

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 2nd, 2012, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958). Violin Concerto in D minor (Concerto Accademico) (1925). Kenneth Sillito, violin, London Symphony Orchestra, Bryden Thomson. 16:50

Vaughan Williams. Symphony No. 4 in F minor (1934). New Philharmonia Orchestra, Sir Adrian Boult. 33:24



Even though descended from the Wedgwood family of pottery fame, and with Charles Darwin as a grand-uncle, Ralph Vaughan Williams was more common man than society type. The world-famous composer and esteemed professor at the Royal College of Music was once mistaken for a vagabond in his own hometown, dressed in ragged clothes and pushing a cart gathering aluminum for the war effort.

It took a while for him to achieve fame. He was a student at the RCM with classmates Gustav Holst and Leopold Stokowski, but real success as a composer wouldn't happen until well into middle age.

Long after his formal studies, he was collecting folk music and editing *The English Hymnal*, when at 35 he decided he needed a change. Going to Paris to study with Maurice Ravel for a few months, he bristled when at the first meeting the younger but more established composer suggested that he write a little minuet in the style of Mozart. Vaughan Williams countered, "Look here, I have given up my time, my work, my friends and my career to come here and learn from you and I am not going to write a *petit menuet dans le style de Mozart!*"

Ravel must have inwardly smiled. He would later say that Vaughan Williams was the only one of his students who didn't end up sounding like Maurice Ravel.

Soon, Vaughan Williams was conducting his *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* at the famed Three Choirs Festival, and his career was assured. That and other works (such as *The Lark Ascending*, a 1914 work for violin and orchestra) quickly entered the repertoire, remaining there ever since.

The contrapuntal lines in his concerto for violin and strings owes much to a lifelong love of Bach, a composer we wouldn't at first associate with the exceedingly English Vaughan Williams. But the Baroque master was a great influence, and the piece also allowed Vaughan Williams another opportunity to write for an instrument he played quite well, the violin.

Another aspect not normally associated with his music is a sense of foreboding. It is a striking feature of his Symphony No. 4, completed in 1934. It was a time when he was experimenting with harmonies further afield from his sunny folk modality, and it was a time of growing rumors of wars in Europe. He was never one to allow non-musical "explanations" to be attached to his music, but it's difficult to hear this work and not think of the dark violence on the horizon.

One of the great joys of his life was conducting Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at the Leith Hill Musical Festival. Vaughan Williams was the Festival conductor from its founding in 1905 by two ladies—one of whom was his sister Margaret—all the way until 1953. The Festival is a community effort embodying the true meaning of the word "amateur." It embodies Ralph Vaughan Williams himself. A giant among composers and in every sense a professional, he nevertheless produced music for one reason: for the love of it.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), former 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](#).