

**Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA**

***Fantasia on a Theme by* .....Ralph Vaughan Williams**

***Thomas Tallis for Strings* (1872-1958)**

*Composed in 1910; revised in 1913 and 1919.*

*Premiered on September 6, 1910 in Gloucester, conducted by the composer.*

The *Tallis Fantasia* of 1910 was the fruit of an immense musical background that Vaughan Williams had been accumulating since his student days twenty years before. The list of influences on the composer and on this particular work is long: he studied composition with Parry and Stanford, those twin paragons of Victorian musical virtue; he directed a Palestrina Society especially to learn the works of that Italian Renaissance master; he followed closely the revival of early, especially Elizabethan, music by the remarkable performer and scholar Arnold Dolmetsch; he avidly collected British folk songs with Gustav Holst; he spent two years compiling a new edition of the *English Hymnal*; and he refined his compositional style through study with Ravel in Paris. All of these experiences found their way into this exquisite *Fantasia*, which, though preceded by a number of songs, chamber pieces and orchestra scores, is the first work in which Vaughan Williams' unique genius was fully revealed.

The main influence and inspiration for the *Fantasia* was the great Tudor composer Thomas Tallis (1505-1585), remembered not only for his excellent music but also for his political acumen. While steadfastly maintaining his Catholicism in the fluid religious landscape of 16th-century England, he wrote sacred music with either Latin or vernacular texts according to the theological preference of the current monarch, and even became such a favorite of the Protestant Elizabeth that he (with William Byrd) was granted the exclusive privilege of printing music and ruled music paper for all of Britain.

During his labors on the *English Hymnal* ("some of the best — as well as some of the worst — tunes in the world," he said), Vaughan Williams discovered a set of nine hymns that Tallis had contributed to the *English Metrical Psalter* published in 1567 by Mathew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury. Vaughan Williams was drawn to the third of these, an austere melody in the Phrygian mode to the text now known as "Why do the heathens rage and the people imagine a vain thing?," but given in those pre-King James I times as "Why fumeth in sight: the Gentiles spite, In fury raging stout?"

Vaughan Williams conceived his *Tallis Fantasia* for the resonant spaces of Gloucester Cathedral, where it was first heard as part of the 1910 Three Choirs Festival. Its scoring was carefully arranged to create the aural impression of great depth and reverberation in the Cathedral through the use of three antiphonal groups within the string orchestra — a solo quartet, a small ensemble and the entire orchestra. The *Fantasia* is in a free variation form which carries some suggestion of its 16th-century namesake. There is a quiet introduction in which the opening phrases of Tallis' theme, given by pizzicato low strings, alternate with a phrase of Vaughan Williams' invention, played in parallel harmonies. Tallis' hymn is then heard in full in the orchestra's rich middle register supported by pizzicato basses and tremolo violins, after which the high violins take it over for an intensified repetition. The central portion of the *Fantasia* comprises variants of fragments from the old melody and the parallel-harmony phrase, making sumptuous use of the acoustical possibilities offered by the three string groups. Tallis' tune is heard again, complete, near the end, floating high in the solo violin over a shimmering orchestral background. A serene coda closes the work, one of the most thoughtful, ecstatic and sonorous in the entire orchestral repertory.

John Fuller Maitland's words in *The Times* of London about the 1910 premiere of the *Tallis Fantasia* still ring true: "Throughout its course one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new. The work is wonderful because it seems to lift one into some unknown region of musical thought and feeling."

***Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra* ..... Gerald Finzi**

**(1901-1956)**

*Composed in 1949.*

*Premiered on September 9, 1949 in Hereford, England, conducted by the composer with Frederick Thurston as soloist.*

The lyricism, tenderness and immediacy that characterize the English pastoral tradition at its best are perfectly captured in the music of Gerald Finzi. Finzi, the son of a shipbroker, was born in London on July 14, 1901. His delicate temperament was shaped when his father died when the boy was eight and three elder brothers passed away shortly thereafter and little altered by four years of private schooling in England and a year's rest cure in Switzerland. Finzi began music study with Ernest Farrar when he returned to London in 1915, but Farrar's death in combat the following year affected the young musician deeply. He studied sporadically with Edward Bairstow, organist at York Minster, until 1922, when he settled in the Gloucestershire countryside. He returned to London in 1925 to take counterpoint lessons with R.O. Morris, and there met such leading English musicians as Holst, Vaughan Williams, Bliss and Rubbra, and immersed himself in the cultural life of the capital. From 1930 to 1933, Finzi taught at the Royal Academy of Music, but he found himself unsuited to the discipline and stresses of teaching, and withdrew to the village of Aldbourne in Wiltshire; in 1937, he built a modest house at Ashmansworth in Hampshire. Though philosophically a pacifist, Finzi reluctantly admitted the necessity of World War II, and he worked at the Ministry of War Transport in London from 1941 to 1945. Before joining the war effort, he founded the Newbury String Players in Newbury, an hour west of Windsor, to perform in local churches, schools and village halls; he guided the group through the war years by playing standard literature and some of his own original compositions, as well as reviving works by Boyce, Wesley, Stanley and other 18th-century British composers. Finzi continued to compose after the war, even when he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease in 1951, completing a cello concerto, a *Grand Fantasia and Toccata* for Piano and Orchestra, a number of songs (mainly to texts by Hardy and Shakespeare) and several choral works before his death at Oxford in 1956.

Since at least 1719, the musicians of Hereford have joined together late every summer with those of the neighboring cathedrals of Gloucester and Worcester in southwestern England to produce the Three Choirs Festival; it is Europe's oldest music festival and one of England's most important. Finzi regularly attended the Festival after settling in the Cotswold town of Painswick in July 1922, and he became friends with Herbert Sumsion, the organist at Gloucester Cathedral, after Sumsion took over direction of the event in 1928 and made it a showcase for new British music. During the 1930s, Finzi devoted much time to composing his *Dies Natalis* ("Day of Birth"), a setting of verses by the Anglican metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne (ca. 1637-1674) about a newborn's first perceptions of the world, and it was scheduled for performance at the 1939 Three Choirs Festival. The outbreak of World War II cancelled that year's Festival, however, and the premiere was given in London in January 1940. Finzi belatedly conducted *Dies Natalis* at the Three Choirs Festival in 1946 in Hereford and the following year his anthem *Lo, the Full and Final Sacrifice* was performed at Gloucester, and in 1949 the Festival commissioned him to write a new instrumental work. He responded with his Clarinet Concerto, and conducted Frederick Thurston and the strings of the London Symphony Orchestra in the premiere in Hereford on September 9, 1949. His biographer Stephen Banfield judged the Clarinet Concerto to be "the most smoothly argued and best proportioned of Finzi's full-scale compositions," and it has remained among his most frequently performed and highly regarded works.

The Concerto opens with a stern orchestral introduction that contains the seeds of the movement's thematic materials. The clarinet forges the lyrical main theme from transformations of the introduction's octave-leap motive and descending sequences. The second theme is a lovely, arching melody traded between clarinet and first violins above a murmuring accompaniment. The development section is brief, little more than a reminder of the dramatic mood of the opening followed by some ruminative phrases from the clarinet. The main and second themes, somewhat altered, are reprised before the movement concludes with an extended coda that comprises a final traversal of the principal subject, an increasingly intense string passage that culminates in the stark unison octave leaps from the introduction, a short clarinet cadenza, and a forceful close. The *Adagio*, based on a simple, quiet theme given by the violins with rhapsodic comments from the clarinet after an ethereal opening, creates a formal arch, with an almost trance-like stillness at beginning and end surrounding a central episode of heightened emotion. The finale begins with an introduction whose harmonic asperity provides a foil for the charming, carefree clarinet tune that serves as the movement's main theme. The melody's returns are separated by three complementary episodes: the first hints at a waltz, the second is a smooth, graceful strain, and the third recalls the principal theme of the first movement. An abbreviated recall of the carefree theme and a final clarinet

flourish close this deeply satisfying work.

**Serenade for Strings in E-flat major, Op. 6.....Josef Suk**  
**(1874-1935)**

*Composed in 1892.*

Josef Suk, internationally renowned as a composer and violinist, was one of the most prominent musical personalities of the early 20th century. Suk was born into a musical family, and entered the Prague Conservatory at the age of eleven to study theory, composition and performance. He began composing seriously three years later, and, in 1891, he became the prize pupil of a new member of the Conservatory faculty — Antonín Dvořák. Following his graduation in 1892, Suk founded the Czech Quartet, which won the enthusiastic approval of Brahms and Hanslick at its Viennese debut a year later, and with which he was to perform over 4,000 concerts before retiring in 1933. He was deeply influenced in his compositional style by the music of Dvořák, and his relationship with his teacher was cemented when he married that composer's daughter, Otilie, in 1898. His works of those years include the lovely Serenade for Strings, the Symphony in E, the tone poem *Prague*, and other compositions for orchestra, chamber ensembles and solo piano. "In his early works," wrote Vaclav Stepán, "his expression is based on Dvořák, though there is a greater gentleness, a softer sentiment and a richer rhythm." The "gentleness" in Suk's music and life was purged by the deaths of Dvořák in 1904 and of his own young wife only fourteen months later, a double tragedy that left him brooding and morose. His personal loss was reflected in his music, which became more modernistic and complex in its texture, harmony, rhythmic construction and form, and more sophisticated in its instrumental technique. The works of his later years — most notably the symphony dedicated to the memories of Dvořák and Otilie titled *Asrael* ("Angel of Death") and the symphonic poem *The Ripening* — show a concentrated emotional power through which Suk sought "to embrace the sterner problems of humanity," according to Otakar Sourek. "He strove to show how grief and suffering may be overcome through faith in life and in the individual will, while in his boldest flights, he hymns universal love — the love of all for all." Much of the closing decade of his life was devoted to teaching composition at the Prague Conservatory, where he served four terms as Rector and taught many important Czech musicians of the next generation, including Bohuslav Martinu. His grandson, also named Josef, is one of the leading violinists of our time.

"Herrgott, what a charming little thing!" exclaimed Brahms when he saw the score of Suk's Serenade for Strings, Op. 6. So taken was he with the music that he brought it to the attention of his publisher, Simrock, who printed the Serenade in 1896. Suk wrote the work in 1892 following a suggestion by Dvořák that his music was too tragic in mood. Dvořák urged his eighteen-year-old student to give up "those minor-key monumentalities" (the C minor Trio, the A minor Piano Quartet, the *Dramatic Overture* in A minor) and devise something more cheerful. Inspired by his teacher's String Serenade in E major of 1875, Suk created his first important work, and one of the few for which he is known outside his native Czechoslovakia. Dr. Karel Srom noted of this delightful piece, "The first three movements of the Serenade for Strings were produced quickly. In the first movement, the music seems to have descended on Earth directly from Heaven. The second is an ethereal waltz, now and then with hints of the faster or slower three-beat Bohemian folk-dance types; the third is a broadly arched *nocturno*. Those three movements had to be followed with something that would not detract from the effect, but intensify it. The moment Suk conceived the two principal ideas, it took him a mere two days to write the entire scintillating, reverberating, fascinating finale."

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