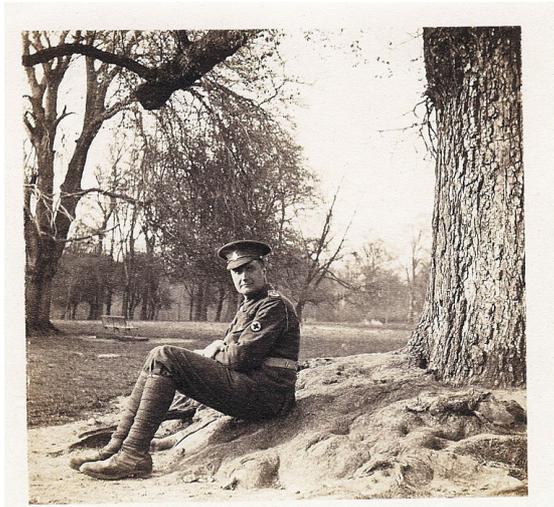


The mystery of the pastoral symphony by Peter Gillman

Fans of Ralph Vaughan Williams are in for a treat. On February 24 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the BBC Concert Orchestra is to perform his Third or Pastoral Symphony, rated by many followers as among his finest works - yet one that it seldom played. What makes it so special - and why is it so rarely performed?

When World War One began in August 1914, Vaughan Williams was already a successful composer. He had written two symphonies and had drafted *A Lark Ascending*. Even though he was 42 he answered the call to arms, joining an ambulance brigade because he felt it was more suited to his age and fitness than a fighting unit. He witnessed the carnage on the Western Front in 1916, carrying the dead and dying away from the front line. He had a spell in the Balkans, retrained as an artillery officer, and returned to the Western Front in 1918.



Vaughan Williams during WWI (Ralph Vaughan Williams Society)

He maintained his interest in music during this period, organising bands and choirs. In the Balkans he transcribed folk songs, as he had done in England before the war. After the Armistice he set up a dozen or more bands and choirs before he was demobbed in February 1919.

Vaughan Williams composed the symphony in 1921. It is a work of profound longing and regret, lamenting the loss of his friends, including the talented young composer George Butterworth, as well as the decimation of Britain's manhood. He memorably incorporated a trumpet solo inspired by an army bugler he had heard practising who repeatedly missed a high note. The trumpet passage poignantly mimics this, with echoes of *The Lark Ascending* (composed in 1914) and *The Last Post*.

When the symphony was first performed in 1922, some critics considered it naive and simplistic: "like a cow looking over a gate," one said. Others read it as an elegiac and contemplative piece that was also technically complex and innovative. Some guessed at a provenance in the First World War but Vaughan Williams kept his silence, perhaps ironically dubbing it a pastoral symphony. Not until 1938 did he

reveal its true source of inspiration, when he wrote of looking over the desolate battlefield landscape from his ambulance wagon at dusk.

Since then its reputation has grown. The eminent critic Michael Kennedy considers it Vaughan Williams' greatest and most radical symphony, which raises the question why it is so rarely performed.

Andrew Manze, who conducted the symphony's last UK performance in Scotland in October, believes that it has been over-shadowed by more popular pieces such as the London Symphony. Vaughan Williams, he adds, was "too easily written off as behind the times, whereas he never ceased to explore and experiment." Manze considers the symphony "a profound and moving *cri de coeur*".

More provocative is Kennedy's own explanation, namely that it "requires superb playing and enlightened conducting if it is to create its special atmosphere." It also needs "proper rehearsal time to ensure that the rich array of thematic material is played fluently."

"Amen to all of that," says Charles Hazlewood, the BBC's conductor on February 24. "One of the great things about the BBC is that it can do projects properly and get under the skin of things." The Pastoral, with its "almost trippy" quality, is his favourite Vaughan Williams symphony. Yet, he adds, "It's not a piece you would want to play or hear very often - it's not a comfortable or easy listen. If we get it right, there will be a profound sense of unease."

I have long been drawn to the symphony, in part because my father was an infantryman in World War One. While researching this article in the records of the admirable Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, I came upon some astonishing coincidences. Vaughan Williams' ambulance unit was attached to the same brigade as my father. Both were privates, and both crossed from Southampton to Le Havre - most likely on the same boat - on 22 June 1916. They travelled in cattle trucks to the Western Front where both took part in the battle of Arras. Later both sailed from Marseille to the Balkans, and both fought Bulgarian forces at the battle of Doiran. There their paths parted, but both finished up in France in 1918.



Infantryman Charles Gillman (centre) during WWI

To my lasting regret, my father, who died when I was eleven, never talked to me about his experiences. Now that I am aware of these links, perhaps I will gain a deeper sense of what he went through when I hear the symphony on February 24.

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