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

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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 a roughly chronological order. The early years are depicted in a series of flashbacks reenacted with Walton and other close relatives and lifelong 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

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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—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.

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