

Symphony No.9 in E minor

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

B. October 12, 1872, Down Ampney,
Gloucestershire, England

D. August 26, 1958, London

Premiered at the Royal Festival Hall, London, April 2, 1958.

Scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two saxophones in E-flat, saxophone in B-flat, four horns, Flugel horn, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta and strings (approx. 35 minutes).

One of the themes of the 2007-08 season of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra is the choice of a number of works with the title "Ninth Symphony." Of course the first and most famous of these is Beethoven's last symphony, his Symphony No. 9 in D minor. Vaughan Williams himself did not originally number his symphonies, but rather referred to them by key or title (for example "Sea," "London," "Pastoral," "Sinfonia Antartica"). Vaughan Williams' first three symphonies are known by their titles as well as by their numbers. Not until the composition of his ninth, and last symphony (in the key of E minor, the same as the sixth) did he number them, beginning with the fourth symphony in F minor.

Vaughan Williams' Ninth Symphony was first performed at a concert by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent, when the composer was 85. A reviewer for the July 1958 issue of the *Musical Times* commented, "The whole of musical London, as well as many distinguished visitors from elsewhere, seemed to have gathered in the Festival Hall for the Royal Philharmonic Society's concert on 2 April." The Royal Festival Hall itself was opened in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain, and had become one of London's principal concert halls. The Royal Philharmonic Society (formed in 1813 at a time when there were no permanent orchestras in London) had also commissioned the work from Vaughan Williams. The concert consisted of Zoltan Kodaly's Concerto for Orchestra (1939-40), Vaughan Williams' Ninth Symphony, and following the intermission, Berlioz's "Harold in Italy," a program symphony for orchestra and solo viola. The decade of the 1950s was one of experimentation, revolution and the avant-garde, found in the music of a new younger generation of European composers; among the leaders of this new style were Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. In England, Benjamin Britten's success with the operas "Billy Budd" (written for the Festival of Britain) and "Gloriana" (for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II), and later the 1958 commission for what would become his "War Requiem" (for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral) signaled Britten's succession from Vaughan Williams as the country's preeminent composer. Nevertheless, as we can see from the account of the premiere of the Ninth Symphony, Vaughan Williams was still held in high esteem by the British musical establishment. From the Sixth Symphony onward (1944-47), his post-Romantic approach to the symphony gradually became transformed to one that was increasingly experimental, especially in harmony and instrumentation. Earlier in his career Vaughan Williams had been a principal figure in the so-called English Renaissance; however, these later works are more detached from the established English Nationalist style of the pre-war era. Vaughan Williams' instrumentation in this work is particularly noteworthy. The standard orchestra of the late nineteenth century is greatly augmented, adding three saxophones, B-flat Flugel horn, and an extensive percussion section. The composer's use of unusual orchestral sonorities (especially when compared with his earlier symphonies) is striking, for example the prominence of the Flugel horn in the slow movement, and the remarkable saxophone chords at the close of the finale. Research by music historians Michael Kennedy and Alain Frogley has shown that Vaughan Williams' original conception for this work was as a "program symphony" (that is, a symphony with an extra-musical inspiration and a distinct evocation of that inspiration in the music itself). No evidence of the original program appeared when the piece was first performed, but from an examination of sketch fragments it appears that Vaughan Williams did, at least originally, have a program in mind. The genesis for this symphony lay in Thomas Hardy's nineteenth-century *Wessex* (the name after the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom), and more specifically his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Alain Frogley has suggested a close connection in the second movement with the final part of the novel. Vaughan Williams himself referred to the march interpolations at the beginning of the second movement as "the ghostly drummer of Salisbury Plain."

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Vaughan Williams, Symphony No. 5 in D and Symphony No.9 in E minor, Kees Bakels conducts the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Naxos 8.550738.

Program note by David Kidger, associate professor of music history at Oakland University.