

Oceans of Sound

I. Announcements

- A. Blawenburg Band 136th Annual Concert: Kendall Hall, College of NJ, May 17, 2026, 3:00 pm. Free Admission.

II. “Waves” of Inspiration

- A. The sea has for centuries been a source of inspiration for poets, musicians, novelists, painters and artists across the globe. Today’s program focuses on a period from approximately 1840 to 1920, beginning with what is termed “Romanticism” and concluding with what might be termed “post-Romantic” music of the early 20th century.
- B. Some compositions are “sea-related” through the content of a story, such as Richard Wagner’s opera *The Flying Dutchman* of 1843. The story deals with a ghost ship, “Der Fliegende Hollander”, led by a captain who must sail the seas until he finds a woman who is faithful.
- C. Other compositions draw upon literary works, such as Vaughn Williams’ *A Sea Symphony*, otherwise known as his Symphony No. 1. Vaughn Williams spent much of the period between 1902-1912 interpreting Walt Whitman’s poetry and using it in compositions, with *A Sea Symphony* being the most large-scale and ambitious effort. The work is divided into 4 movements, each using texts by Whitman. Rather than dealing with the theme of unrequited love (e. g., Wagner), Vaughn Williams suggests “an analogy between the voyager at sea and the journeying of the soul towards the unknown regions on earth.” (Richard Whitehouse, Notes to Naxos 8.557059).
- D. Vaughan Williams was very eclectic regarding the performers he chose for his works, providing compositions for amateurs and professionals, brass bands, choral societies, solo singers, chamber groups, opera companies, choral festivals, orchestras and others. *Sea Songs* was composed in 1924 and draws upon three traditional British songs: “Princess Royal”, “Admiral Benbow” and “Portsmouth”. Vaughan Williams’ lifelong interest in folk songs is reflected in this work, which was also arranged for orchestra in 1942 by the composer.
- E. One of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ teachers was Charles Villiers Stanford, an Irish musician and composer who was a staunch Protestant. Stanford could be difficult and very critical, but Vaughn Williams believed he was a good teacher and Stanford’s insistence that his pupils write works in a relatively conservative vein—emphasizing the practicality of composing works that could help his pupils make a living in Edwardian England. Stanford’s own compositions tend to be less

daring than those of his pupil Vaughan Williams, and a good example is *Songs of the Sea*, based upon poems by Henry Newbolt, and premiered at the Leeds Festival in 1904, six years before Vaughan Williams *A Sea Symphony* had its premiere at the same location. Newbolt admired Stanford's compositions, stating "He was the most subtly appreciative critic and interpreter of poetry that I ever met with...I always felt that to hear those songs, given as Harry Greene could give them, was to be told secrets about myself to see my own thought reflected with perfect accuracy but irradiated with the magic lights of a dream." (Jeremy Dibble, Notes to Chandos CHSA 5043)

- F. Arnold Bax wrote his symphonic poem *Tintagel* in 1917 while visiting the Cornwall coast and engaging in a love affair with the pianist Harriet Cohen. As Bax's biographer Lewis Foreman states, *Tintagel* "is inspired by a vision of the sea...important in this music is the sense of sheer physical elation and strain that the difficult and often exultant horn parts give to the sound." Foreman also stated "Nature certainly affected the composer passionately, as he himself once affirmed in a broadcast talk, adding, apropos of the later tone poems, that he based his works upon aspects and moods of 'extreme nature' and their relation to human emotion." (Lewis Foreman, *Arnold Bax: A Composer and His Times*, pp. 162-63).
- G. Claude Debussy's *La Mer* is perhaps the most well-known work associated with images of the sea. Composed from 1903-1905, it was not well-received initially, but soon that judgement changed and it has become one of Debussy's best-known and most admired works. Following the 1905 premiere, critic Pierre Lalo stated "I do not hear, I do not see, I do not smell the sea." However, Lalo apparently misunderstood the work, as Debussy inferred in his reply. "If my idea of music isn't the same as yours, I am none the less an artist and nothing but an artist. I love the sea and have listened to it with the passionate respect it deserves...The heart of the matter is that you love and defend traditions which for me no longer exist, or at least exist only as representative of an epoch in which they were not all as fine and valuable as people make out; the dust of the past is not always respectable." (Pierre Lalo and Claude Debussy, quoted in Paul Roberts, *Claude Debussy*, pp. 174-75)
- H. Henry Wood is best known as the founder of the Promenade Concerts in London, which he originated in 1884. But Wood was also a composer and arranger, and his *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* is a staple of the Last Night of the Proms, the annual closing concert of the summer Promenades at the Royal Albert Hall. Wood composed the *Fantasia* in 1905 to honor the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar, a major British naval victory during the Napoleonic Wars. The *Fantasia* is in nine parts, beginning with Bugle Calls and concluding with Thomas Arne's *Rule Britannia!* The sequence follows the course of the Battle of Trafalgar through the eyes of a British sailor, concluding with victory.

III. Today's Music

- A. Richard Wagner, Overture to *The Flying Dutchman* (Philharmonia Orchestra)
- B. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *A Sea Symphony* (Excerpts) (Bournemouth Symphony, choir and soloists)
- C. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Sea Songs* (Central Band of the RAF)
- D. Charles Villiers Stanford, *Songs of the Sea* (Excerpts) (BBC National Orchestra and Chorus of Wales, Gerald Finley, baritone)
- E. Arnold Bax, *Tintagel* (Excerpts) (BBC National Orchestra of Wales)
- F. Claude Debussy, *La Mer* (Excerpts) (L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande)
- G. Henry Wood, *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* (BBC Orchestra)
- H. Surprise...

IV. Sources

- A. Richard Wagner, *The Flying Dutchman* (opera) Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_fliegende_Holländer.
- B. Alain Frogley and Aidan J. Thompson, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- C. Ralph Vaughn Williams, *Sea Songs*. Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_Songs
- D. Jeremy Dibble, Notes to *Stanford: Songs of the Sea*. Chandos CD 5043.
- E. Lewis Foreman, *Arnold Bax: A Composer and His Times*. The Boydell Press, 2007.
- F. Paul Roberts, *Claude Debussy*. Phaidon Press, 2008.
- G. Richard Whitehouse, Notes to *Vaughan Williams: A Sea Symphony*. Naxos 8.557059.
- H. Henry Wood: *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*. Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasia_on_British_Sea_Songs

Vi. Musical Sources

- H. *Wagner: The Klemperer Legacy, Volume 1*. EMI Classics 7243 5 66805 2 4
- I. *Vaughn Williams: A Sea Symphony*. Naxos 8.557059
- J. *Vaughn Williams: Sea Songs, in Vaughn Williams: The Collector's Edition*. EMI Classics 50999 2 06636 2.
- K. *Stanford: Songs of the Sea*. Chandos CHSA 5043.
- L. *Debussy: La Mer*. Eloquence 480 0127.
- M. *Bax: Tintagel*. BBC Music, Vol. 21, No. 7.
- N. *Last Night of the Proms: The 100th Season*. Kultur DVD D488.

VII. YouTube Films

- A. Sailors Chorus from Wagner, *The Flying Dutchman*.
<https://youtu.be/Kkf6PPm0DAQ?si=qTO3xxcNV5GvgtaS>
- B. Vaughn Williams, *A Sea Symphony*.
<https://youtu.be/2kR3FzJ1Hh4?si=0Y0duXyg5afKtdhq>
- C. Vaughn Williams, *Sea Songs*.
<https://youtu.be/ZLgXJtUMKy4?si=zUSnxPFaaznLQp8>
- D. Stanford, *Songs of the Fleet*.
<https://youtu.be/yjSLGEEKdBIM?si=g1g9Ib0NmolCKAjP>
- E. Debussy, *La Mer*. <https://youtu.be/2sqIh61FXeA?si=09CYEwrT30ilrQ5l>
- F. Bax, *Tintagel*. <https://youtu.be/yeCSU6wMLfw?si=ws7nVV9kp-TsbyTO>
- G. Last Night of the Proms, 2009: *Rule Britannia*.
<https://youtu.be/Sgd9nYqVz2s?si=n3Tdl4-bbTZ2JrIA>