

Divine duet: when Lark Ascending met Bolero

When Ralph Vaughan Williams went to Paris to learn from the younger Maurice Ravel, it set British music on a new and exciting path. Jessica Duchen explains

Friday, 22 April 2011

At the outset of the 20th century, a transformation was about to take place in British music. Long dominated by German influences, but newly interested in folk songs, British composers began to discover France. In 1907 Ralph Vaughan Williams went to Paris to take lessons with Maurice Ravel, a composer several years his junior, yet one whose music – sinuous, detailed and highly individual – proved an irresistible attraction to a young man who declared himself afflicted by "French fever".

The influence of Ravel on Vaughan Williams, and the long friendship between the two, is the basis of a fascinating concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall by the celebrated tenor Mark Padmore next week, with the Navarra String Quartet and the pianist Roger Vignoles. The concert, says Padmore, offers a musical "conversation" between the two composers. "It's like visiting an exhibition of Picasso and Matisse together, so you can see the points where their ideas coincide," he says.

Ravel and Vaughan Williams were introduced to each other by the music critic Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi. Soon afterwards, the Englishman – a great-nephew of Darwin and a descendant of the Wedgwood family – decamped to Paris for three months of study. As Padmore says, "Vaughan Williams decided he needed a bit of French polish".

The beginning, though, was anything but auspicious. Vaughan Williams later recalled: "When I had shown [Ravel] some of my work he said that for my first lessons I had better 'write a little minuet in the style of Mozart'. I saw at once that it was time to act promptly, so I said in my best French, '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 little Minuet in the style of Mozart"'."

Ravel seems to have responded positively to being stood up to; besides, Vaughan Williams, at 35, was hardly a beginner. Soon the English composer was thanking Calvocoressi for the introduction to "the man who is exactly

what I'm looking for. As far as I know my own faults, he hit on them exactly and is telling me to do exactly what I half feel in my mind I ought to do – but it just wanted saying." Ravel's motto, Vaughan Williams noted, was, "complex but never complicated".

The lightness of touch he advocated was a far cry from the blandishments of Sir Hubert Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford, Vaughan Williams's main teachers at Cambridge University and the Royal College of Music, who had steeped him in Beethoven string quartets and the English choral tradition. "The heavy contrapuntal Teutonic manner," he discovered to his delight, "was not necessary".

On *Wenlock Edge*, Vaughan Williams's song cycle at the centre of Padmore's programme, may seem quintessentially English, setting evocative poetry by AE Houseman. But on closer examination, Ravel's stamp is everywhere in it. "There's an impressionistic style to the writing, like the sweeping winds of the first movement, or the way that bells are depicted in 'Bredon Hill', and it sounds less folk-song-like than much of Vaughan Williams's earlier music," says Padmore. The transparency of the textures and the pared-away clarity of line about the melodies were also new to Vaughan Williams and highly Ravel-like. Ravel championed the work, organising its French premiere in 1912 and playing the piano part himself.

The year after Vaughan Williams's time in Paris, Ravel came to London to stay with him and his wife, Ursula, in their home in Cheyne Walk. Ursula Vaughan Williams remembered him as a charming and sometimes very surprising house-guest. "Ralph enjoyed taking him sightseeing and was fascinated to find that he liked English food... It appeared that steak and kidney pudding with stout at Waterloo Station was Ravel's idea of pleasurable lunching out," she recalled.

But several years later, world events conspired to create a stronger tie than either could have envisaged between the works of Ravel and Vaughan Williams. With the outbreak of the First World War, both composers enlisted for active service. The traumas of that time were often reflected by a deep, unsettling chill in their music in later years. Vaughan Williams served in the Field Ambulance Service of the Royal Army Medical Corps, and later in the Royal Garrison Artillery. His experiences of trench warfare in France in 1916 – he was a stretcher-bearer evacuating the wounded from Neuville-St Vaast in hellish conditions – left him profoundly shaken. Here he conceived a work whose misleading title, *A Pastoral Symphony*, belied its true nature.

"It's really wartime music – a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance wagon at Ecoivres and we went up a steep hill and there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset – it's not really lambkins frisking at all, as most people take for granted," he said.

Ravel had hoped to join the air force, but ended up driving an ambulance. "For several months I have been at the front, at the part which has seen the most action," he wrote to Vaughan Williams. "I went through some moving

experiences... enough to amaze me that I am still alive." During the war he experienced an additional tragedy, the death of his mother. His own health suffered: he contracted dysentery and was operated on. Afterwards, he composed virtually nothing for three years, but worked frenetically when he finally resumed. Each movement of his piano suite *Le tombeau de Couperin* is dedicated to the memory of a fallen comrade – as necessary and cathartic an exercise for him as *A Pastoral Symphony* was for his English friend.

Recovering his physical health, he wrote to Vaughan Williams: "It is now my morale that must be cared for and I don't know how to do it... Won't you be coming to Paris soon? I would be very happy to see you after so many terrible years." The memory of war stayed with Ravel: the tramp of marching boots seems to haunt his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (1929-30) while the supposed tribute to the world of old Vienna, *La Valse*, which he started well before 1914, was transformed after 1918 into a veritable dance of death.

But oddly, it was Ravel's mother who may have held the true key to the affinity between the two composers. "She was from the Basque region," Padmore says, "and Ravel recalled her singing folk songs to him." We don't usually think of Ravel as a folk-song-influenced composer – unlike Vaughan Williams, who spent much time researching traditional English music with his friend Gustav Holst, and loved to employ its musical language in his works.

"But it's clear that Ravel did have an interest in folk song," Padmore insists, "and I think it influenced the way he approached word-setting, as it did with Vaughan Williams."

Ravel died in 1937; Vaughan Williams outlived him by 21 years, becoming the grand old man of British music and being awarded the Order of Merit. The two might have been linked by a natural and progressing affinity, but Vaughan Williams always remained, as Ravel said, the only one of his pupils who did not write music that sounded too much like Ravel. Perhaps Ravel's greatest gift to Vaughan Williams was the courage to be himself.

Mark Padmore and Friends perform Ravel and Vaughan Williams at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 (0844 875 0073) on 27 April