

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: HOUSEHOLD MUSIC

During World War II, Vaughan Williams read of Londoners sheltering in tube stations during the German bombing and thought it would be nice if they had some music to play. Since he couldn't count on a specified set of instruments being available, he deliberately wrote it for any combination of instruments with the correct range for the parts. Would that today's great composers would write fine music for amateurs!

Vaughan Williams' work included the editing of several important books of hymns. He was particularly attracted to the warm, richly melodic tradition of Welsh hymns and this work takes three Welsh hymns on a ride. Perhaps it helps if you know the hymns, since Vaughan Williams almost never gives them to you straight!

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: MERCILESS BEAUTY

We now turn the clock back from the second world war to just after the first. Vaughan Williams returned to civilian life and to composing in 1918, after five years service in the army. His new compositions - such as the *Pastoral Symphony*, the one-act Bunyan episode *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* and the *Mass in G minor* - outwardly have serene tranquility in common. But beneath the surface is a requiem-like mood, a legacy of the war. This ambiguity can also be sensed in the three songs - or rondels - for high voice and string trio which he called *Merciless Beauty*.

Vaughan Williams was taught by his teacher Hubert Parry to take his texts from the greatest writers in the English language. These three rondels are among the most exquisite love poems ever written. The texts are attributed to Chaucer.

A rondel is a poetical form similar to the musical form *rondeau*, where a theme heard at the start of a piece keeps returning. In this case the poet repeats the first two lines at the end of the first stanza, and the first three lines at the end of the second.

SCHUBERT: OCTET

When the play *Rosamunde*, with extensive incidental music by Franz Schubert, was booted off the stage at its premiere in Vienna in December 1823, the 27-year-old composer decided to turn his efforts away from the theater, where he had found only frustration, and devote more attention to purely instrumental music. Thus the operas, song cycles and stage music of 1823 (by the way, the dates here are, I believe, very important, and I shall return to them later on) gave way to works such as the String Quartet in D minor ("Death and the Maiden") and the A minor Cello Sonata ("Arpeggione"). Early in 1824, Schubert received a commission for another instrumental work from Count Troyer, Chief Steward to the Archduke Rudolph, a patron of the arts and a fine amateur clarinetist. Troyer ordered from Schubert a companion piece to Beethoven's Septet. Schubert accepted the commission, received Troyer's permission to enrich the septet group with an additional violin, and set to work on the Octet.

A friend of Schubert's commented on his total absorption whilst composing the piece: "Schubert has now long been at work on the Octet with the greatest zeal. If you go to see him during the day he says, 'Hello, how are you? — Good!' and simply goes on working, whereupon you depart."

The Octet was completed on 1st March, 1824, and was first heard at a private concert at Count Troyer's house in Vienna. It was not performed in public for 3 more years when an ensemble played the piece at a hall in the Viennese café "The Red Hedgehog" (which was later a favourite haunt of Brahms).

The eminent musicologist Sir Jack Westrup wrote "What is charming in this music, is the expression of Schubert's personality — a sunny enjoyment of life which is often ready to turn to tears and which by its very nature can bring tears to the listener's eyes."

Now, back to dates ... who remembers when Schubert wrote this Octet? Yes, early 1824. Let me trace for you some of the key events in Schubert's life immediately preceding this composition. It was probably in late 1822 that he contracted syphilis, and suffered symptoms throughout 1823. In the summer of that year he spent an extended holiday at the end of which he suffered an acute depression. At times he suffered severe pain in his left arm preventing him from playing the piano, and asphonia (loss of the voice) so that he could not sing. Performances of his music were getting fewer and fewer due to his illnesses and consequent retirement from society. His only income was therefore from sales of his music, and this was not good either, as he was 'out of sight, and out of mind'. He was constantly broke, living principally on the generosity of friends. As if all of this wasn't bad enough when he composed the music to Rosamunde late in 1823, as I've already said, it was a flop.

In March 1824, just after completing the Octet, Schubert wrote:

"I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse, instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have come to nothing, to whom the joy of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain, at the best, whose enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating kind) for all things beautiful threatens to vanish, and ask yourself is he not a miserable unhappy being? "My peace has gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it never and nevermore" I may sing every day now, for each night I go to bed hoping never to wake again, and each morning only tells me of yesterday's grief."

How, in the midst of all of this, did Schubert compose the Octet, the only somber moments of which are a few bars of introduction to the finale (which was probably simply an homage to Beethoven's Septet)? How could a man suffering such financial, physical and mental agonies conceive some of the most beautiful, tender, high-spirited, and optimistic music ever written? I simply pose the question, I will suggest no answer, but will just allow you to engage with this question as, I hope, you enjoy the uplifting nature of Schubert's music.