

VE Day Reflection



‘A Song of Thanksgiving’

Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958)

Introduction

Thursday 8 May 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day (VE Day). It commemorates the official end of the Second World War in Europe. The BBC will mark the anniversary with a wide-range of special programmes on TV, radio and online.

On Monday 5 May, the BBC will broadcast on radio, a performance of Ralph (pronounced ‘Rafe’) Vaughan-Williams’ Symphony No 5 in D Major. It was composed between 1938 and 1943, and its first performance took place at the Royal Albert Hall in war torn-London, in 1943.

At the start of the Second World War, in his 60’s, as well as writing symphonies, and composing music for war films, Vaughan-Williams aided the war effort by volunteering as a fire watcher. This involved watching for and extinguishing fires caused by incendiary bombs during air-raids.

During the war, Vaughan-Williams campaigned to keep music going, believing in the enduring power of music to provide comfort, unity, and even a sense of hope during times of conflict.

The third movement of Symphony No 5, entitled ‘Romanza,’ is a particularly moving piece of music. Open the following YouTube video, close your eyes, listen deeply, and let the power of music wash over you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oX4pTSRcgSc>

It is one thing to listen to this music in the safety and comfort of our homes in peacetime but imagine being in the audience at that first performance on the evening of Thursday 24 June 1943. Someone who was there wrote this detailed description:

“The Proms still continued in the Albert Hall, despite the bombing, I managed to get there for the concert beginning at 7 pm . . .

For once there was no question of queuing; the audience was thinly scattered about the hall. A note at the bottom of the programme explained that in the event of an air-raid warning we would be told immediately. Those of us who wished could take shelter, but the concert would continue. That night, Vaughan Williams, then over seventy, conducted his own work. None of us knew what to expect . . .

Here was what we were searching for: spiritual refreshment at a time of strife, to remind us that the values we held dear were still what really mattered, despite what was going on outside. An air-raid warning had been given before the concert began, but all that slipped from our minds as we listened, absorbed, to this quiet, almost diffident restatement of faith . . .”

Vaughan-Williams was not overtly religious but was deeply spiritual. His father was vicar of Down Ampney (pronounced ‘Amney’) in Gloucestershire but died when Ralph was just two years old. He was raised by his mother, an evangelical Christian. As for his faith, he has been called a “cheerful agnostic” and a “Christian atheist.”

Putting aside religious labels, two spiritual themes in Vaughan-Williams’ life and music were journeying and beauty. Through these ‘doors’ he was able to enter and find spiritual significance that he was unable to access in organized religion.

He may not have been a believer in a religious sense, but Vaughan-Williams believed in the human spirit. He possessed a deep compassion for humanity. This is evident in his focus on making music accessible to all, rather than the elite, and by his support for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in the 1930’s.

In 1943, as the tide of the war was turning in favour of the Allies, the BBC commissioned Vaughan-Williams to compose a “*Victory Anthem*,” to be used at the end of the war. He submitted his work and renamed it, “*Thanksgiving for Victory*.”

On 5 November 1944, the BBC recorded the work on special transcription discs made exclusively for radio broadcasts, so it could be heard around the world in top-quality sound as soon as victory was declared. The discs were flown overseas. It is thanks to these discs that the recording has been preserved for posterity.

Despite all the preparations, the BBC didn’t broadcast “*Thanksgiving for Victory*” until Sunday 13 May 1945, when it was inserted into the 9.30 am Thanksgiving Service under the heading, “*Victory Anthem*.”

Four months later, it had its first concert performance at the Proms on 14 September 1945, with the title changed again to, “*A Song of Thanksgiving*.”

Vaughan-Williams gave “*A Song of Thanksgiving*” his all, choosing all the texts himself, from the Bible (Old Testament), 1662 Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare and Kipling. Every single section, whether drawn directly from a religious text or not, references the idea of God and his providence as a source of victory and of hope for the future. It is a powerful and moving work.

The following YouTube video is a performance of the work recorded in 1951. It is complemented with nostalgic and evocative images. May the music, words and images speak to us on this 80th Anniversary of the ending of the Second World War in Europe.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOXub0tfqIE>

Notes on the Text

Solo Blessed art thou, O Lord God of our fathers;
& *Chorus* and to be praised and exalted above all for ever.
And blessed is thy glorious and holy Name;
and to be praised and glorified above all for ever.
Blessed art thou in the temple of thine holy glory;
and to be praised and exalted above all for ever.
Blessed art thou on the glorious throne of thy kingdom,
and to be praised and glorified above all for ever.

Song of the Three Holy Children, verses 29, 30, 31 & 33

Vaughan-Williams may not have been a practising or believing Christian, but he spent many years of his adult career as an organist and choir director in Anglican churches and would have been very familiar with the texts of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

The “*three children*” are Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These three children were taken to Babylon in 526 BC after King Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and conquered Israel. Daniel the prophet was captured along with them, and their story is included in the third chapter of his book.

Nebuchadnezzar was a real megalomaniac and decided at some point to build an idol of himself to force everyone to fall down and worship him. But the three children refused, since they worshipped God alone. The punishment was to be thrown into a “*fiery furnace*.” However, they walked through the fire unharmed, accompanied by an unnamed fourth figure. In the Christian tradition, the fourth figure is often interpreted as Jesus Christ in his pre-incarnate form of God himself, protecting them from the flames.

The song of praise to God for his deliverance that the children sing occurs while they are “*walking in the midst of the fire*.” Doesn’t that image fit neatly and completely in with the theme of Vaughan-Williams’ piece as a whole? Britain has just passed through the fire of the Second World War and come out victorious on the other side.

One aspect of the story deserves attention here, since for both the children and Britain, the outcome was never a foregone conclusion. While we believe that God is able to deliver us, and we believe that he will, we never know what the future holds. All we can do is say that we will not give in to injustice, oppression and tyranny. Britain stood alone, and did not negotiate an unjust peace with the Nazi regime.

Speaker O God, thy arm was here,
And not to us, but to thy arm alone
Ascribe we all! Take it, God, for it is none but thine.

Henry V, Act 4, Scene 8

These words are from one of Shakespeare's historical plays, *Henry V*, as the king gives credit to God for England's totally unexpected victory at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. These words are spoken with humility, acknowledging God's strength and not human effort, as the source of the deliverance.

Chorus Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power and the glory,
Thine is the victory, and the majesty;
For all that is in the heaven and earth is thine.
Thine is the kingdom, O Lord,
and thou art exalted as head above all.

1 Chronicles 29:11

These words are part of King David's prayer of praise to God as he presents all the materials he has gathered for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. David finishes the prayer with these words: "*for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.*" David's prayer of praise is an echo of the words of Henry V.

Solo O give thanks unto the Lord because he is gracious:
for his mercy endureth for ever.

Song of the Three Holy Children, verse 67

Speaker & Chorus The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord hath anointed me
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and the opening of the prison to them that are bound,
to comfort all that mourn;
to give them beauty for ashes,
the oil of joy for mourning,
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Isaiah 61:1-3

This passage from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah comes from a section of several chapters near the end that look forward to God's future fulfilment of the promises made to the nation of Israel. Vaughan-Williams has taken several passages from this book (and remember—he chose the texts) that can be applied to Britain's role in the war. Look at the ways in which horrors and tragedy are to be reversed: captives freed, mourners comforted, beauty created from destruction, joy replacing grief, and celebration replacing sadness.

You may especially note two figurative images: the "*oil of joy*" and the "*garment of praise.*" Isaiah is referring to actual practices in his culture when celebrations and feasts occurred: anointing celebrants' heads with scented oil and wearing special ceremonial robes. But those customs shouldn't be all that strange to us moderns. We dress up for special occasions and wear scent, and certainly our society can be very judgemental about how people dress.

Chorus Go through, go through the gates,
prepare ye the way of the people;
cast up, cast up the highway;
gather out the stones.
Lift up a standard for the people.
Behold, the Lord hath proclaimed
unto the ends of the world, — say ye,
“Behold thy salvation cometh,
Behold, his reward is with him
and his work before him.”
And they shall call them the holy people,
the redeemed of the Lord:
And thou shalt be called “Sought out,”
a city not forsaken.

Isaiah 62:10-12

Speaker And they shall build the old wastes,
they shall raise up the former desolations.
And they shall repair the waste cities,
the desolations of many generations.

Isaiah 61:4

Both of these passages are concerned with repairing the destruction in the aftermath of war.

We must remember that Vaughan-Williams chose his texts before the war was actually over. In 1945, vast areas of London were in ruins as a result of the Blitz, and the V1 flying bomb and V2 rocket attacks, to say nothing of Europe in general and Germany in particular. He couldn't have foreseen the enormous celebrations that were going to occur once victory was secured, but these are prophetic words of warning – *“Not so fast, people! There's going to be a lot of work to do after this is all over!”*

Speaker Violence shall be no more heard in thy land,
wasting nor destruction within thy borders;
but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation,
and thy gates Praise.

Chorus But thou shalt call thy walls Salvation,
and thy gates Praise.

Isaiah 60:18

A hope for peace here, sadly unfulfilled but never forgotten.

Children Land of our birth, we pledge to thee
Our love and toil in the years to be;
When we are grown and take our place
As men and women with our race.

Father in Heav'n who lovest all,
O help thy children when they call.
That they may build from age to age
An undefilèd heritage.

Chorus Teach us the strength that cannot seek
By deed, or thought, to hurt the weak;
That, under thee, we may possess
Man's strength to comfort man's distress.

Teach us delight in simple things,
The mirth that has no bitter springs;
Forgiveness free of evil done,
And love to all men 'neath the sun.

All Voices Land of our birth, our faith, our pride,
For whose dear sake our fathers died;
O Motherland, we pledge to thee,
Head, heart and hand through the years to be.

Rudyard Kipling

Vaughan-Williams insisted that the children's part must be sung by real children's voices, not sophisticated choir boys. He seems to have chosen these words as a reminder that Britain's future as a country depends on its children. The section ends on a great swelling chord with all voices joining in and you think the whole thing's over, but not so.

Solo The Lord shall be thine everlasting light,
and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.

Isaiah 60:20

The work concludes with the promise of eternity and its freedom from grief. The piece ends quietly.

Conclusion

Words from a VE Day Thanksgiving Service - 8 May 1945.

Let each one go forth from this thanksgiving
to practise their dedication in the service of God,
and making by their daily work and life
an offering to the Creator for the new creation:
to the praise of His Holy Name
and the good of all.

Acknowledgement:

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"The Children's Song" from *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Rudyard Kipling, published in 1906.

Notes on the text are taken and adapted from:

<https://www.debisimons.com/britains-great-song-of-thanksgiving-from-its-great-composer-ralph-vaughan-williams/>