

Serenade to Music

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958)

Vaughan Williams composed extensively for choirs, from large-scale works with orchestra, such as the *Sea Symphony*, to short, unaccompanied pieces. Anyone familiar with his nine superb symphonies will know that he was eminently capable of a muscular, assertive musical style, in which dissonance and great rhythmic vitality played a prominent part. Nevertheless, his popular image seems to be firmly fixed as the composer of lyrical, pastoral works, of which *The Lark Ascending*, *Fantasia on Greensleeves* and *Serenade to Music* are probably the most well known.

The *Serenade* was composed in 1938 as a celebration of Henry Wood's fifty years as a conductor, and was originally written for sixteen leading British singers. It is still occasionally performed in this solo format, but it is much more common to hear it presented as a choral piece. The text, arguably some of the greatest English poetry, is taken from the final scene of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Vaughan Williams' wonderfully evocative music seems to be organically woven around the words, creating a magical nocturnal meditation on the nature of music and its power to enrapture. As Shakespeare says, 'The man that hath no music in himself is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils; let no such man be trusted'.

programme notes by John Bawden

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