

**Review: Vaughan William's 4th Symphony.**

**Reviewer: Huw Dixon**

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**21 February, CBSO conducted by Sakari Oramo, Symphony Hall Birmingham.**

The CBSO has a theme *Aspects of Englishness* in its 2000/2001 season, reflecting the interest of its new young Finnish conductor and music director Sakari Oramo. Several concerts include English works, not in "all English" programmes but in context of regular concert fare. In this concert, VW4 (1935) was in the second half following two other great works: Bartok's almost contemporary Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste (1936) and Shostakovich's energetic and intense first Cello concerto of 1959. This programming was perfect, enabling one to see VW's music in relation to his great contemporaries in continental Europe.

I had not heard the VW live before. It is not an easy work to perform, particularly the first movement with the conductor needing to balance powerful brass with bringing out a contrapuntal narrative of different voices within the orchestra. I can only say that the performance was an electrifying revelation for me. Oramo constructed a brilliant narrative out of the first movement, building up climaxes whilst clearly articulating the individual strands in the music and contemplating the oases of quietness and calm (notably the ending). I had the feeling that the tempo was faster than usual and the music certainly flowed better than in some recordings where the sudden changes in tempo and volume can lead to a jerky and fragmented feeling. There was a very short gap between the first and second movements. Indeed, I had not before recognised the extent of the thematic unity of this symphony, and moving into Andante Moderato felt a little like moving into another section of the first movement. Here the links with the Bartok and particularly Shostakovich were most obvious, particularly in the string writing. The Scherzo is perhaps the most characteristically VW movement in the whole symphony, with echoes of *Job* in its sound, particularly the brass and wind writing. The CBSO kept up a ferocious and energetic performance throughout. The symphony moves straight into the finale in which one finds extremes of emotion: boisterous fanfares and lolling dance themes combined with the menacing and dark material of earlier movements. Indeed, in the fugue it seemed that all of the material is thrown together in one way or another (I would love to check the score to explore the full web of thematic inter-relationships). The performance was bought to a shattering climax as the opening figure was reprised and the symphony bought to a bleak but energetic thumping minor chord. The audience seemed to like the piece and it was clear that the orchestra had put a lot of effort into the piece.

My overall perception of this piece has changed. Before hearing this performance, I had thought it the least easy VW symphony to listen to. Hearing it in context of Shostakovich and Bartok made me see it as a great 20C symphony: not avant guard, perhaps, but

certainly modern. It is also, of course a watershed in VW's symphonic writing: elements of all of his future symphonies are in the 4<sup>th</sup> (perhaps least in the 5<sup>th</sup>, although the scherzo there also has the Shostakovian feel found here). The musical craftsmanship also came through, in VW's ability to develop and metamorphose thematic material across movements, along with his characteristic and idiosyncratic orchestration. Oramo played the 4 movements almost as if it were a symphonic poem. Overall, I can certainly say that the trip from York to Birmingham was well worth it for the privilege of hearing this wonderful performance; I only wish I lived nearer and could make some of the other concerts with English works in them.