

Vaughan Williams: Five Mystical Songs

George Herbert was a seventeenth-century Welsh-born Anglican priest, orator and metaphysical poet. These poems celebrate Easter, not only in praise and public rejoicing but also, in strikingly beautiful language and imaginative verse-form, conversation between the human soul and its creator and lover, leading to compassion, and acceptance of forgiveness.

Ralph Vaughan Williams lived some three hundred years later, but there is an affinity between the two. VW was well-educated and well-read and admired Herbert's poetry, and he also found creative inspiration in the English-Celtic culture of folk song and modal music. He came into his composing maturity relatively late (described by one of his Darwin cousins as "that young man who would persist in trying to write music").

At the Royal College of Music his tutor, Stanford, did his best to train his young pupil up in the accepted style of contrapuntal and Germanic tradition, but to little avail. Although VW respected Stanford, he felt closer to Parry, and he persisted in following his own, British, muse. There also he and Gustav Holst became lifelong friends, and together a kind of turning-point in British composition.

His setting of these poems embraces warmly and sensitively their emotional and metaphysical content, whether in a shout or an intimate whisper. Although his father had been Vicar of Down Ampney, his son was not so much a believer as a lover of Christian culture, values and morality.

Pat Atyeo
March 2019