

Ralph Vaughan Williams: Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis (1910, revised 1913 & 1919)

The fifteen-minute Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis, which is among Ralph (pronounced “Rafe”) Vaughan Williams’s most widely performed compositions, is a splendid entry point to the discovery of the large, wide-ranging, truly extraordinary oeuvre of its composer. It encapsulates many of the hallmarks of his style: exquisite sensitivity to instrumental sonority, veneration of ancient tradition, nobility of spirit, and a sense of soaring effortlessly through some sublime ether that is as much attached to heaven as it is to earth.

Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was 38 years old when he wrote the Fantasia, and although he was respected within musical circles, he had not achieved what could honestly be called fame. He had received a thorough musical education at the Royal College of Music and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was especially drawn to playing the organ; he continued sharpening his skills as composer by traveling to work with Max Bruch in Berlin and with Maurice Ravel in Paris (this last at the age of 35). His early compositions — and anything he wrote before about 1910 qualifies as early in what would prove an exceptionally long career — often suggested a mystical, visionary style, as in his *Toward the Unknown Region* (1905–06) or *A Sea Symphony* (1906–08). In addition, he had gotten involved with the collecting of folk songs (working closely with the musicologist Cecil Sharp) and with the exploration of English music from the Renaissance and Baroque, which was far less known then than it is today.

In 1904 Vaughan Williams was invited to edit a new iteration of *The English Hymnal*. Although he protested that he knew rather little about hymns, the composer was intrigued by the project and happily took it on. He established what he felt were historically correct texts of the volume’s hymns, culled numerous pieces he considered musically inferior, and even wrote a few new melodies himself (attributing them to Anonymous).

Among the tunes that Vaughan Williams included in the hymnal was the so-called “Third Mode Melody,” a composition by Thomas Tallis (ca. 1505–85) that had first appeared in a 1567 psalter, set in the English Hymnal to Addison’s words “When rising from the bed of death.” That psalter, assembled by Archbishop Matthew Parker, was organized according to the modes of its melodies — the traditional melodic-harmonic game plans that governed music before the rise of modern major-minor tonality. The Third (or Phrygian) Mode is most easily explained as the pattern one hears if playing the white keys of a keyboard connecting the note E to an E an octave higher or lower. In his psalter, Parker had characterized the mode thus: “the Third doth rage: and roughly brayth.”

The melody stuck in Vaughan Williams’s mind, and in the summer of 1910 it provided the basis for his commissioned Fantasia. (He revised it in 1913 and again in 1919.) It sprang from a combination of passions: his absorption in Tudor music and English folk song collecting, and from his editorship of *The English Hymnal*, which occupied him almost exclusively from 1904 to 1906. Several of the tunes included in the Hymnal influenced his own subsequent compositions. He led the premiere on September 6, 1910, at the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester Cathedral, with the London Symphony Orchestra, as a program-opener for a performance of Elgar’s oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius*. Elgar’s Introduction and Allegro probably inspired Vaughan Williams to use the same forces in a Fantasia based on Tallis’ psalm melody.

The work is scored for strings only, grouped imaginatively as a double string orchestra and a solo string quartet. Tallis’s theme is first suggested through the pizzicato violas, cellos, and double basses, and

before long it is given out in its entirety (with the harmonies just as Tallis wrote them) by second violins, violas, and half the cellos. Its melody and harmonies are explored exhaustively as the piece slowly evolves in a spirit of rapt meditation. One can only imagine the effect it must have made on listeners who had never heard it before, as it unrolled for the first time in the vast Norman expanses of Gloucester Cathedral.

Thomas Tallis's career as a composer of church music reflected the great upheavals of the Reformation in England, as his work for the royal court required him to adapt to the wills and religious practices of succeeding Tudor monarchs.

Tallis became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1542, serving under Henry VIII, whose marital travails prompted his break from Rome and formation of the Church of England. Edward VI (Henry's son with his third wife, Jane Seymour) was the first English ruler raised as a Protestant, and Tallis became adept at setting sacred text into English during that monarch's brief reign (from age 10 to his death at 15).

The composer reverted to use of more traditional Latin settings under subsequent efforts by Queen Mary I (Henry's daughter with his first wife, Catherine of Aragon) to restore England to Catholicism, and he ended his career with a blending of musical traditions under the more lenient religious rule of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I (Henry's daughter with his second wife, Anne Boleyn).

*--notes adapted from Internet sources by Stephen Larmore*