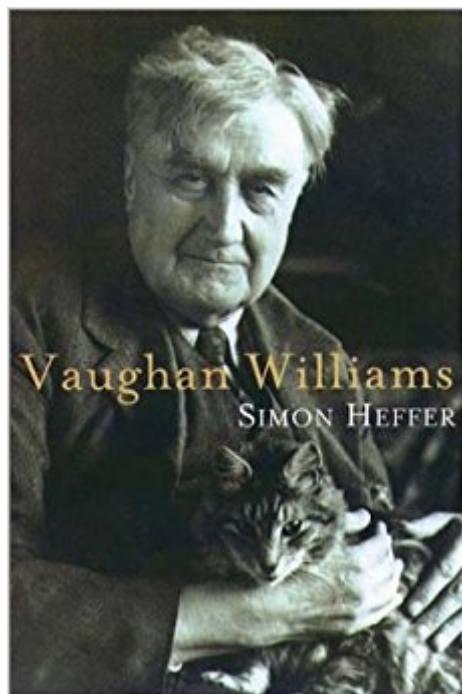


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Vaughan Williams



Synopsis

Unlike the fathers of the nineteenth-century English musical renaissance, who slavishly paid homage to the German masters, composers Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) and his friend Gustav Holst threw off the shackles of the Teutonic school and drew their inspiration from the neglected tradition of folk-song. The result was the creation of a distinctly English musical voice that evoked the cultural heritage of a nation. In particular, the sheer beauty, vitality, and aesthetic force of Vaughan Williams' works, which include *The Lark Ascending*, *Greensleeves*, the *Tallis Fantasia*, and nine symphonies, connected listeners to a timeless past and gave them a common national spirit, especially during turbulent, war-torn times. Here, Simon Heffer charts the course of Williams' remarkable life and career. Heffer traces Williams' privileged upbringing, his years of painstaking studies with Hubert Parry, Max Bruch, and Maurice Ravel, his promotion of folk-song and editorship of the English Hymnal, his close association with Holst and George Butterworth, and his emergence as the leader of English musical life. Williams was a genius of musical invention who is still beloved and admired in Britain and around the world.

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Customer Reviews

It is to be questioned whether a new study of English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) is called for, when a couple of good biographies are already available, including one by his widow, Ursula, and Michael Kennedy's excellent book on the music. But journalist and author Heffer (*Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England*), who seems to have no special musical

training (which his subject would probably have wryly appreciated) has done a thoroughly workmanlike job of evoking the composer's peculiarly English ethos. VW (as he is known in England) set out consciously to be an English composer rather than a member of any international group or movement, and though there were critics who derided what they saw as his parochiality, his music, Heffer observes, has survived with remarkable strength, some of it now even seen as prophetic. Heffer is particularly insightful about VW's last symphonies, the unaccountably neglected piano concerto and his long and constantly thwarted ambition to compose operas that would hold their place in the repertory. But Heffer has nothing much to add, in this slim volume, to what is already known of the life. (If only some scholar could unearth a more complete account of VW's period of study with Ravel in Paris surely one of the unlikeliest matchings of two great composers ever made.) What Heffer has done very convincingly is to set forth eloquently what makes VW's music not only internationally admired, but a source of particular pride and solace to his countrymen. Heffer concludes with an all-too-brief critical discography. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Along with his friend Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams led a 20th-century musical renaissance in England by rejecting continental influences in favor of native folksongs. Critics have often dismissed him as a conservative, "pastoral" composer, but in this compelling portrait by British political columnist Heffer, Vaughan Williams emerges as far more complex a kind of dogged genius, or "the right man in the right place at the right time," in his own words. A late bloomer, Vaughan Williams studied with Ravel in order to overcome a certain orchestral stodginess, and, in fact, his technique didn't find secure ground until he was well into his forties. By no means satisfied merely to repeat his past successes, Vaughan Williams challenged himself and his audiences with occasionally discomfiting music. Now over 40 years since his death, his nine symphonies and numerous choral works have found a cherished place in the hearts of his countrymen, and his works have been often performed and recorded by American orchestras as well. Heffer divides his slender text into eight chronological chapters, and his writing, though not at all technical, will engage both novice and cognoscenti. The lack of a complete works list makes the book less than an ideal reference source, and the selective discography is inadequate. Still, it is an excellent and approachable introduction to the admirable life and often remarkable works of this important 20th-century composer. Larry Lipkis, Moravian Coll., Bethlehem, PA Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I think this is a great book for one who wants analysis of Vaughan William's music; I was looking for a biography of the man in addition to his music.

For me, getting to know a composer's works first begins with getting to know the broad-brush outlines of a composer's life. And Simon Heffer's biography does that broad-brush work exceptionally well. Yes, at some point, I'm going to have to read Ursula Vaughan Williams' "authorised" biography, since that is the Holy Gospel of VW biography... but in the meantime, anyone wanting to get more familiar with VW's output will find this an excellent introduction to the subject. It gives you the framework around which to build an understanding, so that without getting bogged down in the minutiae of a life, you nevertheless learn the important signposts of it: the Tallis Fantasia was pre-war, The Pastoral Symphony post-war and so on. At the end, you'll know the shape of his life, and be able to fill things out with the more detailed reads mentioned by another poster here. But this is as good a starting point as any. (I am reminded, ironically enough, of how Michael Kennedy's biography of Britten got me started on a lifetime's appreciation of Britten's music, despite it being written so early after his death that it clearly cannot have benefited from the voluminous quantities of subsequent Britten scholarship: it was nevertheless a great way to get started on a subject and I am thankful to have read. I get exactly the same sense reading this "beginner's guide to RVW"). Heffer writes clearly and his critiques (and explanations) of individual works are nicely informed and (it seems to me) soundly based. At the end of it, I definitely felt I had a better understanding of Vaughan Williams as a man -and a much better appreciation of his music, too. And I can't think of two better reasons for writing a biography of a composer -or of buying it.

In one of his last utterances, shortly before his death, Vaughan Williams said: "Modernism and conservatism are irrelevant. What matters is to be true to oneself." Simon Heffer's accomplished 150-page biography of Vaughan Williams ably proves the verity of the great composer's personal creed with distinctive prose that luckily also includes a skilled overview (and some cherished details) of his musical works. Heffer secures the essential threads between VW's family (his father, at his son's birth, was the Vicar of Down Ampney and his mother was a Wedgewood, and niece of Charles Darwin) and his lifelong output of quintessentially English music. The author wisely allows this bucolic picture of gentle privilege to continuously and subtly inform the dialogue of Vaughan Williams' life and work, gradually creating a full look on firm ground of a thoroughly cosmopolitan composer. The discussions of VW's compositions are exceptionally competent and always evocative. Heffer's reach is impressive - from VW's undramatic beginnings as a composer, his

constant affection for and lavish attention to the English hymn tune, his musical study with Ravel and its effect on his work, through to the daring influence of blues and jazz found in his symphonies, notably the use of vibraphones that inform the beguiling Eighth. This book is a great deal like VW's music itself - profound and gentle, inspiring and intimate. Recommended over other more lengthy biographies of VW, length not always equalling depth of treatment in these matters. In this important little book, the two aspects combine in perfect conformity to the living testament that is VW's music itself. This book is a full, revealing look at a composer who spent his creative life conjuring manifold beauty and nurturing his unique gifts with the uncommon genius of steady, humane purpose. The appendix of select discography with incisive commentary is also useful especially for those not that familiar with VW's music.

If you've already read Michael Kennedy's *Life and Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* or Ursula Vaughan Williams's *R.V.W.*, you can skip this. It is little more than an expanded encyclopedia entry and the stuff that isn't is problematic. Heffer's an enthusiastic amateur, with either little or no musical training. That may even count as an advantage in a work for the general reader. However, it gets him in trouble when he renders critical judgments, which tend to sound like he's gotten them from others' reviews. He certainly doesn't build much of a case in support. An ordinary book about an extraordinary composer.

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