

Vaughan Williams' unfinished work is a minor triumph

Classical

RSNO/Martin Yates, Vaughan Williams' The Future

Usher Hall, Edinburgh

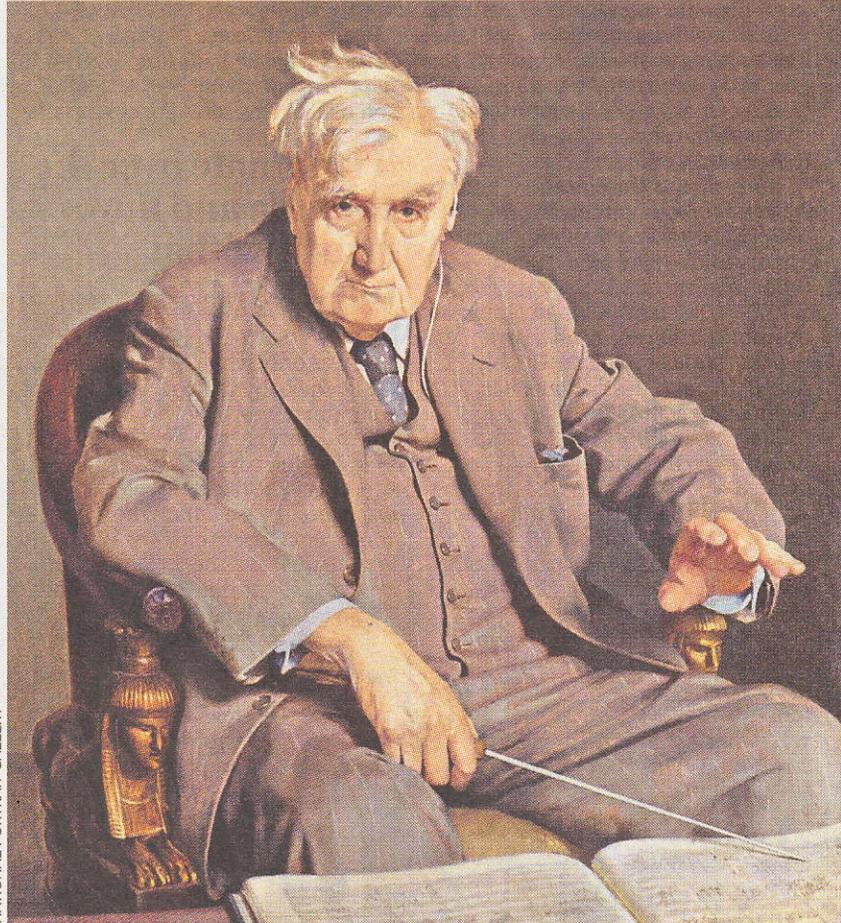
★★★★★

By David Kettle

The irony won't be lost, of course, that a major new work (well, the completion of an unfinished work) by a quintessentially English composer was getting its world-premiere performance north of the border. No particular explanation was given, but judging by the expectant crowds filling Edinburgh's Usher Hall for the first hearing of Ralph Vaughan Williams's portentously titled *The Future*, Scotland was hardly a bad choice. And on a single hearing, *The Future* is something of a minor triumph, not up there with VW's classic creations, perhaps, but memorable, immediate and hinting at the visionary expansiveness that distinguishes the composer's early music.

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Getting it to the concert platform was the work of British conductor Martin Yates, who led an enthusiastic Royal Scottish National Orchestra and its very fine chorus in a richly detailed, powerful account at its Edinburgh premiere. As he explained in his pre-concert interview, there are many unfinished scores and sketches in the Vaughan Williams archive, but *The Future* drew him because of the state that VW had left it in: with 19 pages – virtually two thirds of the work – completed in piano score, and clear indications as to what material should return later to finish the piece. Yates's task was to orchestrate the whole thing – for orchestra, organ, choir and solo soprano (a rather warbling Ilona Domnich at the premiere) – and fill in the missing final third. He almost made it sound easy.



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Work to do: Ralph Vaughan Williams left *The Future* only two-thirds complete

Yates has done a convincing job. It's fruitless, of course, to compare a realisation against a notional original that never existed. But in its own terms, Yates's *The Future* is a powerful utterance, made all the more memorable by his decision to take VW's indications of repeats at their word, so that much of its final section reinterprets its opening. It feels rather over-scored at times, however – Yates seems keen to throw his large brass and woodwind section in full at too many minor climaxes, and the organ is almost a constant presence, which robs it of its power to surprise.

The Future feels like the right piece to be revivifying, too, because of its themes. It sets Malcolm Arnold's poem lamenting the destruction of nature with the onslaught of industrial progress, a message, of course, all the more relevant as the world teeters

towards environmental collapse more than a century later. There are fascinating parallels, too, with VW's *A Sea Symphony* – whose composition almost certainly interrupted that of *The Future* – in the new work's declamatory opening and its nods to the Symphony's visionary spirituality.

It came, however, at the end of an overlong and over-stuffed concert. The idea of prefacing *The Future* with works from the same period was sound, but Yates's performances were disappointing, with a rather perfumy Ravel *Pavane pour une infante défunte* and a Stravinsky *Firebird Suite* that could have done with a lot more sparkle. RSNO leader Sharon Roffman, however, gave an exceptional account of VW's *The Lark Ascending* before the interval – poised, precise, and evoking rapture through Zen-like focus. It was a fascinating counterpoint to the richness and surging emotions of *The Future* to come.