he had deep affection”.²² The fact that he played and favoured the instrument affected his propensity to write for the instrument. He has enshrined in his works and solos for viola some of his most beautiful and poetic music. It is no accident that this is so, and not unconnected with the fact that Ralph Vaughan Williams, apart from being a composer, was also a violist.

²² Wilfrid Mellers, *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*, (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), p. 107



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