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Tony Palmer's Film of At The Haunted End Of The Day, William Walton (review)

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technique may be going but the passion and vocal beauty are still there. Included with the DVD is a CD of excerpts from a 1938 performance of *Siegfried* in Buenos Aires. The sound quality ranges from poor to acceptable, but it is an invaluable document of Lorenz at his peak in collaboration with conductor Erich Kleiber and other notable Wagnerians of the era.

Jumping from the sublime to the ridiculous, we have a rare opportunity to see a parody of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* which was written in 1857, just two years after the first performance of the opera in Vienna. The playwright Johann Nestroy was a major figure in the history of Viennese theater, but his work is barely remembered elsewhere except as the source for the musical *Hello Dolly* (by way of Thornton Wilder). Writer, director, singer, and actor, Nestroy was a celebrated satirist and poked fun at many of his contemporaries. This parody of *Tannhäuser* was written in collaboration with Carl Binder, a forgotten composer whose work consists largely of such parodies. The score quotes Wagner but is made up mostly of songs and dances in the

operetta style. Nestroy's text narrates the story but with numerous jokes about Wagner and his "music of the future" (and how it will ruin your voice) as well as turning Venus into a barmaid in a seedy wine cellar. Most of the humor depends on knowledge of the original opera and an appreciation for Viennese accents and dialects, and as such it is more limited in its appeal than Offenbach's parodies or the comedy routines of Anna Russell.

In 2008, the Vienna Volksoper presented this piece as a one man show performed by actor Robert Meyer, who is currently the director of the company and a noted Nestroy expert. Accompanied by an ensemble of violins, guitar, and accordion, Meyer plays and sings all the roles with great relish and is extremely droll, but much of this gets lost in the translation and will appeal mainly to those who know Vienna and its people intimately, or with a special interest in musical parody.

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Tony Palmer's Film of At The Haunted End Of The Day, William Walton. DVD. Simon Rattle / Philharmonia Orchestra, Elgar Howarth / Grime-thorpe Colliery Band, Simon Preston / Christ Church Cathedral Choir, Oxford, Goldsmith Choral Union, Highgate Choral Society Los Paraguayos. Directed by Tony Palmer. Featuring Yehudi Menuhin, Julian Bream, Iona Brown, Ralph Kirshbaum, Yvonne Kenny, John Shirley-Quirk, Carmen de Sautoy. UK: Voiceprint, 2008. TP-DVD113. \$19.99.

Sir William Walton seems to have stumbled upon composing quite by accident. He was a chorister at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford and wanted some way to distinguish himself so that he would be allowed to stay on in Oxford after his voice broke. Unable to play any of the instruments well, Walton felt that perhaps composition would be the only way he could avoid being sent back to his family, and so he gave it a try. This visually beautiful DVD was originally a film first broadcast in 1981 on Easter Sunday at the *South Bank Show* in London. The film is a deserving winner of the Prix Italia and provides stunning images of Sir William's estate on Ischia in the Bay of Naples. Superb performances of works such as "Drop, drop, slow tears,"

"Belshazzar's Feast," and the breathtakingly mesmerizing, unbelievably poignant aria "At the Haunted End of the Day" from Walton's opera, *Troilus and Cressida*, as well as many more works that musically illustrate the entire span of the composer's distinguished career form the backbone of the film.

Director Tony Palmer tells the story of Walton's life in ninety-nine minutes organized into fourteen segments that are presented in roughly chronological order. The early years are depicted in a series of flashbacks reenacted with Walton and other close relatives and life-long friends telling the story as the actors move through the story. The viewer gets a real sense of the bleakness of Walton's home life and the fact

that much of what happened in the composer's subsequent life was a direct result of his efforts never to return to the place of his birth. Cameos by Walton's engagingly entertaining Argentinian-born wife, Susana, and friends such as Julian Bream and Lawrence Olivier provide interesting insight into Walton's personality. Old newsreels and newspaper clippings alternate in quick succession with scenes from the myriad of propaganda films and British and Hollywood movies that Walton wrote scores for to tell the fascinating story of what the composer did to "make himself useful" during and just following World War II. Walton mentions during an interview segment near the end of the film that he was looking forward to death, and less than two years after the film's premiere, in 1983, Walton died. Palmer mentions in the liner

notes that he feels that his film is about "what we feel as human beings 'at the haunted end of the day.'"

Walton's music throughout the video is presented so that the extraordinary power and emotional intensity inherent in the composer's works is highlighted through superlative performance segments. Most of the works presented are heard in entirety and the overall impression to the viewer is that the film, like the music and the life it documents, is nothing less than a true masterpiece and that the world should be unutterably grateful that young William Walton decided it was necessary to give composition a try.

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"O Thou Transcendent," The Life of Ralph Vaughan Williams. DVD. Directed by Tony Palmer. UK: Voiceprint Records, 2008. TPDVD106. \$19.99.

In the opening moments of Tony Palmer's "*O Thou Transcendent*," the film's central point, and a calling card of contemporary scholarship on the composer, is introduced. The radio announcer for Classic FM informs his audience that Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* has landed, by popular vote, the number one spot in the station's classical "Hall of Fame." The background is established: that Vaughan Williams is widely understood—sometimes loved, sometimes loathed for it—as the greatest representative, even as a symbol, of a comfortable, slightly saccharine English pastoralism. Palmer spends much of the rest of the film seeking to convince us that this understanding is poorly or partially informed at best, and that any fair assessment of the composer's life and music will reveal instead his remarkable depth, range, relevance, and humanity.

One of the film's strengths, and one of the ways Palmer supports the central point, is found in the variety and quality of interviews. Imogen Holst talks about Vaughan Williams's long and fruitful friendship with her father, Gustav; Michael Tippett, sounding a recurring motif, admits that "through [Vaughan Williams] we were made free"; Mark-Anthony Turnage confesses to having

loved the composer's music as a "vice" before his recent scholarly rehabilitation. A number of others could be mentioned, from John Adams to Tony Benn, Michael Kennedy to Ursula Vaughan Williams, the composer's second wife, but despite the real interest generated by individual interviews, none is ever allowed to dismantle the argument. Palmer's control over the material is very strong; contradiction is almost entirely absent. His vision of history, or at least of films about musical history, seems to hinge on the idea that the truth is subversive, but that all the people most closely connected to a situation share a grasp of that subversive truth.

Related to this idea of the subversive nature of truth is Palmer's tendency to insist on correlations between music and image. Montages accompany most lengthy excerpts of Vaughan Williams's music. For some excerpts, the montage seems innocent enough: *The Lark Ascending* alternates between images of the solo violinist, backlit by light pouring through stained glass, and shots of the English countryside. Here the images confirm in a simplistic way a general understanding of the appeal of the piece and also of the parochialism detractors of Vaughan Williams find in his music.