

‘In every way a *persona gratissima* here’: Vaughan Williams and Oxford

Ralph Vaughan Williams could be said to be a Cambridge man: not only in the sense that he studied at Cambridge University, graduating from Trinity College with a music degree in 1894, but also in that his family was closely interwoven with some of the most notable Cambridge intellectual families (his mother Margaret Wedgwood was a niece of Charles Darwin).¹ It is therefore all the more striking that it was with England’s other ancient university city that he had the stronger musical connections. In fact his connections with Oxford were to extend over half a century, and the city was to see the premieres of two of his most powerful and deeply-felt pieces of music for chorus and orchestra—*Sancta Civitas* (1926) and *An Oxford Elegy* (1952)—and at least two other first performances, not to mention early performances of several of his other most significant works. The city played a significant part in establishing the young composer’s reputation; and it could be said that, after London, Oxford was the city with which he felt the strongest connection.

Indeed, Oxford was to have a prominent place in Vaughan Williams’ emotional landscape from the beginning of this career. He had a lifelong admiration for the poetry of Matthew Arnold—he drafted a setting of Arnold’s *Dover Beach* in 1900²—and it seems to have been around 1901 that he began to have ideas of writing an opera based on Arnold’s Oxford-themed poem *The Scholar Gipsy*. The desire to turn Arnold’s lyrical evocation of the Oxfordshire scenery—complete with vistas of the ‘sweet city with its dreaming spires’—into an opera libretto was to remain with him for the next half-century.³

1901 seems to have been a key year in VW’s relationship with Oxford. It was in the summer of that year that he visited the city ‘professionally’ for what appears to be the first time, when he gave three lectures on music as part of the University Extension summer meeting. (Was it on this visit that his experiences amid the ‘dreaming spires’ gave rise to the first inklings of his musical ambitions about *The Scholar Gipsy*?) But it was also the year in which a friend from his Cambridge undergraduate days, who was to become the linchpin of his Oxford connections, moved to Oxford to take up the position of organist of New College. This was the conductor, musicologist and all-round force of nature Hugh Percy Allen, who also in 1901 took on another appointment which was to have great significance for VW: the conductorship of the Oxford Bach Choir.⁴ Forty years later VW was to write that—with the exception of his publisher at Oxford University Press, Hubert Foss—the person to whom he most owed his success was ‘H. P. A. who insisted on shoving the S[ea] Symph[ony] down people’s throats after it was a complete flop at Leeds’.⁵ In fact his championing of the *Sea Symphony*, important as it was for VW’s career, was only one of many ways in which Allen promoted his friend’s interests.

¹ This article draws freely on my earlier article ‘Vaughan Williams and the Oxford Bach Choir’ (*Journal of the RVW Society*, Oct. 2008, pp. 18–20). I would like to thank all those who have helped me find relevant material in Oxford’s archives, particularly Bethany Hamblen (Balliol College), Michael Riordan (Queen’s College), Jennifer Thorp (New College), Philip Ross Bullock, Daniel Grimley, and Eric Saylor have also generously given of their expertise, answering queries and providing numerous comments and suggestions. All remaining errors and deficiencies are of course my own.

² As mentioned in a letter from his wife Adeline to René Gatty (VWL4455).

³ Michael Kennedy, *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (2nd ed., 1980), pp. 47, 357.

⁴ In 1901 Allen was also appointed conductor of the Oxford Choral and Philharmonic Society, which he conducted in joint concerts with the Oxford Bach Choir for several years before the two choirs formally amalgamated in 1910.

⁵ 6 Nov [1941] RVW to Hubert Foss (VWL1584).

At this stage VW was only just beginning to make his way as a composer, with a few performances of his music, mainly in London, where he and his wife were living. Interestingly, however, his music began to make occasional appearances on Oxford programmes in the years following Allen's arrival, including some of the earliest performances of his songs anywhere. In 1902 and 1903, for example, the singers James Campbell McInnes and Francis Harford included songs by VW in recitals at Balliol College;⁶ and in February 1903 VW himself appeared as pianist in two performances of his early D major piano quintet at the University Musical Club.⁷ It is tempting to attribute this at least in part to Allen's influence, given his later championing of VW's music (although McInnes and Harford were both also early champions of his songs); and it does seem to be the case that Oxford was getting to hear more of this young composer than anywhere else outside London. VW himself was also returning to Oxford, both to give further University Extension lectures (on French folk-song in 1903, and on Elizabethan madrigals in 1905) and for more domestic reasons, such as the wedding in 1904 of G. M. Trevelyan, a close friend from Cambridge days.⁸ His wife Adeline's brother, H. A. L. Fisher, was also a Fellow and Tutor of New College.

By 1907 VW's reputation had progressed somewhat, but he was still not enough of a 'big name' to be able to devote himself entirely to composition (or at least he chose not to): in May of that year he was one of the judges for the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Competitive Musical Festival, held in Oxford, which culminated in a concert at the Town Hall at which VW conducted a massed choir of approximately 1,000 schoolchildren in a performance of several part-songs, with Hugh Allen at the organ.⁹ Only a few weeks later, on 22 June, VW was once again on the podium in Oxford, at a very different but equally spectacular concert, this time in the hall of New College. The orchestra was 'Dr. Allen's Orchestra', an ensemble of Oxford players which Allen had established a few years earlier (strengthened as usual on this occasion with wind players from London), and the concert—one of the series of summer concerts organized by particular colleges as part of the customary festivities of the university's 'Commemoration Week'—may be assumed to have been masterminded by Allen. VW conducted a performance of an orchestral version of his song 'The Vagabond', with the baritone Harry Plunkett Greene; but he was by no means the star guest, as two other composers had also been invited to conduct their own works: Sir Hubert Parry conducted his 'Cambridge' Symphony, and Sir Charles Stanford his *Songs of the Sea* and another orchestral song.¹⁰ Such a line-up at a single concert must be practically unparalleled; VW must certainly have felt himself to be in distinguished company; although he knew Parry and Stanford well, having been taught by both of them during his time at the Royal College of Music. Indeed he would soon be impressing Stanford with his first major piece for chorus and orchestra, *Toward the Unknown Region*, which had its première at the Leeds Festival under his own baton that October, and which Stanford was moved to perform

⁶ Balliol College archives. McInnes' performance of the song 'Boy Johnny' at Balliol on 2 February 1902 appears to have been its first public performance; he returned to Balliol on 1 March 1903, and sang 'Whither must I wander?' and 'Blackwore by the Stour'. Harford included four arrangements of French songs by VW in another Balliol recital on 22 November 1903. VW's songs would regularly reappear in this important series of concerts over the next decade.

⁷ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R. V. W.* (1964), p. 64.

⁸ *Oxford Times* 26 March 1904 (which lists 'Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan Williams' among the guests at the wedding reception).

⁹ Notices in *Oxford Chronicle* 7 June and *Jackson's Oxford Journal* 8 June 1907.

¹⁰ Notices in *Oxford Chronicle* 28 June and *Jackson's Oxford Journal* 29 June 1907. The unnamed (male) choral forces—which sang in Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* as well as the *Songs of the Sea*—were probably drawn at least in part from New College Choir.

in London two months later.

And it was with *Toward the Unknown Region* that VW's important connection with the Oxford Bach Choir would become firmly established. The choir had been founded to perform the music of Bach, but following his engagement as conductor Allen lost no time in introducing modern music into its repertoire, and specifically English music, with Parry and Stanford both being invited to conduct the choir in their own music in 1905, and premières of pieces by Ernest Walker and Basil Harwood in the next few years. Having been appointed conductor of the London Bach Choir in June 1907, Allen programmed *Toward the Unknown Region* in his first season with them; and a year later, on 4 March 1909, it was performed by its Oxford counterpart. VW was present at the concert in the Town Hall. Interestingly, a few years later the piece seems to have achieved a special popularity in Oxford: it was performed four times by various Oxford groups between June 1921 and December 1923.¹¹

Within a few months of that 1909 performance of *Toward the Unknown Region*, VW had at last completed the much larger-scale choral setting of Walt Whitman on which he had been engaged for several years, which, like its predecessor, was premièred under his baton at the Leeds Festival (on 12 October 1910): *A Sea Symphony*. Hugh Allen's forceful advocacy of this masterwork has already been mentioned; following its performance at Leeds he determined that the Oxford Bach Choir should perform it, and they duly gave the second performance on 8 March 1911, with the composer once again conducting. In fact this was in some ways another première of the symphony, which had been substantially revised since its performance at Leeds (Adrian Boult recalls that VW and Allen spent a day at Allen's house 'going through the string parts [...] and making them, well, playable'); so it was in Oxford that the piece was first heard in the form in which it has become generally known.¹² VW's charming letter of thanks to Allen and the choir for their 'magnificent performance'—a printed copy of which is pasted into the choir's minute book—is worth quoting at length: 'I never hoped to hear the Scherzo go like that—you know, as I told you, I was coming to the conclusion that I had tried for the impossible there. I am beginning to think differently now [...] I know what a tremendous tussle you've all had with it, it has made me quite unhappy to think of it. But at all events I hope it will be some reward to you to feel what a fine performance resulted.'¹³

There were other Oxford friends besides Allen whom VW consulted about his compositions while they were still in development. Henry Ley, the organist of Christ Church, recalled an occasion in the summer of 1910 when VW brought the score of his still-germinating 'ballad opera' *Hugh the Drover* to Oxford to show it to Allen, whereupon Ley and VW's great friend George Butterworth—then a music master at Radley College—came over, and they 'all spent a day playing and "singing" this delightful opera'. This summer 'singthrough' was to have a strange, and important, sequel: at 10.30 on the same evening VW persuaded his companions to join him on a protracted night-time walk through the Oxfordshire countryside—only returning to Allen's house at 6am the following morning—which has been identified as the occasion when VW's interest in creating something from *The Scholar Gipsy* crystallized into

¹¹ It was performed by the Oxford Bach Choir in the Sheldonian Theatre on 12 June 1921 (VW having conducted them in a rehearsal of the piece a few days earlier), by St Edward's School at their mid-term concert on 22 June 1922, by the Eglesfield Musical Society at Queen's College—with the rather unusual reduced accompaniment of two pianos, three trumpets, and a double bass—on 5 December 1922, and by Iffley Choral Society in the Town Hall on 30 December 1923.

¹² *Boult on Music* (1983), p. 67.

¹³ [10 Mar 1911] RVW to Hugh Allen (VWL5179).

what would eventually emerge, over four decades later, as *An Oxford Elegy*.¹⁴ The walk certainly took VW past many of the Oxfordshire landmarks which feature in Arnold's poem.

Substantial works by VW continued to appear on concert programmes even during the First World War. Allen's influence can often be discerned: not just in the Oxford Bach Choir's programming of his music—they performed the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* in December 1916, and *Five Mystical Songs* a year later—but also elsewhere, such as the performance of the *Fantasia* by the West Oxford Vocal Society in the Holywell Music Room in February 1916 as part of a series of 'popular concerts' jointly organized by Allen and Henry Ley.¹⁵ (Ley was evidently also enthusiastic about VW's music: enthusiastic enough, at any rate, to arrange the slow movement of his *Sea Symphony* for organ and feature it in a recital at Christ Church in 1917.¹⁶)

VW himself was of course otherwise engaged during the war, having enlisted in December 1914. He was demobilized in February 1919, and the following June was once again in Oxford, this time for a very special occasion. He had been invited to receive an honorary Doctorate of Music at the Sheldonian Theatre, and the ceremony was followed by a concert marking the 250th anniversary of the opening of the theatre, at which he heard another performance of *A Sea Symphony*, this time under Allen's baton (and with the OBC augmented by a contingent of singers from their London counterpart). This was followed by some strikingly early performances of VW's next two symphonies in Oxford: the *London Symphony* (in its latest revision) under Adrian Boult on 20 Jan 1921, and the *Pastoral Symphony* performed by Eugene Goossens' own orchestra on 19 Oct 1922, only a few months after its London première. In one review of the latter VW was described as 'in every way a *persona gratissima* here': an indication of his stellar reputation in Oxford musical circles at this time.¹⁷

Hugh Allen may have been the most energetic of VW's champions in Oxford—and was now even better placed to promote him within the University, having been appointed Heather Professor of Music in 1918—but he was by no means alone. Henry Ley has already been mentioned, but there is also Allen's close associate Maurice Besly, who took over from him as conductor of the Oxford Orchestral Society (as Dr Allen's Orchestra later became). After Besly took up the post of director of music and organist at Queen's College in 1919, he was soon including VW's music in the programmes of concerts given by the college's music society, the Eglesfield Musical Society. Particularly notable was a VW première—admittedly only a brief one—on 2 December 1921, when Besly conducted his 'Fanfare' for female voices, acclaimed by one reviewer as '16 bars of concentrated musicianship'. A few days later—wearing, as it were, another hat—Besly gave another VW première, when the Oxford Orchestral Society and the baritone Herbert Heyner performed his *Songs of Travel*, 'specially orchestrated by the composer', in the Town Hall.¹⁸ Over the next year he was to programme VW's music in three further concerts, including an important early orchestral performance of his fine anthem 'Lord, thou hast been our refuge' on 26 February 1922 (Ley having given one

¹⁴ Ley's reminiscences are preserved in BL MS Mus. 1714/1/4; they are quoted at length by John Francis (who makes the claim about the genesis of *An Oxford Elegy*) in his article 'Ralph Vaughan Williams and Henry Ley', *RVW Society Journal* No. 63 (June 2015), pp. 12–13. Francis—following Ursula Vaughan Williams (*R.V.W.* p. 421)—dates the episode to 1914, but the fact of Butterworth coming over from Radley dates it to 1910, as he was only employed at the school for the year 1909–10.

¹⁵ Notice in *Oxford Chronicle* 18 Feb 1916.

¹⁶ Ley's recital (on 25 November) was advertised in the *Oxford Chronicle* of 23 Nov 1917.

¹⁷ Notice in *Musical News and Herald* 2 Dec 1922, p. 507.

¹⁸ Notices of both concerts in *Oxford Chronicle* 9 Dec 1921.

of the very first performances anywhere the previous July).¹⁹ What with these efforts at Queen's, and the performances of the *Pastoral Symphony* and *Toward the Unknown Region* mentioned above, 1922 would already have amounted to something of an *annus mirabilis* for VW in Oxford; but there was more, thanks to Hugh Allen and the Oxford Bach Choir. The composer himself attended another OBC performance of *A Sea Symphony* in the Sheldonian on 12 May; and on 12 November the same forces managed another VW première, in a concert—given twice in the same day!—whose composition might strike modern audiences as distinctly odd: a performance of Verdi's *Requiem* was followed by Elgar's orchestration of *Jerusalem* and the hymn 'For all the Saints', to VW's fine tune *Sine Nomine*, 'orchestrated by him for the occasion'.²⁰

There were now increasing demands on VW's time from elsewhere, especially London (he had taken over the conductorship of the London Bach Choir following Hugh Allen's resignation in 1921); but he still managed to find time for visits to Oxford. One strand of his relationship with the city which should not be overlooked is his involvement in folk-song studies. Oxford had a part to play in this from very early on: what appear to have been his first public lectures on folk-song had been given under the auspices of Oxford University Extension (although they were first delivered in Bournemouth, in October–December 1902). In 1910 he had been invited to give the inaugural lecture of the Oxford Folk Music Society (a lecture which was followed by Stuart Wilson's performance of ten folk-songs collected by VW himself);²¹ and in 1925 he lectured on the subject again, this time at the invitation of the local branch of the English Folk Dance Society.²² His folk-song arrangements were of course regularly featuring in recital programmes; a notable example was the recital by Harry Plunkett Greene—with Sir Charles Stanford at the keyboard—at the Town Hall on 26 November 1910.²³

By this time work was well under way on what must be the most important of VW's compositions to be premiered in Oxford: his oratorio *Sancta Civitas*, which he himself declared to be his own favourite among his choral works, and which was programmed as a highlight of the 1926 'Heather Festival of Music' (a series of concerts and other events celebrating the tercentenary of the endowment of the university's first professorship in music by William Heather). Hugh Allen had secured the première for the Oxford Bach Choir, and VW and Adeline came to Oxford in February for some of the early rehearsals, staying at New College, where Adeline's brother had recently been made Warden. They returned for the first performance, which took place in the Sheldonian Theatre on 7 May (in the middle of the General Strike).

Sancta Civitas was Hugh Allen's final concert as the OBC's conductor; he was succeeded by W. H. Harris, who had succeeded him as organist of New College—and who had known VW since his days as a fellow organ pupil of Walter Parratt—but whose musical sympathies may perhaps have lain elsewhere, for the choir programmed nothing by VW for several years. (Not that he stayed away from Oxford: in October 1928, for example, he was among the

¹⁹ Notices in *Oxford Chronicle* 22 July 1921 (Ley) and *Musical Times* 1 Apr 1922, p. 275 (Besly). The other VW items given by the Eglesfield Society were a performance of his partsong 'The springtime of the year' on 2 June (which, as the *Oxford Chronicle* (9 June) reported, 'naturally had to be repeated') and *Toward the Unknown Region* on 5 December (see above).

²⁰ Notice in *Musical Times* 1 Jan 1923, p. 65.

²¹ Notice in *Oxford Magazine* 24 Nov 1910, pp. 94–5. The chair on the occasion of this lecture was, unsurprisingly, taken by Hugh Allen, who also took a huge interest in folk-song and folk dancing.

²² Notice in *Oxford Chronicle* 13 Feb 1925.

²³ Notice in *Musical Standard* 10 Dec 1910, p. 376.

‘large and enthusiastic audience’ at the Town Hall for a concert of music by Ravel, on the day when an honorary doctorate of music had been conferred on the Frenchman under whose tutelage he had acquired ‘a little French polish’ two decades earlier; and a month later he was at the New Theatre with Allen for the first night of a celebrated production of Weber’s *Der Freischütz*.²⁴) However, there were plenty of enthusiasts elsewhere in Oxford ready to take up the baton from Allen. One such was Reginald Jacques, who had succeeded Maurice Besly as organist of Queen’s College, and who also conducted another of Oxford’s choral societies, the Oxford Harmonic Society, who in the early 1930s performed several substantial pieces by VW not long after their first performances, including his cantata *In Windsor Forest* in January 1932 less than a year after its première, and his *Benedicite* (premiered in 1930) in January 1933. *In Windsor Forest* was a particularly interesting choice, adapted as it is from VW’s comic opera *Sir John in Love*—which had received its first performance outside London at Oxford in May 1930, conducted by Malcolm Sargent; VW had come up to Oxford for the occasion, and made a speech from the stage on the night of the last performance.²⁵ Nor was this the only notable VW stage production in Oxford at this time: his ‘masque for dancing’ *Job* was brought to the New Theatre in July 1931, as part of the International Society for Contemporary Music’s festival, by the Camargo Society—which had given the work its first stage performance in Cambridge only a few weeks earlier—and once again VW himself was in attendance.²⁶ A champion of rather a different kind was the musical Professor of German at the University, Hermann Fiedler, who in 1937 instigated the nomination of VW to receive the University of Hamburg’s new Shakespeare Prize. VW travelled to Germany with Fiedler the following year to receive the award (having first—wisely given the highly sensitive political context—secured assurances that acceptance of the honour should not be interpreted as indicating any sympathy with German state ideology, and that he would be able to speak freely at the ceremony).²⁷

In 1933 W. H. Harris was succeeded as conductor of the Oxford Bach Choir by Thomas Armstrong, who was rather more of a VW enthusiast; he had sung in the choir while an undergraduate at Keble College, when he would have had ample opportunity to absorb something of Hugh Allen’s enthusiasm for works like the *Sea Symphony*, which received a rather special performance in the Sheldonian on 10 May 1936, when Armstrong was lucky enough to conduct the London Symphony Orchestra and the soprano Isobel Baillie. Even more special—and considerably grander in scale—was the concert which took place on 12 May 1938, when the Oxford Bach Choir combined with members of the Oxford Harmonic Society to sing the *Benedicite* and *Sancta Civitas* under the composer’s own baton, together with a performance of the *London Symphony* conducted by Sydney Watson.

Even with the restrictions on travel imposed by the outbreak of another war, VW continued to maintain his connections with Oxford, and Oxford with him. And the record of early performances of his works continues: on 11 May 1941 the Oxford Bach Choir performed his *Serenade to Music* (first performed in 1938) in the Sheldonian; and on 10 February 1944, less than a year after its London première, VW himself conducted the London Philharmonic in

²⁴ Notices in *Oxford Chronicle* 26 Oct and 30 Nov 1928.

²⁵ *R.V.W.* p. 181. The opera was staged at the Oxford Playhouse (in its original premises on Woodstock Road, in a former ‘Big Game Museum’).

²⁶ The notice in the Times of 25 July 1931 reported the audience’s ‘enthusiastic calls for the composer at its close, calls which were at last responded to by Dr. Vaughan Williams joining the company on the stage’.

²⁷ 16 Aug 1837 VW to Fiedler (VWL1205). Further on this episode see ‘Alain Frogley, ‘Vaughan Williams and Nazi Germany: the 1937 Hamburg Shakespeare Prize,’ in *Music as a Bridge: Musikalische Beziehungen zwischen England und Deutschland 1920–1950*, ed. Christa Brüstle and Guido Heldt (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2005), 113–32. I am grateful to Eric Saylor for this reference.

two performances of his 5th symphony in a single day.²⁸ And on 8 March 1945—six months after its first performance—his oboe concerto was played by its dedicatee, Léon Goossens, in a concert given by the Oxford Orchestra under Thomas Armstrong. Even his famously challenging 4th Symphony received an Oxford performance (by the LSO under Henry Wood) in 1941.²⁹ This falls a long way short of a complete account of VW performances in Oxford during the Second World War; but then by this stage his reputation was firmly established as one of the most important contemporary English composers, so it was only to be expected that he would feature prominently in concert programmes, in Oxford as elsewhere.

And this would continue for the remaining years of his life; but a few further highlights are worth picking out. There were two notable premières: in 1948 the so-called ‘Little Oxford Bach Choir’—which actually numbered well over a hundred singers, and which had given the first Oxford performance of *Flos Campi* the previous year—performed (in his presence) the beautiful short motet ‘Prayer to the Father of Heaven’, written for them as VW’s contribution to a festival celebrating the birth of Parry;³⁰ and on 19 June 1952 the Eglesfield Musical Society under Bernard Rose gave the first public performance of *An Oxford Elegy* in Queen’s College. The latter occasion was memorably described by Ursula Vaughan Williams, who was present with her husband, and recalled Steuart Wilson (in the speaker’s role) with ‘tears running down his cheeks [...] mildly outraged that he should be weeping over a poem about Oxford’.³¹ But perhaps it is no surprise that, after gestating Matthew Arnold’s words for so long, VW should have come up with something so powerfully moving. The composer himself could still sometimes be found on the podium in Oxford: in 1951 he conducted the LSO in his *London Symphony*, and in 1952—a few days before the Oxford Elegy performance—he had conducted the Oxford Bach Choir in his *Serenade to Music*.³² And the roster of early performances of his symphonies continues: his Sixth, premiered in 1948, was given by the Hallé under John Barbirolli in 1949; the same forces performed the *Sinfonia Antartica* at the New Theatre in 1953, within a fortnight of its first performance in Manchester (one member of the female chorus recalled Barbirolli begging her and her fellow singers to ‘moan for me!’; but he apparently felt that their performance was ‘rather too “Oxfordy”’); and in 1957 Boult and the LPO performed the Eighth, also in the year of its première.³³ Mention should also be made of an Oxford Bach Choir concert at the Sheldonian in March 1948, devoted to Parry’s music, on which occasion a remarkable photograph was taken featuring VW, Gerald Finzi, Edmund Rubbra, Parry’s daughter Dorothea Ponsonby, and no fewer than four past, present, and future conductors of the OBC (W. H. Harris, Thomas Armstrong, Sidney Watson, and Jack Westrup). Looking slightly farther afield, in 1953 the 80-year-old VW paid a visit to Radley College, during which he sat at the organ bench in the chapel and, ‘to the delight of members of the choir crowding round, tootled at the console’.³⁴ (His abilities as an organist, often deprecated, should not be overlooked: he continued to write for organ in a manner which suggests a respectable proficiency, perhaps most notably in his 1956 motet *A Vision of Aeroplanes*, with its prodigious organ part, which received a performance at an Eglesfield

²⁸ Frank Howes, *Oxford concerts: a jubilee record* (1969), p. 26. Both these concerts also featured other VW works, conducted by Sydney Watson.

²⁹ Howes, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 26; *Musical Times* May 1945 p. 158 (oboe concerto).

³⁰ Ursula Vaughan Williams recalled (*R.V.W.* p. 284) that ‘Ralph was very pleased with the performance’.

³¹ *R.V.W.* p. 321.

³² Howes, *op. cit.*, p. 26 (*London Symphony*).

³³ Howes, *op. cit.*, pp. 17, 26; notes by Robin Darwall-Smith on an interview with Mary Loukes, 14 May 2003; 28 Jan 1953 RVW to Gerald Finzi (VWL2623).

³⁴ ‘Sacred music at Radley College’ (blog: <https://radleyarchive.blog/sacred-music-at-radley-college/> (accessed 19 Feb 2022)). The visit was at the invitation of the recently appointed young precentor (and later editor of the *New English Hymnal*) Anthony Caesar.

Society concert less than six months after its première.³⁵) Finally there was the special occasion in May 1956 when VW's *Five Tudor Portraits* and his friend Herbert Howells's *A Kent Yeoman's Wooing Song* were performed by the Oxford Bach Choir in the Sheldonian in the presence of *both* composers. As a poignant postscript, in November 1958 the OBC performed the *Sea Symphony*—for the sixth time—in the presence of Ursula Vaughan Williams, widowed only three months earlier.

So what are we to make of this half-century of interaction between composer and city? Is it simply the story of how any city like Oxford—given its size, location, and cultural significance—would have interacted with one of the nation's foremost composers during this period? Is it exactly what one would have expected given Vaughan Williams's background and connections? I think there is more to it than that. The relationship was certainly a rich and productive one. Perhaps the answer lies in friendships with particular individuals: Vaughan Williams was a man to whom personal friendship mattered a great deal, and much of his musical interaction with Oxford can be traced to his friendships with particular musicians who were either based in Oxford themselves or had their own strong connections with the city: most obviously Hugh Allen, but also Maurice Besly, Reginald Jacques, and Thomas Armstrong (with perhaps an honourable mention for Henry Ley). Perhaps, too, the enchantment of Matthew Arnold's poetic vision of the city played its part in securing a place for Oxford in Vaughan Williams's heart. Whatever the cause, it can safely be said that Oxford was good to Vaughan Williams, and he was also good to Oxford. Certainly the relationship is one for which both Oxford and the world of English music can be thankful.

³⁵ Notice in *Oxford Magazine* 6 Dec 1956, p. 186.