



ST. LAURENT STUDIO 1012

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS Symphony No. 5¹. *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*² • Christopher Keene, cond; Syracuse SO • (56:19)
Live: Syracuse ¹2/4 & 5/1977, ²2/3 & 4/1981

It's rare for an American conductor to perform Ralph Vaughan Williams's music at the level of to-the-manner-born English conductors like John Barbirolli and Adrian Boult. But on two concerts in 1977 and 1981 the half-forgotten Christopher Keene leading the unsung Syracuse Symphony did just that. These readings of two beloved RVW scores, the Fifth Symphony and the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, are rapturous, and by releasing them in excellent sound, St. Laurent Studio has helped to enlarge our orchestral legacy, which is true of its ongoing Keene series as a whole.

You have to go back to Purcell to find an English melodist as gifted as Vaughan Williams, and when he is in lyrical mode, the term "pastoral" is typically applied to serene works like the Third and Fifth Symphonies, *The Lark Ascending*, and the *Tallis Fantasia*. Looking a little deeper, however, there's a conscious aim on his part to be life-affirming and to look beyond the travails of everyday existence. This transcendent strain accounts for his attraction to the poetry of Walt Whitman and to *The English Hymnal*, which he edited. The Vaughan Williams Third doesn't rise to the level of the Beethoven Sixth as a great pastoral symphony, but the two are linked by seeing Nature as a source of healing beauty.

Beethoven was inspired by his recovery from a bout of illness and a return to his beloved woodland walks. It is more remarkable, perhaps, that RVW had served in World War I and would live through the Great Depression and the Second World War. His music sustained hope and healing through unimaginable catastrophes. This made him a cultural figure of great significance to generations of British music-lovers and fills a work like the *Tallis Fantasia* with ineffable poignancy. (In marked contrast, the Great War made Elgar turn inward to express his bitterness and despair.)

What astonished me about Keene's interpretation of the Fifth Symphony is his affinity for the work's deeper emotional significance. This is a performance marked by virtues one can find in other successful recordings, but even the best lack the mystery I find here, where melody reaches the status of ecstatic expression. It's fair to say that RVW intentionally depicted the religious heart when he set a theme by Tallis, the great devotional choral composer of the Tudor age (his career spanned Henry VIII, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I). But I hadn't thought of the Fifth Symphony in the same terms until hearing what Keene and the Syracuse Symphony do with it.

Since I've given very warm reviews to three previous installments in the Keene series, I will refer readers to them for background information (I review his Shostakovich Tenth in the current issue). Without knowing the background of the fully professional Syracuse Symphony and Keene's directorship for ten years ending in 1985, a reader would be justified in finding my praise extravagant, unrealistic, or baffling. But on purely musical grounds there's a problem to solve in the Vaughan Williams Fifth, namely, its

unvarying melodic spell. Finding variety and occasional drama is crucial in order to break the spell and give the symphony more interest.

Keene's musical instincts serve him well here. This isn't a lulling reading, much less a soporific once, which happens all too often. One hears a vibrant aliveness that never loses its interest. If my earlier praise seems too high flown, I'd urge listeners to attune themselves to how musically inventive Keene's performance is. The *Tallis Fantasia* isn't a problematic work, though. As long as there is a string body capable of sheen and a luminous *legato*, the piece will be a hit. Keene and the Syracuse Symphony fulfill these requirements splendidly—in all the releases I've heard the string section has been especially impressive.

My mind turns with regret to the fact that the Syracuse Symphony is now defunct, but we are fortunate to have on disc performances as truly memorable as these. Strongly recommended.

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Huntley Dent

Five stars: One of the best Vaughan Williams Fifths in the catalog

