

**The Letter and the Spirit: A Response to Jonathan Bellman's
"After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest"**

**Ineffability: The Comparison Project, Drake University
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Let me start by thanking Tim Knepper and the sponsors of the Comparison Project for organizing tonight's program, and to Jonathan Bellman for tackling such a complex issue as musical ineffability so engagingly. It's a privilege to respond to his talk, not least because he's already warmed you all up by this point, so I'm going to exploit your remaining reserves of goodwill for just a few more minutes.

One of the things that struck me about Prof. Bellman's paper was how sensible Mendelssohn sounded when writing about what his music represented (or didn't). Because strange as it may seem, composers are usually the last people you want to ask about questions of musical meaning, least of all in their own music. I suspect it's much like the dreaded question aimed at authors—"So where do you get your ideas?"—and it is a rare writer indeed who is cheeky enough to respond "At Aldi, usually, but for short stories, it's better to purchase in bulk at Costco." For I suspect most authors—and composers, and painters, and playwrights, and artists generally—don't really know where their ideas come from, or even necessarily what they *mean*, in any specific sense. They just sort of *happen*, and to probe their origins too deeply may be to risk losing them

entirely. This leads to much hand-waving flapdoodle in interviews and memoirs by composers who feel they have to say *something* beyond “beats me” when it comes to questions about what their music means. So it’s refreshing to see such a consummate musician as Mendelssohn acknowledge this point quite openly in 1842, saying that yes, his music does, in fact, mean something, but it’s up to you to figure out what.

Mendelssohn’s comments reminded me of a much later essay titled “The Letter and the Spirit” by the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. His basic premise in penning this article was to argue that reading a musical score was an entirely different proposition from hearing the same piece being performed, in that the latter was music and the former was not.

A musical score is like a map. The expert map reader can tell fairly exactly what sort of country he is going to visit, whether it is hilly or flat, whether the hills are steep or gradual, whether it is wooded or bare, what the roads are likely to be; but can he experience from a map the spiritual exaltation when a wonderful view spreads before his eyes, or the joy of careering downhill on a bicycle or, above all, the sense of rest and comfort induced by the factual realization of those prophetic letters ‘P.H.’?¹

Much of Vaughan Williams’s prose—and there’s a lot of it—reads like this: unpretentious, friendly, and on its surface, quite sensible. But this is also one of the very few pieces in which he tackled questions of musical meaning and expression, opening with an innocently-delivered statement about the point of the creative impulse: “May we take it that the object of an art is to obtain a partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and human faculties—of that, in fact, which is spiritual?”² Almost twenty years after first reading this, his statement still hits me like a thunderbolt. In 33 words, he

¹ Ralph Vaughan Williams, “The Letter and the Spirit, in *NMOE*, 125. The “P. H.” to which Vaughan Williams refers stands for “public house”—better known as a pub.

² *Ibid.*, 122.

identified the nexus between artistic aesthetics, sensory perception, and spiritual longing—the mind, the body, and the soul—and went on to further explain the nature of that connection:

To be really musical one must be able to *hear*. The ear must be sensitive, the mind must be quick to grasp what the ear has heard and see its connexion with what has gone before, and to be prepared for what is to come, and above all the imagination must be vivid, to see the glimpses of the heart of things which the composer has crystallized into earthly sound.³

And Vaughan Williams was very much of the opinion that it is the *sound* that matters in terms of creating that spiritual effect, not the symbols on the page. You may recall Vladimir Jankélévitch’s comment that Prof. Bellman shared with you earlier, claiming that he “cannot see exactly what justifies taking the acoustic universe and privileging and promoting it...above all other” forms of sensory perception.⁴ Perhaps he would see, if Dr. Vaughan Williams explained it to him:

What the musical composer, in effect, says to his performers is: ‘I desire to produce a certain spiritual result on certain people; I hope and believe that if you blow, and scrape, and hit in a particular manner this spiritual effect will result. For this purpose I have arranged with you a code of signals in virtue of which, whenever you see a certain dot or dash or circle, you will make a particular sound; if you follow these directions closely my invention will become music, but until you make the indicated sounds my music *does not exist*.’⁵

In other words, Vaughan Williams sees the score as simply prep, a guide, an imperfect method for reproducing an entirely ineffable experience envisioned by another person, who hopes that you will “obtain a partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and human faculties” upon hearing it. I also find it noteworthy that

³ Ibid., 125.

⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable* [1961], trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12.

⁵ Ibid., 124.

Vaughan Williams wrote this essay in 1920, shortly after being discharged from military service. He volunteered for the Great War in 1914 at the age of 42, far past the limit for conscription, but with a great desire to serve his country. He was initially posted with the Royal Army Medical Corps as an ambulance waggon orderly tasked with removing the dead and wounded from the field, both in France and Greece. He later received a commission in the Royal Garrison Artillery, where he was placed in charge of managing the 200 horses necessary to move 60-pound howitzers. My point is this: Vaughan Williams, a sensitive and humane individual, spent his mid-forties in the very heart of combat, constantly surrounded by noise, mud, horror, and death, conditions that spelled mental and physical destruction for millions. Yet upon returning home, he immediately turns his mind to essentially Romantic modes of thinking about artistic expression, which many other artists and critics had dismissed as entirely unsuitable for the postwar world.

But I'm not so sure. One of the first works that he completed upon returning to civilian life was his *Pastoral Symphony*, the third of his family of nine, and he would have been working on it at the time he wrote "The Letter and the Spirit." Many of his friends and colleagues, upon first hearing it, assumed (not unreasonably) that it was a meditation on the English countryside, capturing elements like the quiet of the Cotswold Hills, a folk dance in a rural village, and so on. Vaughan Williams did little to dissuade these interpretations, but he wrote in a 1938 letter that it wasn't, as he put it, lambkins frisking at all, but actually wartime music, its genesis coming during the long nights in northern France while he was on ambulance duty.⁶ Perhaps the only overt signal of such a connection comes in the symphony's second movement, which features a brief cadenza

⁶ See Ralph Vaughan Williams to Ursula Wood, in *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1895–1958*, ed. Hugh Cobbe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 265.

for a natural solo trumpet that opens with the same figure as the “Last Post” bugle call, the tune played at military services for the dead in England. Such an allusion would be lost on those unfamiliar with the melody, but its general character of melancholy and solemnity is still easily grasped.

Recall, however, that Vaughan Williams expressed the desire to achieve a “*certain* spiritual result on *certain* people,” perhaps intuitively understanding that some listeners would respond to the music more readily than others. This takes us back to Mendelssohn, but in a slightly varied form: whereas Mendelssohn seems to think that everyone will interpret his music differently, Vaughan Williams seems to think that some people will be more attuned to his compositional intent than others, and will therefore come closer to realizing the ineffable aesthetic experience that he had in creating the piece. That doesn’t necessarily mean that such a listener’s perception of the piece is intrinsically better or worse than anyone else’s, just closer to that of the artist.

Lest you think this is all speculative, let me share a brief anecdote: the first time I heard a live performance of the *Pastoral Symphony* was by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in London, at a Remembrance Day concert in 1998. As you may know, Remembrance Day is a very solemn occasion in Europe generally and the United Kingdom in particular, with a great deal of understated (but widespread) public displays of memorialization and/or mourning. Many uniformed veterans were in attendance at this concert, including one elderly gentleman sitting just off to my right. I was already familiar with the associations this piece carried, and when the trumpet cadenza sounded in the second movement, I glanced over at my neighbor—who was sitting at attention in his chair, tears streaming down a face that might well have been carved from granite.

Clearly, this gentleman might take issue with Rousseau suggesting that the passage would have to be labeled “This is an elegy” in order to understand that point.

While it is therefore tempting to assume that the ineffable realms of the spirit that composers attempt to evoke are those of a brilliant and sublime paradise, I think it is worth remembering, as we approach the centenary of World War One, that there are many paths that lead to spiritual transformation. Vaughan Williams almost never spoke about his experiences in the Great War—a phenomenon common among veterans, as it is hard to explain the trauma of combat to those who didn’t experience it. To forge a new mode of musical expression from the psychic wreckage of war, as he did, requires the plumbing of spiritual depths that most of us, I suspect, would rather leave unexplored. That the results of such an experience should manifest as a masterpiece of understated beauty, capable of being mistaken as a meditation on England’s green and pleasant land, speaks volumes. Or at least, it would, if we could put it into words.