

[They] played Scriabin's Second Symphony. I think there was a gross error in the program: instead of 'symphony' they should have printed 'cacophony'. – Anton Arensky, January 17, 1902.

Our next concert:

The Gift



Sunday 11 December 2011 at 2.00pm
in the Great Hall

Including *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*
by Ralph Vaughan Williams

Featuring

- Baritone Richard Bannan

- Waxing Lyrical
(Chris Allan, Jenny Barnes, Paul Bevan &
Rosemary Saunders)

- Lakeside Brass

- Organist Peter Guy

A festival of Christmas music, some well known,
others not so, but all designed to bring the
Christmas feel to you and your family. Come and
sing some favourite carols with the Choir!

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*"I wish you would let me have a line as to your
opinion of Vaughan Williams. He... seems to me
somewhat hopeless." - Alan Gray, organist.*

1895 was an interesting year. England was shocked by revelations of the naughtiness of Oscar Wilde. But musically it was quite exciting. Rising stars included Claude Debussy and Frederick Delius, both thirty three, Edward Elgar was thirty eight. Henry Wood, just twenty six, had audiences flocking to his promenade concerts.

It was the year that Ralph Vaughan Williams enrolled for the second time at the Royal College of Music, to continue his studies in composition under Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. He was far from confident in his own abilities:

"Stanford was a great teacher," he wrote, "but I believe I was unteachable... my work annoyed Stanford so much that... the lesson usually started with a conversation along these lines: 'Damnably ugly, my boy! Why do you write such things?' 'Because I like them.' 'But you can't like them, they're not music.' 'I shouldn't write them if I didn't like them.'"

"Stanford never really displayed great enthusiasm for my work. I once showed him a movement of a quartet which had caused me hours of agony, and I thought it would really move mountains this time. 'All rot, my boy,' was his only comment."

Vaughan Williams was dismissed as a serious composer by many academics: "No one seems to love Vaughan Williams but people" writes critic Steve Schwartz.

When he heard one of his works, a quartet for men's voices, performed in public for the first time, Ralph wrote "The second tenor got a bar out and remained so nearly to the end. [The conductor] organised an encore and it was done all over again, this time correctly. The audience disliked it the second time even more than the first."

Organist Alan Gray wrote to Sir Walter Parratt, Professor of Organ at the Royal College: "I wish you would let me have a line as to your opinion of Vaughan Williams. He... seems to me somewhat hopeless."

In his autobiography published in 1953 Vaughan Williams wrote "I felt such an amateur: I have struggled all my life to conquer amateurish technique and now that perhaps I have mastered it, it seems too late to make much use of it."

He needn't have been so hard on himself! He studied under both Bruch and Ravel, as a close friend of Gustav Holst, and is now regarded as one of the key British composers of the 20th century.

Of *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* Schwartz writes "[It] thrills the soul in performance, as if, at night, one suddenly became aware of the brilliance of the stars... To a great extent, the beauty of the piece depends on the beauties of the chosen tunes, as much as on the craft of the composer... [but] the arrangements themselves contribute to the effect – they set off the tunes as a ring of small diamonds deepens the colour of a central sapphire."

Another critic writes: "It has become a perennial favourite... This holiday work draws on the composer's love for the rich tradition of English folk songs and hymns, a tradition he cultivated all his life... This is a beautiful, warm-hearted piece, with the kind of timeless melodies that always prove popular, as was the case at its first performance in September 1912."

Fantasia is a fitting centrepiece of the concert, but there is lots more.

Gustav Holst was a fellow student of Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music, and they became lifelong friends. Although their music is quite different they both admired each others work, which they shared and criticized as they composed. They were both interested in exploring the English choral tradition as found in folk songs and church music.

Holst, of course, is most famous for his orchestral suite *The Planets*, but he composed nearly 200 works, including operas, ballets, songs and a few Christmas carols. Two of these will feature in our concert – an arrangement of *Personet Hodie* and his own composition *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

The latter is a musical setting of a poem by English poet Christina Rossetti. Holst's *Cranham* from The English Hymnal of 1906 was composed specifically for this text.

The poem was published posthumously. Christina was deeply religious, so much so that she refused a proposal of marriage from a man she deeply loved, thereafter becoming prone to frequent fits of melancholy.

Holst's music is noted for his unconventional use of metre and haunting melodies – "I've learned what 'classical' means," he said. "It means something that sings and dances through sheer joy of existence." It shows; this is an extremely popular Christmas work, and you'll enjoy it!

As the composer pointed out: "Music, being identical with heaven, isn't a thing of momentary thrills, or even hourly ones. It's a condition of eternity."

The choir will also perform carols by John Rutter and other composers and arrangers. More next issue.

This is a concert in which you will hear many works that you probably haven't heard before, and also have the opportunity to sing along with a few popular favourites. Something quite different to the usual!



I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. - Charles Dickens

Christmas is a necessity. There has to be at least one day of the year to remind us that we're here for something else besides ourselves. - Eric Sevareid

Mail your packages early so the post office can lose them in time for Christmas. - Johnny Carson

Cacophony is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com

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