**Ralph Vaughan Williams**

Ralph Vaughan Williams’s musical talent was recognized at Charterhouse School which he left early to study composition at the Royal College of Music. His weekly lessons with Hubert Parry in London continued during his time at Trinity College Cambridge where he read both history and music. In 1895 he re-entered the RCM to study with Charles Villiers Stanford. It was here that he met Gustav Holst who became his closest friend, colleague, critic and inspiration. Vaughan Williams married Adeline Fisher in 1897, and together they travelled to Berlin where the young composer studied briefly with Max Bruch.

In the early years of the twentieth century Vaughan Williams began to collect folk songs from around the British Isles, which would have a profound influence on his compositions. The distinctly English musical idiom that he helped to develop was also shaped by his work editing a new version of *The English Hymnal* (1906) for which he immersed himself in choral music from the Tudor and Elizabethan period. Vaughan Williams added several original compositions to the collection, amongst them ‘Come Down, O Love Divine’, also called ‘Down Ampney’ after his birthplace. The pronounced atheism of his youth, which would later mellow into agnosticism, did not prevent him from composing sacred music, including a setting of the Mass. But a great deal of inspiration came to him by way of the spiritual mysticism of the American poet Walt Whitman. The metrical freedom and visionary qualities of his poetry and his humanist outlook made Whitman a popular choice for composers at the beginning of the twentieth century: Delius, Holst and Vaughan Williams all set his verse to music.

Considering Vaughan Williams’s interest in song and his life-long connection to choirs and choir festivals, it is no surprise that his first symphony should be a choral symphony. The work is part symphony, part cantata – the first three movements are more symphonic in form, with the chorus/semi-chorus, two soloists and orchestra being given an equal share in carrying out the musical ideas, although the balance between them changes throughout. The fourth movement, which is nearly as long as the first three put together is really a cantata in its own right.

The work started out in 1903 as a song-cycle, The Ocean, but evolved into a large-scale symphonic work which was published in 1909 as *A Sea Symphony*. The composer himself
conducted its first performance at the Leeds Festival in 1910. During the long gestation period of the work, Vaughan Williams spent some time in the British Museum studying the scores of Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* and *The Dream of Gerontius*. In retrospect he freely admitted the influence of *Gerontius* on his *Sea Symphony*, especially in the last movement. For some months at the end of 1907 into 1908 Vaughan Williams went to study with Maurice Ravel in Paris, an intense period from which he returned inspired and with renewed creative energies. Ravel’s influence might have helped to bring out Vaughan Williams’s ability to paint with music, a defining feature of his first symphony with its vivid depiction of the sea.

For *A Sea Symphony* Vaughan Williams used lines from five different poems by Walt Whitman, four from Whitman’s collection *Leaves of Grass*, one (in the last movement) from his *Passage to India*. The composer takes great liberties in choosing which lines of verse to use and which ones to leave out; he changes the order of verses and even alters words, guided mainly by his own compositional intentions and personal vision. ‘The nature of Whitman’s texts is cosmic, dealing with the mysterious uncertainties of life’, writes Paul Holmes, ‘and Vaughan Williams provides music with an appropriate mystical feel. This symphony gazes at the sea but realizes it is a symbol for the infinite’. The journey of the human soul depicted in *A Sea Symphony* ends with the ship of life slowly and calmly disappearing over the horizon into the unknown.