Vaughan Williams

Toward the Unknown Region
Dona nobis pacem
O clap your hands
Lord, Thou hast been our refuge
Four Hymns

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CORYDON ORCHESTRA
MATTHEW BEST conductor
Dona nobis pacem fills a much larger canvas than anything else in this collection. It has every right to do so, for its theme is anguished and impassioned on a cosmic scale. It is, if you like, ‘propaganda’, an ‘occasional’ piece—if pleas for peace and tolerance and understanding can ever suitably be described as ‘occasional’. No question here but that the motivation was war, or the deepening sense of trouble which by the mid-1930s seemed set to explode into war. Vaughan Williams compiled a text chiefly from the Bible and Whitman (though the work’s motto, and the words of its first movement, belong to the Mass) and Dona nobis pacem was first performed in Huddersfield in October 1936, with the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Albert Coates.

In the event, Vaughan Williams’s warnings and entreaties went unheeded. But the humanitarian warmth and splendour of his vision remains; and, after all, if the day ever dawns when composers fail to speak out through the medium of their art against mankind’s seemingly illimitable folly and wickedness, we shall be in a poor way, to put it mildly.

I The soprano solo leads the forces of apprehensive humanity (the chorus) in their quest for peace. At the end the drums of war are heard in the far distance.

II War erupts: nothing and nobody is inviolate. The Whitman setting is dominated by beating drums and blowing bugles, inbuilt in the music even when the text isn’t directly referring to them. In an inspired transition (Vaughan Williams no less than Britten was a master of the seamless scene-change) the drums of war turn into the lapping, laving rhythms of …

III Reconciliation. The ‘enemy’ is dead—‘a man as divine as myself’, as in Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’—and music of transcendent beauty and simplicity warms and cleanses the world.

IV Dirge for Two Veterans. A second drum-study. This time the drums are not of war but of its aftermath—death, and burial. Vaughan Williams based this movement on an earlier setting of the same words made before his mature style had crystallized. This works to his advantage since the music has a kind of rude solidity and strength which a more sophisticated musical language might have mellowed. It would be easy to sentimentalize Whitman here, and this Vaughan Williams resolutely avoids.

V The ostinato bass which plays out the ‘veterans’ now plays in the Angel of Death. The snorting of Dan’s horses momentarily recalls the apocalyptic equine visions of Sancta Civitas, but these are soon dispelled by one of the work’s most magical moments, the solo baritone’s reassuring ‘O man, greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee’. Chorus basses intone the great text from Micah, almost every word a poem: ‘Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’ The word spreads among all instruments and tongues in prospect of a New Jerusalem: bells ring out in a riotous succession of keys and peals, and what better than C major for the Christmas climax: ‘On earth peace, goodwill toward men’? As the sounds of the heavenly host move out of earshot the soprano solo rises from them with a final reiteration of her entreaty: hers alone is the voice that lingers at the end like a solitary ray of hope, a light in the night.

1 I Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi
donab nobis pacem.
Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world,
Grant us peace.

2 II Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through the doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have
now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field, or
gathering in his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you
bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in the
streets;
Are beds prepared for the sleepers at night in the houses?
No sleepers must sleep in those beds,
No bargainers’ bargains by day—would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to
sing?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie
awaiting the hearse,
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles
blow.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

III RECONCILIATION Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time
be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly,
softly,
Wash again and ever again this soiled world;
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—
I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in
the coffin.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

IV DIRGE FOR TWO VETERANS The last sunbeam
Lightly falls from the finished Sabbath,
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking
Down a new-made double grave.

Lo, the moon ascending,
Up from the east the silvery round moon,
Beautiful over the house-tops, ghastly, phantom moon,
Immense and silent moon.

I see a sad procession,
And I hear the sound of coming full-keyed bugles,
All the channels of the city streets they’re flooding
As with voices and with tears.

I hear the great drums pounding,
And the small drums steady whirring,
And every blow of the great convulsive drums
Strikes me through and through.

For the son is brought with the father,
In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,
Two veterans, son and father, dropped together,
And the double grave awaits them.

Now nearer blow the bugles,
And the drums strike more convulsive,
And the daylight o’er the pavement quite has faded,
And the strong dead-march enfolds me.

In the eastern sky up-buoying,
The sorrowful vast phantom moves illumined,
’Tis some mother’s large transparent face,
In heaven brighter growing.

O strong dead-march you please me!
O moon immense with your silvery face you soothe me!
O my soldiers twain! O my veterans passing to burial!
What I have I also give you.

The moon gives you light,
And the bugles and the drums give you music,
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,
My heart gives you love.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)
The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings. There is no one as of old... to sprinkle with blood the lintel and the two side-posts of our doors, that he may spare and pass on.

JOHN BRIGHT (1811–1889)

Dona nobis pacem.

We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble! The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan; the whole land trembled at the sound of the neighing of his strong ones; for they are come, and have devoured the land... and those that dwell therein...

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved...

Is there no balm in Gilead?; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

JEREMIAH 8: 15–22

O man greatly beloved, fear not, peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong.

DANIEL 10: 19

The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former... and in this place will I give peace.

HAGGAI 2: 9

Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. And none shall make them afraid, neither shall the sword go through their land. Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven. Open to me the gates of righteousness, I will go into them. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled; and let them hear, and say, it is the truth. And it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and they shall declare my glory among the nations. For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, so shall your seed and your name remain for ever.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men.

adapted from MICAH 4: 3, LEVITICUS 26: 6, PSALMS 85: 10, 118: 19, ISAIAH 43: 9, 66: 18–22, LUKE 2: 14

Dona nobis pacem.

The Five Mystical Songs for baritone and orchestra were written in 1911. The following year Vaughan Williams began what sounds like a smaller-scale companion piece, the Four Hymns for solo tenor, solo viola and strings. Though completed in 1914, the war delayed performance until 1920. It is a beautiful work with several interesting features. Is VW really given enough credit as the first English composer to set consistently only the finest literature to music? Do we place him as prominently as he deserves in the vanguard of the Purcell revival? The first hymn, ‘Lord! Come away!’ testifies eloquently to the composer’s love of Purcellian declamation. The text by Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667), Bishop of Down and Connor, is variously subtitled ‘The Second Hymn for Advent’ and ‘Christ’s coming to Jerusalem in triumph’; hence the processional character of the second part. ‘Who is this fair one’ is a dialogue for two voices—the solo tenor and the solo viola with its intimate, communing character (it was always on of VW’s favourite sonorities). As for Isaac Watts (1674–1748), one of whose hymns this is, A E Housman, reading Dr Johnson’s rhetorical question ‘If true poetry is not to be found in Pope, where is it to be found?’ replied ‘It is to be found, Dr Johnson, in Dr Watts’. We all know Watts as the author of When I survey the wondrous Cross and O God, our help in ages past.

The setting of Richard Crashaw’s ‘Come Love, come Lord’ breathes that spirit of mystical remoteness later to inform (on a wider canvas) A Pastoral Symphony—a perception of

The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.
The finale, ‘Evening Hymn’ (a translation from the Greek by the then Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges), is a brilliant contrapuntal tour de force whose not least remarkable feature is its pre-echoes (in its seven-note bell-like basso ostinato) of Holst’s *Hymn of Jesus*, composed in 1917. There are two themes—the ‘bells’ and a viola tune, soon taken up by the tenor—but the distinctions between them quickly become blurred as the hymn gains in warmth, intensity and complexity. In a long-drawn fade-out it is the bells that have the last word.

6 **Lord! Come away!** Why dost Thou stay?
Thy road is ready; and Thy paths made straight
With longing expectation, wait
The consecration of Thy beauteous feet!

Ride on triumphantly!
Behold we lay our lusty and proud wills in Thy way!
Hosanna! Welcome to our hearts!

Lord, here Thou hast a temple too; and full as dear
As that of Sion, and as full of sin:
Nothing but thieves and robbers dwell therein;
Enter, and chase them forth, and cleanse the floor!
Crucify them that they may never more
Profane that holy place
Where thou hast chose to set Thy face!

And then, if our stiff tongues shall be
Mute in the praises of the Deity,
The stones out of the temple wall
Shall cry aloud, and call
‘Hosanna!’ and Thy glorious footsteps greet!

JEREMY TAYLOR (1613–1667)

6 **Who is this fair one** in distress,
That travels from the wilderness,
And press’d with sorrows and with sins
On her beloved Lord she leans?

This is the spouse of Christ our God,
Bought with the treasures of His blood,
And her request and her complaint
Is but the voice of ev’ry saint:

‘O let my name engraven stand
Both on Thy heart and on Thy hand;
Seal me upon mine arm and wear
That pledge of love for ever there.

‘Stronger than death Thy love is known
Which floods of wrath could never drown,
And hell and earth in vain combine
To quench a fire so much divine.

‘But I am jealous of my heart
Lest it should once from Thee depart;
Then let my name be well impress’d
As a fair signet on Thy breast.

‘Till Thou hast brought me to Thy home,
Where fears and doubts can never come,
Thy countenance let me often see,
And often shalt Thou hear from me:

‘Come, my beloved, haste away,
Cut short the hours of Thy delay,
Fly like a youthful hart or roe,
Over the hills where spices blow.’

ISAAC WATTS (1674–1748)

8 **Come love, come Lord,** and that long day
For which I languish, come away,
When this dry soul those eyes shall see
And drink the unseal’d source of Thee,
When glory’s sun faith’s shades shall chase,
Then for Thy veil give me Thy face.

RICHARD CRASHAW (1612/3–1649)

9 **EVENING HYMN** O gladsome light, O Grace
Of God the Father’s face,
The eternal splendour wearing;
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
Joyful in Thine appearing:
Now, ere day fadeth quite,
We see the evening light,
Our wonted hymn outpouring;
Father of might unknown,
Thee, His incarnate Son,
And His Holy Spirit adoring.

To Thee of right belongs
All praise of holy songs,
O Son of God, Life-giver;
Thee, therefore, O Most High,
The world doth glorify
And shall exalt for ever.

ROBERT BRIDGES (1844–1930) from the Greek

A hundred years on, now that Whitman’s ideals of democracy and individualism have become so integral a part of modern thought, it is hard for us to appreciate how enormously liberating was the impact of *Leaves of Grass* on the free-thinking young of the late Victorian generation—notably Delius, Holst and of course Vaughan Williams. Shortly before he died VW told Michael Kennedy, ‘I’ve never got over [Whitman], I’m glad to say …’, and he had good reason not to have, since two of the most outstanding successes of his early career as a composer were Whitman settings—*Toward the Unknown Region* (probably completed in 1906, first performed at the Leeds Festival of 1907, the composer conducting) and the mighty *Sea Symphony* of 1909.

*Toward the Unknown Region* was VW’s first major choral piece (he calls it a ‘Song’ for chorus and orchestra) and despite its intermittent Wagnerian echoes (Wagner was an influence that he did want to get over, and it took him quite a time to do so) its obvious inspirational qualities—not to mention its technical savoir faire in terms of the handling of massed voices—made it a success from the first. Stanford (who conducted the first London performance in 1907) and Elgar are important models, but most of all the Parry who urged VW to write choral music ‘as befits an Englishman and democrat’. The spirit of adventure is always keen in Vaughan Williams; but after the great outburst at ‘Nor any bounds bounding us’ the words seem buoyed up on, bowled on by, wave after wave of musical excitement and elation. The great choreographer Agnes de Mille, describing an altogether different medium, nonetheless invoked an emotion which distils the spirit of *Toward the Unknown Region* to perfection: ‘To take the air. To challenge space. To move into space with patterns of shining splendour. To be at once stronger and freer than at any other time in life. To lift up the heart …’

*Toward the Unknown Region* was the work of a comparatively young man. But the music, no less than the text, has a transcendent timelessness that relates to any and every period in life.

Darest thou now O soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?

No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are in that land.

I know it not O soul,
Nor dost thou, all is a blank before us,
All waits undreamed of in that region, that inaccessible land.

Till when the ties loosen,
All but the ties eternal, time and space,
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us.

Then we burst forth, we float,
In time and space O soul, prepared for them,
Equal, equipt at last, (O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfil O soul.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

Of the broad straightforward choral style of *O clap your hands* (1920) Michael Kennedy remarks how apt it is
to its purpose of ‘filling a great cathedral with joyous sounds’. It is however not quite as straightforward as all that in every respect: there are moments when choir and orchestra seem to be in untypical harmonic conflict (eg ‘Sing praises unto our King’). Mistake? No, VW evidently meant these clashes; and once we accept that they are meant, we can relish them the more keenly for their unexpectedness.

O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph. For the Lord most high is terrible. He is a great King over all the earth. God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God; sing praises. Sing praises to our King; sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth. Sing ye praises with understanding. God reigneth over the heathen. God sitteth upon the throne of His holiness. Sing praises unto our King. Sing praises.

from PSALM 47

Composed in 1921, **Lord, Thou hast been our refuge** combines a setting of Psalm 90 with Issac Watts’s metrical version of the same Psalm—*O God, our help in ages past*—and the fine tune ‘St Anne’, to which the latter is commonly sung. VW carries out this feat with typically unostentatious skill. The baritone soloist (sometimes a semi-chorus) starts the Psalm, chant-like; the full chorus enters with the hymn, pianissimo, as if in the distance, and the two proceed in tandem—always piano—until the first verse of the Hymn is finished. The full chorus then continues with the Psalm over a broad spectrum of homophonic texture. An instrumental transition, fugally based on ‘St Anne’, leads to a combined recapitulation / apotheosis—forte now—in which fugal derivations from ‘St Anne’ assume ever greater importance (‘And the glorious majesty of our Lord be upon us’). Vaughan Williams would certainly have been aware, in this context, of Bach’s so-called ‘St Anne’ Fugue, the first phrase of whose subject is identical with the first phrase of the ‘St Anne’ tune.

Lord, Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever the earth and the world were made, Thou art God from everlasting and world without end. Thou turnest man to destruction; again Thou sayest: Come again, ye children of men. For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday; seeing that is past as a watch in the night.

O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

As soon as Thou scatterest them they are even as a sleep and fade away suddenly like the grass. In the morning it is green, and growth up, but in the evening it is cut down, dried up and withered. For we consume away in Thy displeasure, and are afraid at Thy wrathful indignation. For when Thou art angry all our days are gone; we bring our years to an end, as a tale that is told. The years of our age are threescore years and ten, and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength but labour and sorrow. So passeth it away, and we are gone. Turn thee again, O Lord, at the last. Be gracious unto Thy servants. O satisfy us with Thy mercy and that soon. So shall we rejoice and be glad all the days of our life. Lord, Thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever the earth and the world were made, Thou art God from everlasting and world without end. And the glorious Majesty of the Lord be upon us. Prosper Thou, O prosper Thou the work of our hands, O prosper Thou our handywork.

PSALM 90

Notes by CHRISTOPHER PALMER © 1993
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

**Dona nobis pacem** Cantata for soprano and baritone soli, chorus and orchestra [35'05]
JUDITH HOWARTH soprano THOMAS ALLEN baritone

1. I *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi* [3'10]
2. II *Beat! beat! drums!—Blow! bugles! blow!* [3'44]
3. III Reconciliation *Word over all, beautiful as the sky* [6'34]
4. IV Dirge for Two Veterans *The last sunbeam* [10'45]
5. V *The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land* [10'46]

**Four Hymns** for tenor, viola and strings [16'55]
JOHN MARK AINSLEY tenor MATTHEW SOUTER viola

6. Lord! Come away! [4'20]
7. Who is this fair one? [4'27]
8. Come love, come Lord [3'47]
9. Evening Hymn *O gladsome light, O grace* [4'04]

10. **Toward the Unknown Region** Song for chorus and orchestra [12'44]

11. **O clap your hands** Psalm 47 [3'07]
    Motet for chorus and orchestra

12. **Lord, Thou hast been our refuge** Psalm 90 [7'46]
    Motet for chorus, semi-chorus (or baritone solo) and orchestra
    THOMAS ALLEN baritone

**CORYDON SINGERS**
**CORYDON ORCHESTRA**
JOSEPH FRÖHLICH, ELIZABETH LAYTON co-leaders

**MATTHEW BEST** conductor
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Cantata for soprano and baritone soli, chorus and orchestra

6. Four Hymns [16'55]
for tenor, viola and strings


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