

■ *Nantwich Choral Society* ■

DURUFLE

REQUIEM

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS

TIPPETT

SPIRITUALS FROM

'A CHILD OF OUR TIME'



SATURDAY 24th JUNE 1995

**The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30pm.**

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

Fiona Vaughan, *soprano*

Philip Ravenscroft, *bass/baritone*

Andrew Mildinhall, *organ*

Conducted by
Stephen Buckman

NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF MUSIC SOCIETIES



FIVE NEGRO SPIRITUALS (Tippett)

Steal Away
Nobody Knows
Go Down, Moses
By and By
Deep River

FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS (Vaughan Williams)

Easter
I Got Me Flowers
Love Bade Me Welcome
The Call
Antiphon

~ INTERVAL ~

REQUIEM (Durufle)

Introit
Kyrie
Domine Jesu Christe
Sanctus
Pie Jesu
Agnus Dei
Lux Aeterna
Libera Me
In Paradisum

If there is a link between the three composers in tonight's programme, it is to be found in their spiritual make-up. All three have a profound sense of the mystical and this is evident in much of their music which has an ecstatic, often visionary, quality which transcends the merely religious. Indeed, it is the agnostic Tippett who is arguably the most spiritual of the three, his "vision" being highly personal and individual, rather than the more conventionally Christian outlook of Vaughan Williams and Durufle. That having been said, of the pieces we shall actually be hearing, it is Tippett's **FIVE NEGRO SPIRITUALS** which are the most firmly rooted in earthly matters.

The oratorio "A Child of Our Time" is a latter-day Passion, provoked by Tippett's response to the increasing injustices and atrocities which he saw being inflicted on various groups of "social outcasts", all over Europe during the 1930's. He was strongly influenced by the structures of Bach's Passions and Handel's "Messiah", but it was quite by chance that he discovered in the words and music of 19th century negro spirituals a modern equivalent to the Lutheran chorales which are the focal points of Bach's Passion music. One day in 1939, while work on the oratorio was still in its earliest stages, Tippett happened to hear "Steal away" on the radio, sung by a black American singer. In particular, the line "The trumpet

sounds within—a my soul” made a deep emotional impression on him and he recognized in the familiarity of the spiritual an experience of oppression that was both contemporary and universal.

Tippett wanted to retain the “authenticity” of the five spirituals he finally selected while adapting them to his own musical style, and in the score of “A Child of Our Time” he warns against treating them as “congregational hymns” and says that they should not be sentimentalised, but sung with a strong underlying pulse and slightly “swung”. The natural strength of the music is underlined by Tippett’s spare and static harmonisation (a striking contrast to the colourful “jazzy” harmonies which often trivialise other modern arrangements), while the use of soloists as leaders of the choir (first among equals) is in keeping with the original purpose of the negro spiritual as a collective expression. Although the five spirituals were tightly integrated into the structure of the oratorio, in 1958 Tippett made the highly effective arrangement of them that we shall be hearing tonight, as independent pieces for unaccompanied chorus, assimilating the orchestral parts of the originals into the new purely vocal texture so naturally as to be undetectable.

Vaughan Williams’ **FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS** for baritone, chorus and orchestra (which we shall be hearing in a version with organ accompaniment) were written for the 1911 Three Choirs Festival in Worcester. They are settings of poems by George Herbert (1593–1633), a younger contemporary of Shakespeare and one of the finest early 17th century religious poets. He turned to poetry only in the last few years of his life when, after the death of James I had brought his brilliant early career in public office to an end, he became an Anglican priest and rector of a parish in Wiltshire. His poetry often reflects the uncertainties that had always troubled him concerning the conflicting demands of the spirit and the world, a conflict which the “disappointed theist” in Vaughan Williams (an agnostic, like Tippett) would certainly have recognised.

The first song is a setting of **Easter**, a song of praise to the risen Christ. The strongly upward-moving opening phrase, which recurs twice more during the piece, is contrasted with a more agitated middle section for the soloist alone in which he sees in the components of his lute a metaphor of the crucifixion. The second and fourth songs are more simple, ballad-like settings for baritone (briefly reinforced by the choir at the end of **I got me flowers**), whose melodic lines and modal harmonies show the evidence of the composer’s love of the folksong and, more significantly, of plainsong. These two settings act as a frame for the movement which lies at the heart of Vaughan Williams’ mystical songs, **Love bade me welcome**, a contemplation of the mystery of the eucharist, in which the poet (the baritone soloist) feels himself unworthy to share. When he finally accepts Christ’s acceptance of him, a wordless chorus magically intones the plainsong hymn “O Sacrum Convivium”, symbolising the act of communion. At this point the music becomes almost motionless – the poet’s experience is almost too intense – but slowly it rises into nothingness, beyond our human senses, like a soul in ecstasy.

The last of the Herbert poems is probably more familiar as the hymn **Let all the world in every corner sing**, and here Vaughan Williams gives it an equally un-mystical treatment in his best “public rejoicing” style. With no room for the personal utterances of a soloist, it is for chorus alone with a very busy accompaniment that features a lively imitation of pealing bells.

We have already seen how the use of plainsong can suggest or intensify an atmosphere of other-worldliness in music. Vaughan Williams drew on the rhythmic and melodic freedom of Gregorian chant to colour his **FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS**, reserving direct quotation for the emotional climax of the work. Maurice Duruflé’s **REQUIEM** of 1947, however, is (in his own words) “composed entirely on the Gregorian melodies of the Mass for the dead”, but he has absorbed the nature of this ancient music so thoroughly and clothes it in such seductive harmonies that there is not the slightest feeling of academicism or anachronism, just a very personal musical language perfectly suited to such a personal – and passionate – expression of faith and hope.

Duruflé chose to set the same words as Fauré had done in his Requiem of sixty years previously, foregoing the fire and brimstone of the “Dies Irae”, which dominates so many other settings of the Mass for the dead, in favour of texts which emphasise the consolation of “rest eternal”, and the spirit of Fauré (“le grégorianisant voluptueux” as he was once labelled by Reginald Hahn) is often called to mind by the corresponding passages in Duruflé’s music.

Originally written for performance with a very large orchestra, Duruflé (himself an organist of international standing) made several versions of his “chef d’oeuvre” for smaller forces, including the one with solo organ accompaniment that we will hear tonight.

Colin Bromelow, 1995