

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS:

IT WAS IN THE LATE 1940S THAT I, a young singer, first performed as a soloist for him in his *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*; naturally I was apprehensive about working with the great man, but I need not have been. As he came into the room he asked, in that gruff voice of his, and in a totally disarming way, if anyone had a conducting stick as he had left his own at home. A 'conducting stick' – never a baton to R.V.W., by the way! – is not the sort of thing generally carried around in one's luggage, and the demand created a great deal of amusement. After much searching, the only thing remotely suitable was the orchestral leader's stubby pencil, and giving it a rueful glance he started the rehearsal. His conducting was rudimentary to say the least – he chopped the air in a most extraordinary way – but such was the force of his personality, how he used the stick was immaterial: the real work was done with his eyes. Whenever a solo started he looked at me over the top of his half-moon spectacles, and somehow, without being told, the interpretation he wanted was drawn out of me, and I knew instinctively that what I was doing was right. It was marvellous for me to have had this opportunity, because ever since then I

by Liveryman
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have been able to say with authority how the composer wanted it sung.

I remember, in the green-room between rehearsals and concert, he chatted to me about music and performance in general as if I were his equal, and by the time we went on to the platform, I felt I had been his friend for a lifetime. In later years, talking with orchestral players, I discovered they too had this great admiration and affection

for him: they appreciated his wonderful sense of music-making, ignored the deficiencies in his conducting, and played their very best for him. Approbation of this kind from those who work with so many different conductors is not lightly earned.

Something I always found fascinating was the way in which one great composer would conduct the work of another, and I was privileged to have taken part, again as soloist, in a number of the Leith Hill Festival performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* under R.V.W.'s direction, including the last time he conducted the work. His was an entirely personal view, and I suspect his rather '19th Century' approach would be completely out of fashion with today's audience: he would have nothing to do with harpsichords, always using a grand piano, he himself having written out the continuo part as a flowing pianistic accompaniment. (We tend to forget, in our search for 'authentic' performances, that this treatment was totally acceptable at that time: I remember being a soloist in Bach's *Mass in B Minor* conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent for which he had re-scored the work to include clarinets and grand piano!). R.V.W. felt the *Passion* to be something special, definitely not to be treated as an ordinary concert, so he would have no formal entry of conductor and soloists: we came on to the platform individually in the most unobtrusive manner possible. He always insisted on the audience standing for the whole of the Last Supper section, gesturing commandingly for everyone to rise, and refusing to proceed until they did. I can remember once or twice some of the audience seemed unwilling: in the face of his continued 'look' they hastily came to their feet! All of this was, as I say, personal to him, but it reflected his own humble approach to a masterpiece, and he had that special quality, impossible to identify, which enabled him easily to communicate to performers the ideas he wished them to express. Such was the powerful atmosphere he created, it ceased to be a performance and became an experience.

Even after all these years, writing this brings back potent memories, and I can still recall the frisson which came from taking part in such superb music-making.

EDITORIAL

In his Lecture on Something published in 1961, the American composer John Cage wrote: 'Let no one imagine that in owning a recording he has the music, The very practice of music is a celebration that we own nothing'.

The deeper philosophical arguments that Cage espoused do not concern us directly here (although a contribution to *Preserve Harmony* from a Liveryman on the topic would be welcome), but the subject of recorded music is one that the Company might usefully address in the years leading up to our quincentenary in June 2000.

Man has been able to record and replay music at will for only about a fifth of the Company's existence – since 1888, when parts of a performance of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* were recorded 'live' at the Crystal Palace on wax cylinders. The invention of radio, LPs and Compact discs has led to a huge increase in the accessibility of music at any time and in any place. Some international recording organisations are wealthier by far than orchestras or opera houses (which does not mean they are artistically more successful, possibly just more influential), and yet, as a Company, we have not looked at the Art of recording; we do not sponsor record-making, or award medals for the finest recorded performances every year, as we do 'live' music.

Is recording an aspect of music performance that we should support? Should we be seen acknowledging the fact that Plácido Domingo can foster a love of music through his latest CD of Neapolitan songs in a way that, for example, a young clarinettist, perhaps one of our Award winners, will never be able to, however talented?

The relationship between 'live' and recorded' music-making may be uncomfortable, but it is one that we cannot now ignore.