

Musical Treasure Chest #29

I have always looked forward to the month of November. Though daylight continues to wane, a warm day occasionally pops up, the ground is usually free of snow, and some trees still retain beautiful colors. I happily anticipate Thanksgiving and Christmas and the wonderful musical activities of the next two months. This year concertizing is muted, so I rely on some great memories of past seasons. November 22nd is Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, Day, and in my mind is a simply ravishing piece of music that I performed on that day more than thirty years ago; a piece that has reappeared many times over my professional life: ***Serenade to Music* of Ralph Vaughan Williams.**

David Janower introduced me to *Serenade to Music* back in the mid-1980s when he programmed it sung by a handful of Albany Pro Musica singers paired with his chamber choir from the University at Albany. Completely unfamiliar with the work (and still with access to the incredible WMHT-FM record library) I began to listen to recordings. What a simply glorious, haunting piece: soaring solo violin lines, the atmospheric orchestration, lovely choral writing and stunning solo vocal parts, all mesmerizing and so effective. Written in 1938 for sixteen solo vocalists and orchestra, it premiered on October 5th of that year, paired with the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 2 (with the composer as soloist). Rachmaninov sat in the audience to hear the second half and was reduced to tears by the beauty of the work.

Vaughan Williams had 16 specific outstanding British singers in mind when he created the piece, which was a tribute to Sir Henry Wood, a famous British conductor. Wood conducted the premiere at Royal Albert Hall. The text is taken from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene 1 (Music of the Spheres dialogue). Each soloist in the original performance had specific text assigned, and they sing both as soloists and in chorus. Vaughan Williams realized that it would be difficult to assemble sixteen vocal soloists of this caliber for subsequent performances, so he made a several additional arrangements including ones for four soloists, choir and orchestra, and for chorus and orchestra with no

soloists. Whatever version you listen to, you will be stunned by the radiance of the music.

This work has been part of my life since that performance back in the 1980s at the Cathedral of All Saints in Albany. David pulled together his own arrangements of the work combining the various versions. In the early 2000s we did an amalgam with solo violin, a soprano soloist chorus and orchestra at the Troy Music Hall. After David passed away, we did a version for solo violin, vocal soloists and piano (what a bittersweet performance that was). But what a gift to have this piece in my life. I hope I have another chance to play it.

I have given you two performances to hear. The first is from a 2019 BBC Proms concert. The singing is stellar, as is the orchestral playing and solo violinist. And then I have given you the original premiere. While the sound quality is from the 1930s, you will still hear the magic of the performance, and you will hear the same performance that made Rachmaninov weep.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJDrEvH4c08>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tq8sczVU5o8>