

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Vaughan Williams' A London Symphony

Nov 16 - 18

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

In the South (Alassio), Op. 50

Duration: ca. 20 minutes

England was a proud musical nation long before many other countries had developed their own identity, in part because of its strong choral tradition honed in the country's many cathedrals. Composers such as William Byrd, Thomas Tallis, John Dowland, Henry Purcell, and John Dunstable injected England with a musical richness that forms an arch reaching modern musicians and listeners. The first important English opera, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, is one of the oldest in the repertoire and continues to be widely performed today.

But English music began to wane, and for two centuries only minor composers ruled the land. The public also began a fascination with things foreign: Handel operas and oratorios, symphonies by Haydn, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. By the late 19th century, English music was playing catch up, and its national repertoire paled compared to the rugged individualism of Russia, Germany, and France. The running joke in Europe was that England was a "land without music."

Elgar helped get the country back on track, albeit with a conservative playbook that appealed mostly to the upper class. Along with Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ethel Smyth and Gustav Holst, Elgar helped spawn an English musical Renaissance that continued with Benjamin Britten and other prominent composers of the later 20th century. Elgar's place in today's concert hall stands on music of refined, noble, melodic, and proudly national intent. The conductor Hans Richter called Elgar's *First Symphony* the "greatest symphony of modern times," and the list of masterpieces continues with the *Enigma Variations*, *Cello Concerto*, *Pomp and Circumstance* marches (remember your high school graduation music?), the *Serenade for Strings*, and *Dream of Gerontius*.

Less known but just as luxuriant is the 20-minute postcard tone poem, *In the South*, also known as *Alassio* for the small Italian town that inspired Elgar during a family vacation there in 1903. "In a flash, it all came to me," he said that year. "The conflict of the armies on that very spot long ago, where I now stood; the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd; and then, all of the sudden, I came back to reality. In that time I had composed the overture; the rest was merely writing it down."

Set in the key of E flat, the work includes as its centerpiece a *cantor popolare*, or folk song, played on the solo viola. Elgar made use of traditional sonata form for his scaffolding, and the atmosphere hints of the music of Richard Strauss in its expansive, wave-like flow of material and barrages of brass.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Violin Concerto in E Minor, Op. 64

Duration: ca. 26 minutes

At the tender age of 17, when most of us are struggling through high school, Mendelssohn was putting the finishing touches on his overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a marvel of musical art that placed him in the pantheon of the most gifted composers of any era. Educated, cultured, skilled in the visual and literary arts, Mendelssohn had prepped for greatness, and included in his circle of friends such giants as Goethe and Schumann.

Like Mozart, Mendelssohn died young and at the height of his power. For years he had suffered from severe headaches that left him bedridden, but it took the death of his beloved sister, Fanny, to hasten his end. Mendelssohn exposed his tormented soul in his last major work, the tragic *F Minor String Quartet*, and died at age 38 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Mendelssohn left a remarkable legacy in almost all forms of music. His best-loved work is undoubtedly the *Violin Concerto*, a cornerstone of the concert hall and a must for any violin virtuoso. Audiences love its sweetly lyrical opening melody, set against a veil of hushed tension, and the organization of its three movements – including a surprise cadenza that appears before rather than after the orchestra restates the main themes.

Perhaps most intriguing about the concerto is its mood: a mix of pathos, melancholy and exuberance. There is something childlike about this music, but how could a child so effortlessly blend pathos, melancholy and exuberance? It is the first major violin concerto in which the soloist enters before the orchestra develops its initial themes. The violin writing is virtuosic throughout the first movement, serene in the middle andante, and a dash of bravado involving the entire orchestra brings it to a close.

The concerto is incandescent, spontaneous sounding, and immediately memorable, notes Conrad Wilson in his book, *Notes on Mendelssohn: 20 Crucial Works*: “The way one splendid tune works up to a climax before leading to another, the poise of the accompaniments, the beauty of the transition passages, the control of tension and relaxation – operate so discreetly and naturally, as if the concerto were composed in a single sweep.”

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
Symphony No. 2, A London Symphony

Duration: ca. 44 minutes

The music of England was quiescent throughout much of the 19th century, when France, Germany, Russia, Spain, and other European countries forged their identities. But England soon would wake from its slumber and give the world a distinctive style based on deep-rooted folk traditions dating back to the late Middle Ages.

Vaughan Williams embraced that tradition in works both small and large. A sluggish, avuncular man in old age, he focused on a national style rather than riding the coattails of other European artists. “As long as composers persist in serving up at a second hand the externals of the music of other nations,” he once said, “they must not be surprised if audiences prefer the real Brahms, Wagner, Debussy, and Stravinsky to their pale reflections.”

Vaughan Williams loved the tradition of English folk and sacred music, particularly works written to be performed in great cathedrals. After earning a doctorate degree in music at Cambridge in 1901, he

joined the English Folk Song Society, and immersed himself in the simple tunes he found in small villages and towns throughout England. This was to be a turning point: "Every composer cannot be expected to have a worldwide message," he once said, regarding his interest in the common music of his homeland. "But he may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people."

This interest found a home in such agreeable pieces as *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, *On Wenlock Edge* and *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. These works are hushed, accessible, mysterious – and exquisitely well crafted

Vaughan Williams is one of a handful of famed composers to complete nine numbered symphonies, following Beethoven, Schubert, Dvorak, Bruckner, and Mahler. He divided his output between purely abstract creations such as the numbers 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9, and the named, programmatic pieces: *A Sea Symphony* (No. 1.), *A London Symphony* (No. 2), *A Pastoral Symphony* (No. 3), and *Sinfonia Antarctica* (No. 7). But don't expect an easily recognizable pattern: No two symphonies are alike in structure or atmosphere; it's almost as if nine different composers created the batch.

First performed in 1914 at the onset of World War I, the symphony went through three revisions until 1936, when Vaughan Williams settled on the work most often performed. He didn't intend it to be a musical postcard of London but a fleeting impression more akin to Debussy's *La Mer*. He even suggested calling it *A Symphony by a Londoner*, which irritated many residents of Gloucestershire County, where Vaughan Williams was born.

Still, pictorial ideas and the bustle of the city abound: Westminster bells are portrayed by the harp in the first movement; the second section depicts Bloomsbury Square on a fall afternoon; the late-night sounds of a crowded West End street in the scherzo; and moods inspired by the H.G. Wells novel, *Tono-Bungay*, in the finale. Looking back on his career before his death at age 86, Vaughan Williams called the *London* the favorite of his symphonies.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.