

PROGRAMME NOTES

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis

The two English composers pertaining to this *Fantasia* – Thomas Tallis and Ralph Vaughan Williams – lived and flourished some 350 years apart. Being one of the foremost English composers of the early twentieth-century, Vaughan Williams was never an avant-garde and his music was never grotesque. He received traditional training in music and attended the Royal College of Music. In addition, he studied composition in Berlin with Max Bruch and had lessons with Maurice Ravel in Paris for three months. His interest in English folk tunes, having spent months in collecting them in the rural countryside, is manifested through the frequent incorporation of folk music in his compositions, such as *English Folk Song Suite* and *Fantasia on "Greensleeves"*. His preoccupation with the revision of the English Hymnal of 1906 gave Vaughan Williams an opportunity to know the music of Thomas Tallis (c. 1505 – 1585) who was regarded as the "Father" of English church music. Tallis wrote nine Psalm tunes for Archbishop Matthew Parker who published *The Whole Psalter* in 1567. The third Psalm tune "Why fumeth in fight" serves as the inspiration for Vaughan Williams to write his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. The piece was premiered in 1910 in Three Choirs Festival that took place in Gloucester Cathedral with the composer conducting. Although the crowd was not immediately impressed with the piece as they were there mainly to listen to the premiere of an oratorio by Elgar, the *Fantasia* marked the first major compositional success for Vaughan Williams. The piece was soon to be performed widely by orchestras all over England and around Europe with high acclaim.

The *Fantasia* is skillfully scored for three different forces: a full string orchestra, a chamber-sized second orchestra and a string quartet. The three forces give diversity to the context of the piece but join together for *tutta forza*. The second orchestra, as indicated to play at times with mutes and without expression, is mainly used for echoing effects, which would be very effective inside a cathedral in an antiphonal setting. The piece opens with a mystic ambience, followed by some striking pizzicato in the lower strings, introducing very briefly Tallis' theme before it is fully unfolded. The solemnity of the psalm theme is combined with Vaughan Williams' imaginative and sonorous writing, giving the piece a sense of ambivalence between the modern and the past.