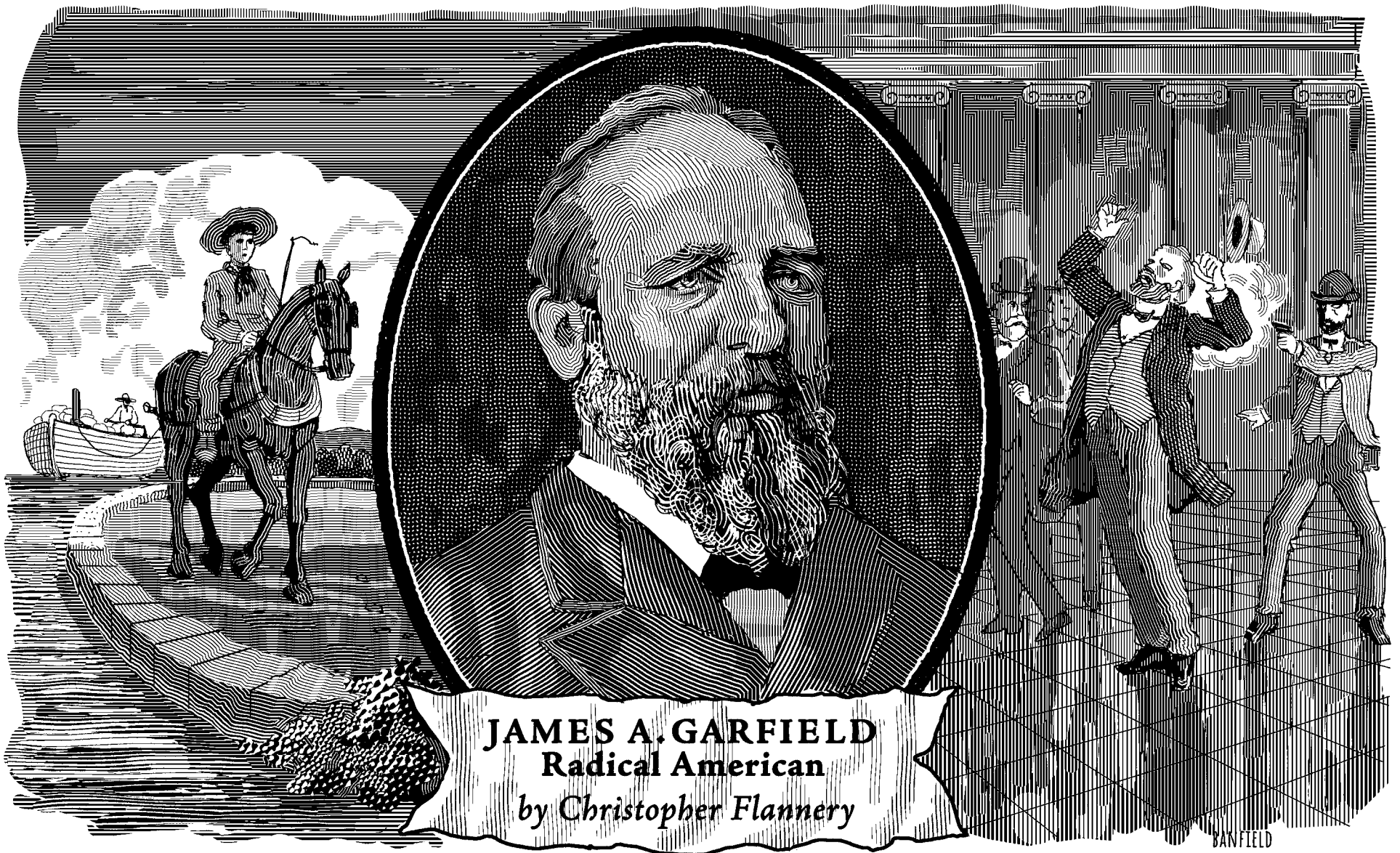


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# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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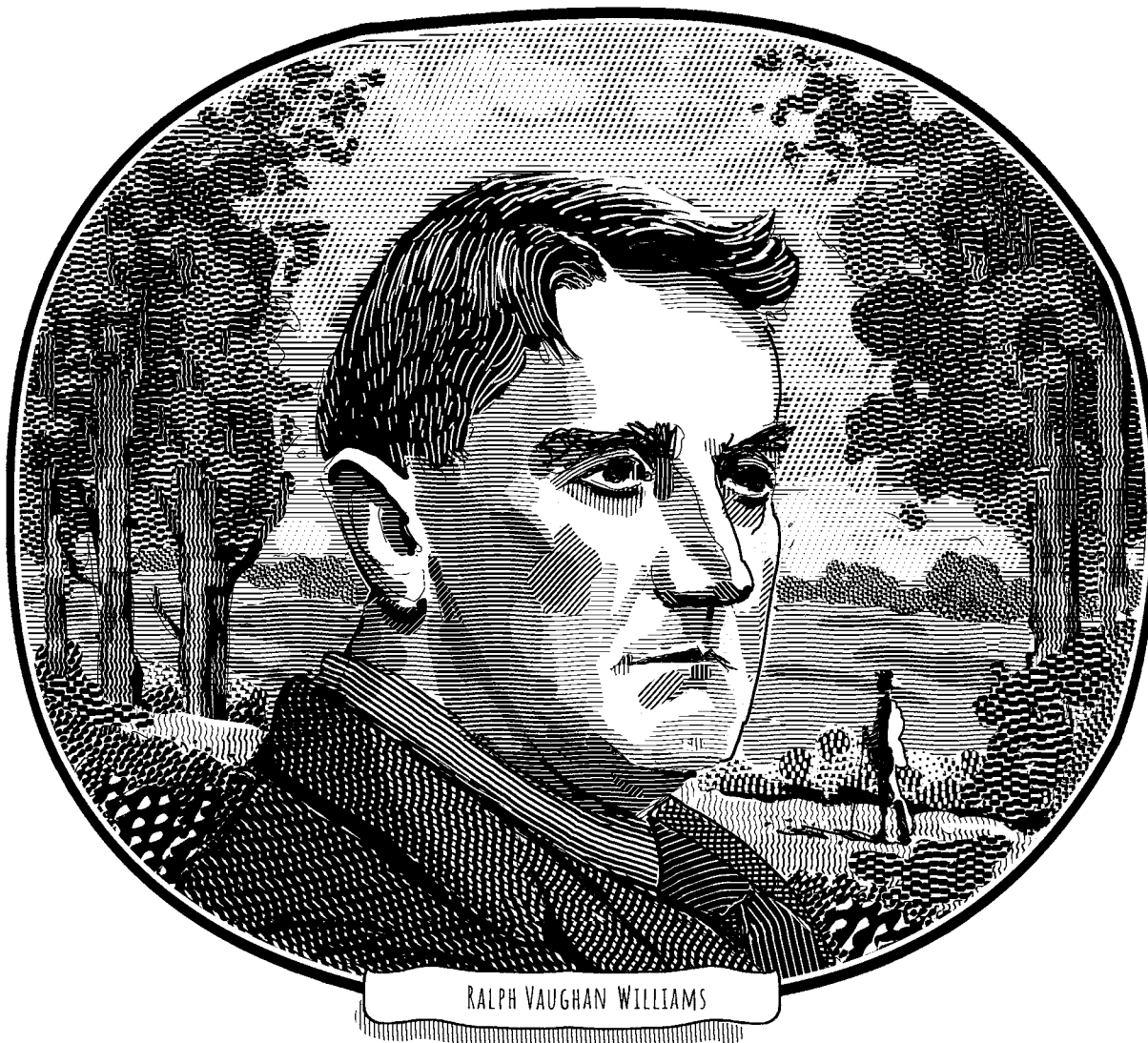
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Book Review by Allen C. Guelzo

## LAY OF THE LAND

*Vaughan Williams*, by Eric Saylor.  
Oxford University Press, 360 pages, \$37.99



**B**REXIT HAD A THEME SONG, BUT IT wasn't about Britannia ruling the waves or a land of hope and glory. It was about a lark.

This particular lark was *The Lark Ascending*, a 13-minute musical essay for solo violin and a small chamber orchestra. No drum-set thumping, no karaoke microphone. It was first performed in 1920, as a musical portrait based on George Meredith's poem of the same name, and begins with the solo violin in rhythmless quavers, picks up at its 70th measure with what sounds like a gentle Morris dance in 2/4, and then returns at the end to those contemplative bird-like quavers.

*The Lark Ascending* has all the musical thrill of an extremely quiet day in an extremely quiet English meadow. But for just that reason in 2016, Britain loved it. "It hearkens back

to my father again," gushed one pop singer who probably could not otherwise have told Bach from Bacharach. "When I first heard this piece of music I collapsed in tears with emotion. I just thought it was probably the most beautiful piece I ever heard." Comments on YouTube videos of *The Lark Ascending* claimed powers for it not dissimilar to Brexit, like "This is what finally coming out of a depressive episode feels like" and "Listening to this music lifted my heart above the clouds and I felt the pain subside." And, not surprisingly, Remainers loathed *Lark*. It reminded writer and musician Hugh Morris of "the residual spectre of British exceptionalism that characterises our politics, governance, and musical life," and yet another complained that "Just like Brexit the British are fixated on *The Lark Ascending*."

**T**HE PRINCIPAL IRONY OF THE PIECE'S identification with Brexit lies in its composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), who not only had been dead for 62 years when Brexit was accomplished, but who had something of a reputation as a genteel socialist and European unionist. He told his fellow composer Herbert Howells after the outbreak of World War II that "a Federal Union of free peoples under a common government" was "the only solution" to Europe's future, and when the longtime socialist composer Rutland Boughton announced his disgusted resignation from the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1952, Vaughan Williams mildly suggested that "all right-minded people are Communists, as far as that means that everything should be done eventually for the common good."



But this was also the same Vaughan Williams who admitted to Boughton that “[s]ocialism in practice” had made an “unholy mess” of postwar Britain. He was no working-class capitalism-hater. Vaughan Williams’s mother was a Wedgwood—which meant that he floated financially on the torrent of money that flowed from old Josiah Wedgwood’s elegant pottery—and his own earnings as a composer netted him the equivalent of half a million pounds *per annum* in today’s currency. When “a young exquisite” objected to him that Bach was just so bourgeois, Vaughan Williams retorted “that being bourgeois myself I considered Bach the greatest of composers.” The problem was not with Bach but with the “proletarians” who were “too much occupied in preserving their rights to have time to be human.” His friend and collaborator of 40 years, Gustav Holst (who despite his German-sounding name was born in Cheltenham), was more of the genuine bourgeois article, but this was exactly what endeared him to Vaughan Williams. For Holst, “life and its realities”—which Vaughan Williams unblushingly enumerated as “money-making, marriage, family cares”—were not some middle-class annoyance that a card-carrying bohemian should resent, but “the very stuff out of which he has knit his art, the soil on which it flourishes.”

The truth was that Vaughan Williams was simply a contrarian who liked to think he had no ideology, “so that when I am with Conservatives I become socialistic and when I am with Socialists I become true blue Tory.” And his music captured another marvelous conundrum: a composer educated by Max Bruch the German and Maurice Ravel the Frenchman, whose music took its deepest root in English folksong and the Anglican church’s liturgy.

**E**RIC SAYLOR’S JOINS AN INCREASINGLY crowded shelf of biographies and studies which began with Hubert Foss’s *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* in 1950. This book, which appears in Oxford’s “Master Musicians” series, is actually one of two Vaughan Williams biographies in that set (the other being *Vaughan Williams*, published in 1961 by James Day, who, like his subject, was a violist).

Any musical biography has the problem of *hearing*. Biographies of politicians can quote speeches; biographies of novelists and poets can quote texts; biographies of artists can reproduce paintings. But the best that biographies of composers can do is reproduce musical notation, which most of the reading public can no more decipher than hieroglyphs. Apart from that, musical biography can only fall back upon words, and words do not convey what is meant to be *heard*. Perhaps

a reasonably broad swath of us can imagine Beethoven’s *Fifth* (*da-da-da-DUM*) while we are reading about it, but that will only happen if we are already familiar with the sound.

Saylor, who teaches music history at Drake University in Iowa, attempts to balance this problem by alternating chapters of straightforward life-narrative with chapters of musical analysis drawn from each preceding narrative chapter. But there are only a dozen notation examples in the entire book, and even the chapters of musical analysis are mostly prosy descriptions of Vaughan Williams’s compositions. If you are not the sort who likes to prop open the score of a symphony for reading pleasure, you will not be in much discomfort with Saylor.

What’s more, Saylor’s biography devotes a satisfyingly large amount of his attention to Vaughan Williams’s personal life, which is a story often quite apart from his music. Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in 1872, the grandson of a prominent judge, Sir Edward Vaughan Williams, who invented and bequeathed the double-barreled last name (sans the usual Victorian hyphen) to his offspring. One of his sons became yet another lawyer and judge, while the other two were ordained in the Anglican church. It was Sir Edward’s third son, the Reverend Arthur Charles Vaughan Williams, who married Margaret Wedgwood in 1868 and became the composer’s father four years later.

And that, in almost every Vaughan Williams biography, is usually the end of what we learn about the composer’s parentage, because Arthur Vaughan Williams died in 1875 before Ralph turned three. Otherwise, we know of Vaughan Williams *père* little more than what we’re told in the sketchy entries of *Crockford’s Clerical Directory*: that he was a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford, served a brief curacy at Bremerton (the famous parish of the 17th-century mystical poet George Herbert), and finally in 1868 moved as vicar to All Saints, Down Ampney (about 25 miles west of Oxford), where he died.

**T**HIS LOSS CREATED A STRANGE VACUUM in Ralph Vaughan Williams’s life. His father’s death is rarely mentioned in the biographies except in a very swift passing. And yet the loss of a parent, especially a father, before the onset of adolescence is frequently the most terrible fact that shapes a young life. Given how often the absence of a father transforms itself into a child’s difficulty with religious belief, this gives us a ready explanation for Vaughan Williams’s own struggle with agnosticism and unbelief, even as he was writing some of the most memora-

ble English church music of the 20th century. And it really was a struggle. As an undergraduate at Cambridge, he was notorious for asking difficult questions (“Who believes in God nowadays, I should like to know”). Yet he undertook a revision of *The English Hymnal* (and composed new hymns for it, one of which was, significantly, given the tune name “Down Ampney”), wrote settings of George Herbert’s poems in the *Five Mystical Songs* of 1911, and composed one of the most moving of tributes to a bygone youth in *An Oxford Elegy* in 1952—despite the fact that it was his *father* who was the Oxford man. If there are new paths Vaughan Williams biographers need to open up, the ones that lead to his father’s grave in Down Ampney churchyard may be the most fruitful of all.

Margaret Vaughan Williams, who lived until age 94, moved her fatherless brood (Ralph had two siblings, Hervey and Margaret Jane) to the Wedgwood estate at Leith Hill Place in Surrey. Hervey followed his grandfather into law while Margaret lived the quiet life of a country *grand dame*. Ralph, however, became intoxicated with music, beginning violin lessons at age seven and starting a correspondence course in music theory the next year. His Wedgwood relatives regarded this as a harmless amusement he would outgrow. He didn’t. Sent to Charterhouse School in 1887, he switched to the viola, sang in the chapel choir, and began organ lessons. He talked his relatives into allowing him to begin composition studies under Charles Hubert Parry at the Royal College of Music (RCM), but he had to placate them by also taking an undergraduate degree in history at Cambridge. Once he had paid his dues, though, he went back to the RCM to study in earnest under Charles Villiers Stanford, and then abroad with Bruch and Ravel.

**V**AUGHAN WILLIAMS WAS NOT AN effortless musician. He was physically awkward, with a huge upper-body frame that must have terrified the first-chair violins when he conducted. A good deal of what he wrote before age 30 was mediocre, and he suffered through much of his life with a version of imposter syndrome, once wailing that “I wish I didn’t dislike my own stuff so much when I hear it.” When his operatic version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* debuted at Oxford in 1930 as *Sir John in Love*, he sadly dismissed it—“It’s bad Stanford”—which was patently untrue. (In fact, nestled inside *Sir John in Love* was an *entr’acte* which became famous on its own, his *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, which has been heard by more people around the world, especially at Christmastime, than anything else he wrote).



And then, in December 1903, Vaughan Williams was introduced to Charles Potiphar, an elderly illiterate laborer who sang for him several folksongs he had learned as a young man. This was not necessarily an unusual experience: all across Europe, Romantic *littérateurs* in the first half of the 19th century (like the Brothers Grimm) had turned to collecting folk materials as a way of discovering authentic ethnic identities, as well as putting a thumb into the eye of Enlightenment universalism. Vaughan Williams was at first hesitant about the virtues of folksong. Why, he asked in 1902, “should an English composer attempt to found his style on the music of a class to which he does not belong, and which itself no longer exists?” What brought him up short was Potiphar’s singing of “Through Bushes and Through Briars.” Vaughan Williams was riveted. It was like “something he had known all his life,” something ineffably English and unpredictably familiar through which he could breathe, musically and effortlessly.

He moved at once into serious folksong collecting (sometimes assisted by a bell-horned gramophone which is still on display at the English Folk Dance and Song Society in London) from aged singers like Potiphar whose art was dying with them. Even more, he began incorporating folksong and the ancient church modes in which folksong was cast—Mixolydian, Phrygian, Dorian, and so forth—into his own compositions. The first of these was his *Norfolk Rhapsody No. 1* of 1906 (which featured “The Captain’s Apprentice” and the bumptious “On Board a Ninety-Eight”), followed in 1910 by the extraordinary success of his *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* for double string orchestra and string quartet, based upon a Phrygian psalter tune from 1567. Anyone who can listen to the *Tallis Fantasia* and not at once conjure up images of Elizabethan England hath not ears to hear.

**S**AYLOR IS GENEROUS AND METICULOUS in his estimates of Vaughan Williams’s writing, two qualities not often found together in one musical biography. Over the long career that followed the success of the *Tallis Fantasia*, Saylor shows us how Vaughan Williams wrote in almost every musical genre—the art song; four operas; nine symphonies; a piano concerto (later rewritten for two pianos); film and liturgical music; three ballets; concertos for violin, for oboe, even tuba; and a suite for viola, *Flos Campi* (“The Rose of Sharon”), based on seven texts from the Song of Solomon—and was still at work when he died, suddenly, of a massive heart attack in August 1958.

Saylor’s generosity is a virtue. Nevertheless, it still has to be said that some of Vaughan Williams’s enormous *oeuvre* is poorly written and blunderingly orchestrated. His first symphony, *A Sea Symphony*, is really a traditional English oratorio, only using Walt Whitman for his texts rather than the Old Testament; the *Fourth Symphony* is a half-hearted but noisy experiment in modernism. Even the *Serenade to Music*, which he wrote for Sir Henry Wood’s golden jubilee as a conductor in 1938, is dull to the point of flatness, despite setting the famous discussion of the music of the spheres from *The Merchant of Venice* for 16 soloists. But when he was good, Vaughan Williams was very good. The ballet music he wrote for *Job: A Masque for Dancing* in 1930 is a graceful and Jacobean embodiment of William Blake’s *Illustrations of the Book of Job*; his third symphony, the *Pastoral Symphony*, is a gentle threnody from 1922 for the losses of the Great War; while the *Fifth Symphony* (from 1943) is English mysticism cast in orchestral form. And his last opera, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1951), with its long sonorous introduction of the York psalm-tune, succeeds in making John Bunyan’s Roundhead Puritanism understandable, even admirable—even if the staging is static and inert.

**A**FTER HIS EPIPHANY WITH FOLKSONG in 1903, it was Vaughan Williams’s fundamental contention that any worthwhile music had to be national music. He dismissed the notion that music was a “universal language,” and he was sure that “the composer who tries to be cosmopolitan from the outset will fail, not only with the world at large, but with his own people.” His teachers deplored this, in just the same way that the American Charles Ives’s teachers told him he must never use New England revival hymns in serious composition. Like Ives (his contemporary), Vaughan Williams ignored them: “I believe that the love of one’s country, one’s language, one’s customs, one’s religion, are essential to our spiritual health.” He profoundly admired Bach, but he scoffed at the cult of “period performance” and thought that it was perfectly reasonable to have the B Minor Mass sung to an English text so that English listeners could hear it in “the incomparable language of their liturgy.” (What he would make of the current mash-ups of that liturgy does not gladden the mind.)

Yet he also believed that even national music obeys a natural law common to all music. Just as natural law in history and ethics reveals universal patterns of human flourishing and human order, so music is ordered sound, “an orderly succession of sounds at regular inter-

vals,” as he put it, recognizable to every human hearer. What Vaughan Williams called “great patterns in sound” are intrinsic to human good and “open the magic casements” of life. Even a sailor cast away on an island “would continue to make music for his spiritual exaltation even though there were no one to hear him.”

Music “is not a series of mysteries or trade secrets but is simply the development of a power natural to the human ear and the human mind.” So natural, in fact, that Vaughan Williams could remember hearing an open-air preacher on the Isle of Skye speaking with such emotion that his sermon gradually developed into a four-note litany—E, A, B, A—and was astonished to discover that this was exactly the same pattern that began “Through Bushes and Through Briars.” What was true of melody was also true of rhythm: people listening to a machine making ticking sounds will, he declared, sooner or later believe that some of those ticks sound louder than the others, and discern a pattern. This instinct conforms to people’s natural impulse, “for rhythmical quality” is “implicit in their nature.”

**D**ISCOVERING THE NATURAL ORDERLI-ness of music did not make Vaughan Williams any less a musical nationalist. No man may be an island, but no man is a planet, either, and our search after beauty and truth grow out of specific times and places that enable that seeking. Yet they all point in the end to a common beauty that can be embraced by all, as surely as the natural law limned by Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson can describe rules and rights which belong to everyone. A musical culture which has no root in a nation produces only an arid modernism in composition, much of it unlistenable for all except tiny academic audiences. A musical culture that acknowledges no universal order produces a brainless vulgarity at best, and at worst a lethal rage.

Vaughan Williams’s music speaks to Americans and to many others out of a particular national culture, but he is still nevertheless hearable because national musical traits are not incommensurate with each other or with the natural law that spreads like a canopy over them. There is, Abraham Lincoln said, an electric cord which runs through the hearts of all lovers of liberty, everywhere. It does likewise for all lovers of truth and beauty.

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