

Next on

Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, June 6, 2009, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Josef Holbrooke (1878-1958). *The Viking*, Poem No. 2 for Orchestra, op. 32 (1900). Brandenburg State Orchestra Frankfurt, Howard Griffiths. CPO 7774422. Tr 2. 19:02

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958). English Folk Song Suite (1923) arr. Gordon Jacob. London Symphony Orchestra, Adrian Boult. Angel 65615. Tr 8-10. 8:45

Josef Holbrooke. *Three Blind Mice*, Symphonic Variations on an old English Air, op. 37, no. 1 (1900). Brandenburg State Orchestra Frankfurt, Howard Griffiths. CPO 7774422. Tr 3. 14:37

Nationalism in music came later to England than it did to the Continent, and like all movements, has more than a few parts to it. Beyond the quoting of native folk tunes, nationalism evokes an ethos of the country, the people, and the cultures—even when they conflict with each other. American music, for instance, encompasses jazzy urbanisms as well as cowboy laments, often within the same composer's output. Other currents similarly vie with each other in England, where Josef Holbrooke and Ralph Vaughan Williams are two big parts of an English identity in classical music.

Holbrooke and Vaughan Williams, born in the 1870s (along with Holst), represent the second generation of an English musical renaissance, following the older Stanford, Elgar, and others. Holbrooke is entirely English despite his German-spelled first name, which he adopted to differentiate himself from his father Joseph, also a musician. On top of that, his music is influenced heavily by the iconic German composer of the time: his chromatic harmonies, large orchestrations, and even a northern-mythological opera trilogy brimming with leitmotifs elicited a nickname for him as “the Cockney Wagner.”

But his orchestral writing was indeed new and fresh, especially to English ears. He had a knack for the grand gesture that was more than empty pomposity, but colorful, dramatic, and sweeping. Much is programmatic, *The Viking* being a perfect example. It follows Longfellow's poem *The Skeleton in Armor*. It's a story of piracy, love, elopement, father's rage, sea battle, domestic bliss, the death of the Viking's wife, and a grief-stricken suicide by the armor-clad Viking falling on his spear.

The fate of the *Three Blind Mice*, while also employing a sharp instrument, is—luckily for them—not as catastrophic. The immensely talented Holbrooke displays his lighter side in this brilliant setting of 20 variations on the children's tune. Both works were recorded from materials housed in the Fleisher Collection.

With *Three Blind Mice*, the *English Folk Song Suite* of Vaughan Williams sails in the main current of nationalism, folk music. Vaughan Williams earned his folk credentials by traveling throughout the countryside, collecting more than 800 songs and probably saving many from oblivion. (Always magnanimous and never an ivory-tower composer, for many years he also conducted at the English Folk Dance and Song Society.) This suite also has a curlicue history. Vaughan Williams first wrote it for band; his student Gordon Jacob, who would become a leading composer for bands, took this work and arranged it—for orchestra.

Born in the same decade and dying within three weeks of each other, Holbrooke and Vaughan Williams together helped bring the music of their country to international exposure. They did this by remaining true to themselves, and by remaining very English.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).