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## Ralph Vaughan Williams Birth Centenary I, May 21, 1972

Donald Armstrong Conductor

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ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

presents

# RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS BIRTHDAY CENTENARY I - 1872-1972



The University Concert Choir and the University Oratorio Choir  
Donald Armstrong, Conductor

assisted by

The University Symphony Orchestra, Robert Oppelt, Conductor  
The University Concert Band, George Foeller, Conductor

21 May 1972

Capen Auditorium

8:15 p.m.

CELEBRATIONS, Opus 103 (1967)

Poetry by Walt Whitman

Stranger

I Celebrate Myself

You Who Celebrate Bygones

There Is That In Me

Sing Me the Universal

Flaunt Out O Sea

I Sing The Body Electric

A Clear Midnight

Voyage

Vincent Persichetti

b. 1915

INTERMISSION

DONA NOBIS PACEM (1936)

Ralph Vaughan Williams

1872-1958

Sheri Holliday, Soprano

Alan Peters, Bass

Agnus Dei—Requiem Mass

Beat! Beat! Drums!—*Drum Taps*, Walt Whitman

Reconciliation—*Drum Taps*

Dirge For Two Veterans—*Drum Taps*

The Angel of Death—A speech by John Bright; Jeremiah; Daniel; Haggai;  
Micah; Leviticus; Psalms; Isaiah; Luke.

## PROGRAM NOTES

Little doubt remains today that Ralph Vaughan Williams was the first modern English composer to successfully extricate himself from European continental bonds and create English music in the fullest sense. Almost since the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, England had either been so dominated by foreign musicians (Handel and Mendelssohn particularly) or at best so influenced by European musical tradition and thought in the music of its native English composers, that a truly English music had not existed for about two hundred years. Even Edward Elgar (1857-1934), whom most consider the first important modern English composer, employed a quasi-European style.

It is not without significance that Vaughan Williams was principally a composer of vocal music. Only the choral tradition in England has continued unabated from the sixteenth century, not being affected by the period referred to as "mediocrity in spate" of the last half of the nineteenth century. Also, with its intrinsic ties with English folk-music and the English language, choral music was the soil in which Vaughan Williams (and his contemporary Gustav Holst) succeeded in nurturing the "renaissance" of true English music.

Although his cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*, composed in 1936, is not among the giants of the choral medium in this century, its extra-musical significance is still evident. It was composed at a time when the shadows of war were darkening over all Europe. Frank Howes calls it the outcome of "a sense of political urgency of the belief that a composer must not lead a life apart". While thoroughly patriotic, Vaughan Williams maintained a discreet distance from official life which enabled him to be somewhat polemic at times. *Dona Nobis Pacem* was timely in 1936, and is still so thirty-six years later.

The music is free flowing, an admixture of harsh cries, stern marches, and lush melody. The total effect is one of melancholy, even though the final movement is primarily joyous. The composition begins and ends with the quiet, poignant whispered prayer for peace. The message is not unlike that proclaimed in Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (1962) of the futility and pity of war. *Dona Nobis Pacem* however is conceived in a less dramatic and shocking vein, but is still capable of overwhelming with the combination of vocal and instrumental forces, and the extremely strong texts.

Vincent Persichetti has to date composed an impressive oeuvre of choral music, rather unusual among younger American composers of the twentieth century. His works for choirs range from liturgical ones—a *Mass*, *Stabat Mater*, and a *Te Deum*—to secular works with texts of widely divergent sources. His three cantatas—*Spring Cantata*, opus 94, in 1943, and *Winter Cantata*, Opus 97, in 1964, both for women's chorus, and *Celebrations*—are admirable examples of his sensitivity to the poetic word. The prosody of poetry is always upper most in the composer's mind, interpreted by a musical rhythm that is at once delicate yet inherently singable.

*Celebrations*, commissioned by Wisconsin State University—River Falls, is a setting of nine random selections from the poetry of Walt Whitman. The coherence of the work and texts is found in understanding the progress of the poet, and the singer, from effervescence in life to buoyant confidence in facing death. The image of the singer as a sensual, intimate person is primary in the poetry, and through the medium of mostly homophonic choral textures, is maintained in the singing.