

Nantwich Choral Society

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

FIVE TUDOR PORTRAITS IN WINDSOR FOREST



SATURDAY 22nd JUNE
1991

The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30 p.m.

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA
Leader: Christopher Pratt

Sarah Wright, mezzo-soprano
Philip Ravenscroft, bass

Joy Roberts, piano

conducted by
Stephen Buckman



IN WINDSOR FOREST (1928)

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

1. The Conspiracy ("Sigh no more, ladies")
2. Drinking Song ("Back and side go bare")
3. Falstaff and the Fairies (Round about in a fair ring-a)
4. Wedding Chorus (see the Chariot at hand)
5. Epilogue (Whether men do laugh or weep)

MÄDCHENBLUMEN Poems by FELIX DAHN music by RICHARD STRAUSS

OPUS 22 No's 1, 2, 3 & 4

1. Kornblumen
2. Mohnblumen
3. Epheu
4. Wasserrose

INTERVAL

FIVE TUDOR PORTRAITS (1935)

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

1. Ballad - The Tunning of Elinor Rumming
2. Intermezzo - My Pretty Bess
3. Burlesca - Epitaph on John Jayberd of Diss
4. Romanza - Jane Scroop (her lament for Philip Sparrow)
5. Scherzo - Jolly Rutterkin

Vaughan Williams (1872 - 1958), had an incredible gift to create a precise mood, whether it be mystical or contemplative, and yet at the same time, he is always in contact with the ordinary world, either through the melodic and harmonic ideas of folk-song or the nature of his chosen text.

Five Tudor Portraits is Vaughan Williams's largest secular choral work and was first performed at the 1936 Norwich Festival. Its five movements are settings of poems by John Skelton (1460 - 1529), a Tudor poet and one time tutor to the Duke of York (later to become Henry VIII). He used a device subsequently known as the "Skeltonic line", a short erratic rhyming verse descended from Medieval Latin. Skelton is notorious for his "earthy" verses - indeed the Countess of Albermanle walked out of the first performance of **Five Tudor Portraits**, pronouncing the work to be "disgusting" (and Vaughan Williams didn't even set the bawdy bits!).

The first of the portraits, **The Tunning of Elinor Rumming** (a good example of Skeltonic line) is an absolute masterpiece in setting to music Skelton's racy, zest-for-life verses. Elinor kept "The Running Horse" alehouse in Leatherhead. A strong motto-theme opens the work, followed by the chorus's narrative description - warts and all! This is followed by **Pretty Bess**, a love song for the baritone and chorus. The soloist protests and is echoed by the men of the chorus - there is a feeling of both happy and sad, major and minor simultaneously. The male chorus again sings the **Epitaph on John Jayberd of Diss**, a satirical view of a parish clerk from Skelton's native Diss in Norfolk, whom he quite clearly disliked. It is in monkish Latin interspersed with English and begins persistently, slowing down to highlight the nastier insults. A drinking song leads into a parody of the Office for the Dead. The fourth movement is a real requiem (no parody here) of a convent girl for her pet sparrow, Philip, who was killed by Gib the cat. A very touching and tender innocence is created, evoking a deep emotional response. As the tiny coffin is laid to rest the Dies Irae is heard, the air fills with birds and Jane intones the Miserere - a very moving portrait indeed. The final movement is a scherzo, a portrait of a Tudor scamp. Its exciting cross-rhythms bring the work to a rousing end.

The first performance of **In Windsor Forest** took place in Windsor in 1931 when it was conducted by the composer. The five movements are adapted from his Falstaff opera **Sir John in Love**, and Vaughan Williams hoped that this cantata would save some of the music from the obscurity in which the opera now lies. Although the opera is based on "The Merry Wives of Windsor", Vaughan Williams also took lyrics from other Elizabethan authors. Hence the first movement of **In Windsor Forest** (for women's voices) is from "Much Ado About Nothing". In the opera this is a trio for Mistresses Page, Ford and Quickly. The next movement is a raucous drinking song for the men of the choir (words by either John Still or William Stevenson). In Act I, Nym, Pistol, Bardolph and the host of the Garter Inn sing this. The remaining movements are all from the last scene of the opera which is set in Windsor Forest itself. **Round about in a fair ring-a** (Shakespeare, Ravenscroft and Lyly) is a development of the teasing of Falstaff by the fairies, that again demonstrates Vaughan Williams's skill in capturing the imagination and creating a vivid, visual picture through his music. **The Wedding Chorus** for Anne Page and Fenton is the climax of the opera, and its romantic effect is enhanced by the introduction of a violin solo. The final movement (words attributed to Campion) shows Falstaff leading the chorus in reconciliation, ending "and the world is but a play". Beauty and simplicity of lyrics and of melodic line contribute to the appeal of the whole work.

Colin Bromelow