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"O Thou Transcendent," The Life of Ralph Vaughan Williams
(review)

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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.

Another example suggests a more willful filmmaker. During an extended excerpt from the Sixth Symphony, which Vaughan Williams famously denied as being about war, Palmer assembles a lengthy concatenation of scenes of mass graves, woodlands, orchestral players, marching soldiers, an array of more recent war images including a stealth fighter, and finally a photo of the composer looking pensive. The spoken message of the film—that Vaughan Williams is more than the quintessential amateurish pastoralist—seems to be expanded during these montages into an appeal to hear Vaughan Williams encoding

existential struggle in the sounds themselves. This would be very subversive truth indeed, but it is not an inevitable one. Perhaps these moments of the film are best thought of as Palmer's creative rejoinder, based on his personal experience of the music and its composer.

Finally, the montages do not prevent the film from succeeding as informative biopic, earnest homage, engaging narrative, or committed introduction to the music, and for all of those reasons it is recommended.

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Toscanini: In His Own Words. DVD (Widescreen ed). Directed by Larry Weinstein. [United States]: Medici Arts International, 2009. 3077928. \$24.99.

Cinematic docudramas and docufictions seem to be in vogue today (*Frost/Nixon* and *Lives of Others* come easily to mind). This, combined with the ability of DVDs to reach a niche audience, affords filmmakers an opportunity to approach subjects which otherwise might never see the light of day. Larry Weinstein's recent work *Toscanini: In His Own Words* is based upon over 150 hours of surreptitiously recorded taped interviews made by Arturo Toscanini's son, Walter at his Wave Hill home in New York during the 1950s. In this film, these multiple revelations are woven together to create one fictional New Year's Eve celebration at home in 1954 where a widowed Toscanini (Barry Jackson) is joined by his son Walter (Joseph Long), his daughter Wally (Carolina Giammetta), the Canadian conductor Wilfred Pelletier (Michael Brandon), his long serving assistant and friend Anita Colombo (Jennie Goossens), and Iris Cantelli, the wife of his protégé, conductor Guido Cantelli (Valentina Chico) for a discussion of the maestro's entire life.

While the performances seem to be a bit contrived and melodramatic, there is unquestionable elegance in the setting and efforts to explore the mystique of Toscanini through this representation of his thoughts. From the film, Toscanini emerges as a highly self-critical man, who equally spared no one his views and opinions on music and the world. The result of this is a contemporary, perhaps revisionist view of Toscanini, as more modern man

than might otherwise be expected, with a deep moral sense of duty and humanity, which was tempered by infidelity and personal doubt. His political views about Mussolini and Hitler, his opinions of the music of Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, and Catalani, of performers such as Geraldine Farrar, Maria Callas, and Leopold Stokowski bear witness to his sharp tongue and incisive mind. Quotes such as "I recognize only the stars in heaven" and "You can't understand a word she sings" remind us of the power that the conductors exerted during the Toscanini years, and which have been replaced by an egalitarianism which would have appalled him had he been alive today.

The skillful interposition of vibrant kinescopic archival footage and recordings along with reconstructed black and white as well as color video images contribute much to the warmth of the film, adding to this viewer's perception of Toscanini as a less formidable man than before. (Full disclosure: my father played in the NBC Symphony under Toscanini, and I heard many stories of those sessions.) Watching his eyes in the final scene conducting the *Liebestod*, one can still feel the power of Toscanini's music making, after all these years. Curious inconsistencies appear throughout the film (is an accelerando really a dynamic marking?) and the obvious imposition of a recording of the Valkyries over a different video track results in a lack of synchronization that is jarring to say the least. Lastly, the use of more recent recordings by per-