

BEST HEARD ON RADIO

Vaughan Williams' New Symphony

IN the fourth year of the war just ended, the English composer Vaughan Williams wrote his Fifth Symphony. We are to hear it broadcast for the first time in New Zealand in a recording made in New York and supplied by the U.S. Office of War Information, which 2YC will broadcast at 9.26 p.m. on Saturday, December 1. Vaughan Williams' other symphonies were "A Sea Symphony" (choral, to words by Whitman, 1907), "A London Symphony" (1914), "A Pastoral Symphony" (1922), and Symphony No. 4 in F Minor (1935). The Fifth, like the Fourth, is without title, and is in the key of D.

A. E. F. Dickinson, who has written about this symphony for the BBC *Listener* and for the English quarterly *The Music Review*, says it is "palpably the work of a free artist, not an underground revelation."

"The symphony embodies some themes and one dramatic background from an unfinished opera, *The Pilgrim's Progress*," Dickinson says, "and may so far be regarded as a preliminary outlet for, or deliberate salvage from, an operatic design uncertain of fulfilment, as Borodin's second symphony was a sublimation of sketches for *Prince Igor*."

The Product of Conviction

Mr. Dickinson finds in the symphony and in its appearance and reception during the war some indications of the freedom of artistic life in Britain: "Let us not overlook the rare qualities of our national tradition," he says, "fruits of a historical parliamentary record and still preserved in a menacingly totalitarian and destructive world. These values will be remembered later by those who concern themselves with the liberation of artistic life in countries where it is now dead or in chains. This symphony shows the products of individuality, national and personal, and its production and diffusion in these years of universal stress may be counted as a sign at once of singular present opportunity and of wider hopes of reconstruction. It is unworldly and certainly not cosmopolitan music, its serenity is the product not of complacency, but of conviction."

This symphony, Mr. Dickinson concludes, is not a world-embracing symphony in the style of Mahler or the composer's own Symphony in F Minor, "nor an intensely national product in the tradition of Borodin and Sibelius and (in intention) Shostakovich, but its firm handling of essentials, quiet orchestral dignity and generally sterling

quality will commend it to any unprejudiced listener in the western world."

When the work was broadcast by the BBC in August last year, *The Listener's* music critic W. McNaught had some things to say about it afterwards which will throw some more light on the symphony for listeners who will be hearing it for the first time from 2YC:

"On the surface, or parts of the surface, this is the most reminiscent work he has written for years," he said. "The first few bars are almost a declaration that we are back on familiar ground; that horn motive is one of the instrument's oldest formulae, and the surrounding phrases are what the composer was usually on the verge of writing 20 or 30 years ago. I believe that this initial self-quotation, for that is what it nearly amounts to, was done with a purpose; from the very first bars we are to know that the symphony is an artistic home-coming after such strange excursions as the rampaging piano concerto, and the ferocious Symphony in F Minor. We soon discover, however, that the returning voyage is wiser than his young self. Where an old theme is recalled a new light is thrown upon it; where old chords are struck it is with a finer and more aristocratic touch.

Radio Suits It

"One aspect of the work was brought home to me by Sir Adrian Boult's performance last week," Mr. McNaught continued. "To hear it properly you must listen by radio. Having tried all three ways I feel that something in the nature of the music takes unkindly to the circumstance of the concert-room and the business of the gramophone. I put this, down, not to any emotional mood that resents interruption, but rather to the intensity and quick flow of the music beneath its largely placid rhythm. Although both rhythm and harmony are simple on analysis, within their framework runs an intricate texture, formed not of decorative additions, but of essential lines of music that are themselves easy to follow and keep one's ears intent on their multiple course. Little of the world's music has this effect of binding the attention with long threads, or offers so few of those positive tunes or dramatic moments or other junctures that now and then give the mind a stance. This does not mean that the music is difficult to follow; but follow it you must, and closely, if you are to make the most of those grand things that do positively occur, such as the re-entry of that ancient horn theme near the end of the first movement after pages of fine scene-setting; or a score of other things in this wisely and cunningly planned music; chief of all that beatific epilogue where the work finally decides, after much going about, to be really a symphony in D."

The movements of the symphony are: *Preludio and Allegro*; *Scherzo*; *Romanza*; *Finale—Passacaglia*. A quotation from Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" is attached to the *Romanza*, and refers to an inscription on a sepulchre by a cross: "He hath given me rest by His sorrow and Life by His death."



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are not dominant in *When the Wind Blows*. The author has made his advance in technique rather than in thought and feeling; he turns for his materials to a narrow area of experience which seems to be cut off from the vigorous life of the world around us. This is, of course, an individual judgment, and it is quite likely to be wrong. I find myself hoping that it is, for Mr. Sargeson's novel, fragment though it may be, could not have been written easily.