



The Captain's Apprentice: Ralph Vaughan Williams and the Story of a Folk Song

Caroline Davison. London: Chatto & Windus, 2022. xii + 384 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. ISBN: 978-1-784-74454-0 (hbk).

In the 150th year since the birth of eminent composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (RVW) it was inevitable that performance and publishing would manifest itself in celebration of this somewhat complex man. His legacy as a composer and folklorist has certainly been much pawed over since his death in 1958 and much conjecture made, particularly in the spaces where hard truths have been difficult or impossible to discern. However, as more information has emerged from the publication of his letters, edited by Hugh Cobbe, in 2008, his second wife's autobiography, *Paradise Remembered*, in 2002, and his folk music manuscripts and broadside and scrapbook collections on the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library website since

2013, a much clearer understanding is emerging. This includes an overarching feeling that he has too often been simply lumped together with all the other folk music collectors of his time, background, and class, whose motives have been somewhat generalized. In this book Caroline Davison takes on the challenge of disentangling some of the many threads that make up this man and has produced a work that interweaves biography with autobiography, local history, musicology, folklore, and a good deal of personal imagination, into an essentially cohesive whole that challenges some existing perceptions and introduces aspects of research that widen the frame of reference.

There are two principal threads in this work. The first, as suggested by the title, is a traditional song collected by RVW in King's Lynn in Norfolk in 1905 and its influence on the composer's original works. The geographic and demographic significance of the place of collection and its inhabitants is analysed in some depth and sheds new light from the writer's personal experience of the area and undoubtedly adds to our knowledge. The contentious issues of song ownership and appropriation are raised, as are those involved in the process of fieldwork at the time, particularly its exclusion of key contextual information highly relevant to the lives and circumstances of the singers. These issues will not be new to students of this subject area. However, the author does have some sympathy for RVW and his contemporaries and an appreciation of a certain awkwardness and social distance in their collecting experience, particularly in the case of RVW, whose personal reticence was obvious to those who knew him well. In the specific case of seaman James 'Duggie' Carter and his meetings with RVW when he sang 'The Captain's Apprentice', these are very convincingly fleshed out from local knowledge and a good deal of informed speculation, where an undoubted self-consciousness is palpable on the page.

Of greater interest here are the detailed discussions of the possible origins of the song itself, which also dissect the issue of validating what we call 'folk songs' and their passage through time and space, as well as the dimension of landscape as an influence on the composer. This latter aspect is considered from the point of view of the radical thinking of the early twentieth century, rather than the later, more commonly held notion of it being an idyll of escapist imagination. RVW's link to Virginia Woolf through his first wife's family is a validation for this view and forms an impressionistic slant that is common throughout the book.

The second principal thread is a biographical portrait of RVW the man, which, as mentioned above, seeks to demonstrate an individuality within this folk music context. Here the author emphasizes something of a separateness from his contemporaries, such as his close friend Cecil Sharp, whose nationalistic overtones made the composer somewhat uncomfortable. Tony Palmer's film about RVW, '*O Thou Transcendent*' (2007), also touched upon this more liberal-leaning and socially conscious view of the world, which involved him in a number run-ins with authority. Where this biographical thread strays on

to the axis involving wives Adeline and Ursula, and particularly the latter's published interpretation of his relationship with the former, the relevance to the core of the book is perhaps a little forced.

Intermingled with these threads is what we might call an outline of the author's credentials as one who has, as a singer herself and a resident and historian of Norfolk, a deeper understanding of what the core of this book is all about – the nature and affect of traditional song. Whether or not this is at all relevant, the overall result is an immensely enjoyable, lively, and thought-provoking read which is worthy of a place in this celebratory year.

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