

The Sacred in Opera **July 2011**

In This Issue...

Ruth Dobson

In our Sacred in Opera newsletters we have featured many sacred chamber operas, encouraging our members to produce and present these works in their churches, theaters, and universities. Those of you who attended the recent NOA convention in San Antonio were charmed by the world premiere of a chamber opera by Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky, *St. Thomas the Carpenter*, with musical direction by Dr. Gary Mabry and stage direction by Dr. Samuel Mungo. We have had much positive feedback from the presentation in San Antonio. The following letter came from the Texas Children's Choir after their participation in the January convention performance of *St. Thomas*. We are delighted to share it with you.

In addition to chamber operas, we also want to draw your attention to larger-scale sacred dramas. In a previous issue of the SIO newsletter we profiled Hugo Weisgall's *Esther*, which was presented by New York City Opera in 2009. Another epic religious work worthy of renewed attention is *The Pilgrim's Progress* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. We hope the following information about *The Pilgrim's Progress* might inspire you to consider a staged, semi-staged, or concert performance of this great sacred drama. The epic nature of the work makes it difficult to produce, but we feel we must champion such great works, which often are neglected by opera companies and symphony orchestras. *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*, a 30-minute excerpt from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is more easily produced. Production information about *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* will appear in the next SIO newsletter.

Dear Mrs. Dobson,

Thank you so much for your message. This was such a wonderful experience and we felt very honored to have this opportunity. Every child in the choir matured so much musically, in knowledge about the workings of an opera, and spiritually, as they participated as fish or sick and poor or in the chorus.

Without Dr. Mabry's invitation, we would never have had this exciting musical and dramatic growth experience. Children are really not much about opera in school, and this was a most valuable teaching experience. We thank the NOA for making the occasion possible.

With gratitude and warmest wishes for a rewarding and productive New Year,

*Tom Hardaway, Director
Texas Children's Choir*

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

– A Morality –

Premiered in 1951

Music by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
(pictured at right)

Libretto by the composer, founded on
The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is To Come
(Part I, 1674–1679; Part II, 1684) by John Bunyan

With interpolations from the Bible and verse by
Ursula Vaughan Williams

Oxford University Press

Background:

Vaughan Williams studied composition with both Hubert Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music and also at Trinity College College. As he began his compositional career, he became very dedicated to preserving the folk songs of England, eventually collecting over 800 of them. The influence of English folk song on his music is a distinctive part of his compositional style. But this most British of composers was also profoundly affected by his extensive work with Ravel in Paris, which began in 1908. His *Sea Symphony*, with text by Walt Whitman, was a success at the 1910 Leeds Festival, gaining him recognition as a leader of his generation of British composers.

Vaughan Williams was the prolific composer of many well-known choral and orchestral works, including nine symphonies, but he also wrote five operas:

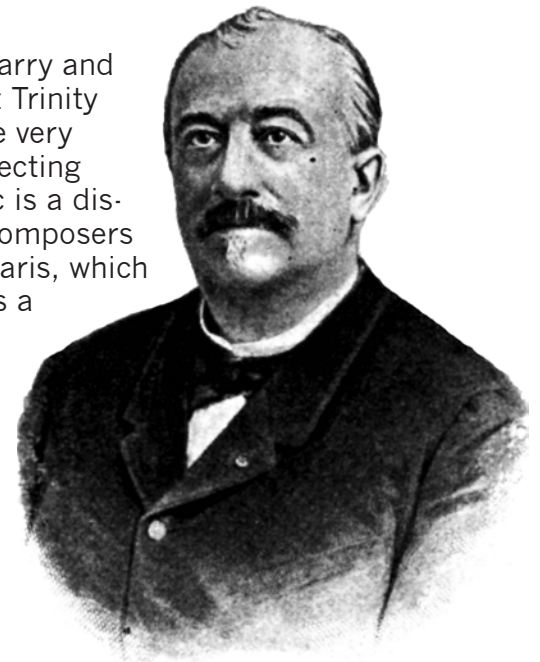
Hugh the Drover (composed 1914-1918, premiered 1924)

The Poisoned Kiss (1936)

Sir John in Love (1929, revised 1933)

Riders to the Sea (composed 1925-1932, premiered in 1937)

The Pilgrim's Progress (composed 1925-1936, revised 1942, 1944-1949, 1951-1952; premiered 1951, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden)



Composer Ralph Vaughan Williams

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Background (continued from page 2):

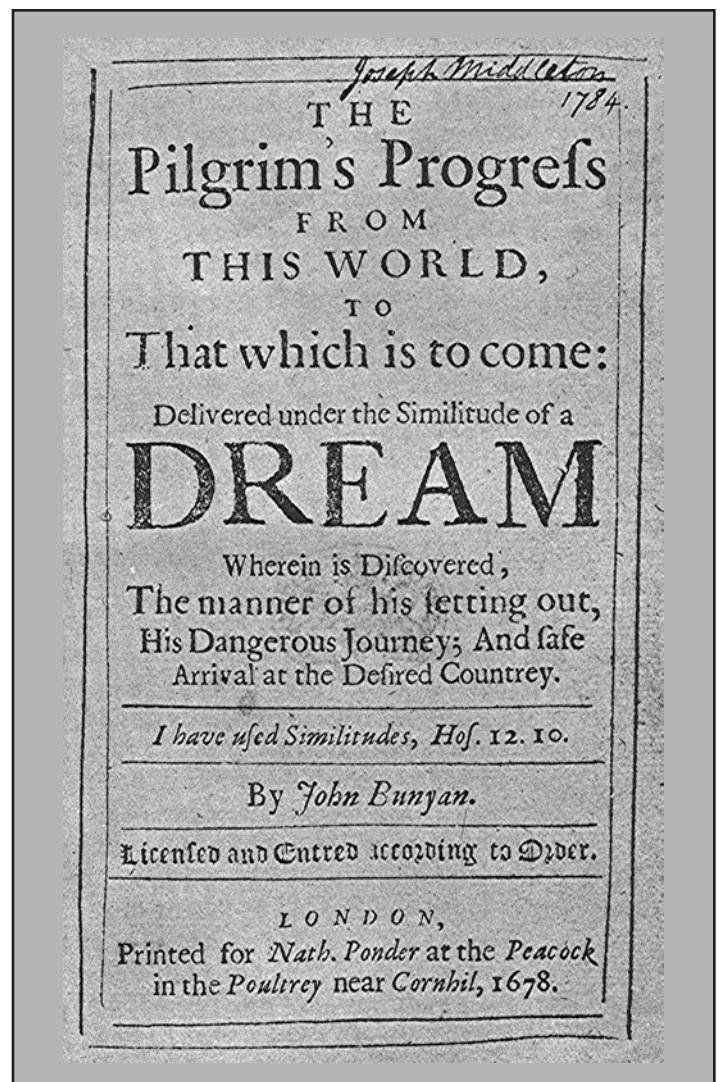
The completion of *The Pilgrim's Progress* took over forty years. The first sketches date from 1906. Act IV Scene II, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* was composed in 1921 and is performed as a separate one-act opera on occasion. Some of the themes from Act I and II from 1925-1936 are found in his Fifth Symphony, which was premiered in 1942. The final version of the opera was completed between 1944 and 1949, revised from 1951-1952, with the premiere in 1951 at Covent Garden. Subsequent full productions have been rare. The US premiere was presented at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah in 1968.

Although it is just two hours and fifteen minutes long, Vaughan Williams' opera is a monumental work, difficult to produce, with four acts and nine scenes plus a Prologue and an Epilogue. The text is from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*, a Christian allegory published in February, 1678. Bunyan's book is regarded as one of the most significant works of religious English literature ever written and has been translated into more than 200 languages. It has never been out of print and was considered the most favored book of its time after the Bible. It has never faded from interest and has inspired many adaptations, including *The Pilgrim's Regress*, by C. S. Lewis, which was his first book of prose fiction, and most recently a 2008 movie directed by Danny Carrales.

Part of the popularity of Bunyan's work when it was published in 1678 was the way it spoke to working class men and women, with solid, identifiable characters and an accessible story of the journey to a Promised Land. Bunyan began his work while in the Bedfordshire county jail for violations of the Conventicle Act, which prohibited the holding of religious services outside the auspices of the established Church of England. It is divided into two parts; Vaughan Williams set only the first part, ending as Pilgrim passes through the River of Death and ascends to the gates of the Celestial City.

Right: A scan of the cover of the first edition of the book on which the libretto is based, printed in 1678.

Vaughan Williams was sometimes referred to as a "Christian agnostic". In any case, he was obsessed with writing this epic religious opera and it became the labor of a life-time. His decision to call the main character "The Pilgrim" rather than "Christian" as it appears in John Bunyan's work, may mute some of the direct Christian tone. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was called an operatic "Morality" by Vaughan Williams and is at once both sacred and secular. But additional text is taken from Scripture and from hymn texts, adding to the already profound spiritual and Christian nature of Bunyan's story. The music is uniquely Vaughan Williams, with flowing, melodious vocal lines and complex, yet tonal harmonies.



THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Characters:

The cast is large, with three major roles:



John Bunyan (bass-baritone)



The Pilgrim (baritone)



Evangelist (bass)

The minor roles include:

Pliable (tenor)

Mistrust (baritone)

Timorous (tenor)

Three Shining ones (soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto)

The Interpreter (tenor)

Watchful, the Porter (baritone)

A Herald (baritone)

Apollyon (bass)

Two Heavenly Beings (soprano, contralto)

Lord Lechery (buffo tenor)

Demas (baritone)

Judas Iscariot (baritone)

Simon Magus (bass)

Worldly Glory (baritone)

Madam Wanton (soprano)

Pontius Pilate (bass)

Madam Bubble (mezzo-soprano)

Usher (buffo tenor)

Lord Hate-Good (bass)

Malice (soprano)

Pickthank (contralto)

Superstition (tenor)

Envy (bass)

A woodcutter's Boy (boy soprano)

Mister-By-Ends (buffo tenor)

Madam By-Ends (contralto)

Three Shepherds (tenor, baritone, bass)

The Voice of a Bird (soprano)

A Celestial Messenger (tenor)

Angel of the Lord (soprano)

Eleven soloists are sufficient as a number of parts can be doubled.

The SATB Chorus represents various groups of people and angels.

The images above are depictions of the three principal characters by Charles Henry Bennett with the assistance of Charles Kingsley. They were created in 1859.

There is an extensive collection of Bennett's graphics available at <http://www.bunyanministries.org>.

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Duration: 2 hours, 15 minutes

Materials for *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

Available from Oxford University Press.

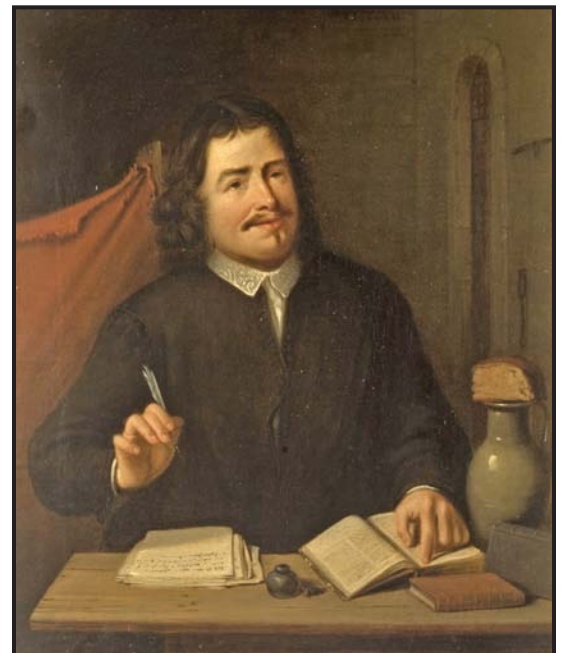
Plot Synopsis

from *The Penguin Opera Guide*

Prologue: Bunyan is seen in Bedford Gaol writing the last words of his book.

Act I begins as he reads, and Pilgrim is seen with a burden on his back. He is directed by the Evangelist to the Wicket Gate, where his neighbours fail to persuade him to turn back. He kneels in front of the Cross. Three Shining Ones take his burden and lead him to the gate of the House Beautiful, where he is robed.

Act II: Pilgrim takes to the King's Highway. He is given armour. In the Valley of Humiliation he hears the howling of the Doleful Creatures and defeats Apollyon in a fight but is wounded. Two Heavenly Beings revive him, and the Evangelist invests him with the Staff of Salvation, the Roll of the Word and the Key of Promise.



Act III: At Vanity Fair, Pilgrim rejects the seductive pleasures on offer. He is taken before Lord Hate-Good and condemned to death. In prison he bewails his fate until he remembers the Key of Promise. He unlocks the gates and walks to freedom.

Act IV: A Woodcutter's Boy directs Pilgrim to the Delectable Mountains. On the way he encounters Mr. and Mrs. By-Ends, who decline to accompany him. Then follows the scene with the Shepherds. A Celestial Messenger summons him to the Celestial City and pierces his heart with an arrow. A trumpet sounds as Pilgrim passes through the River of Death and ascends to the gates of the city. In an epilogue, Bunyan offers his book to the audience.

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS



Premiere: Royal Opera House Covent Garden, April 26, 1951

After forty years of revisions, *The Pilgrim's Progress* opened to mostly positive reviews, yet it is difficult to call the premiere an overwhelming success.

Critic Herbert Murrill, in *Music and Letters*, Vol. XXXII, No. 4, said of the premiere, "He positively disregards theatrical and operatic convention; throws to one side the nice delineation of character, the careful balance and adjustment of climax-points, the pointed underlining of the dramatic situation; and with a sort of humble self-confidence writes a loose-knot and contemplative score that succeeds by its sincerity, convinces by its integrity and becomes a unity by its single-mindedness. So I say that if *Pilgrim's Progress* achieves greatness—as I think it does—it achieves it *through* its disregard of stage convention, and not in spite of this...We are given what Vaughan Williams, with his usual felicity, called a Morality. It could be played in a cathedral or before some great architectural façade. Yet it is not unsuited to the opera-house, where the more exotic religious dramas of Wagner, of d'Annunzio and Debussy, of Claudel and Honneger have been seen....In his complete reverence

for the sung word Vaughan Williams provides a parallel to Debussy's setting of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, where Maeterlinck's text is enabled to move with the naturalness and at the pace of speech itself."

Some critics have said that perhaps *The Pilgrim's Progress* would be better suited to performance as an oratorio. But Vaughan Williams himself wanted *Pilgrim's Progress* to have grand scenery, lighting, costumes, and stage direction in the tradition of medieval morality and miracle plays and he was very involved in the production elements of the premiere.

In a series of interesting letters printed in *Musical Times*, October 1952, from the British writer on music E. J. Dent to Vaughan Williams, Dent offers suggestions about ways of improving the original 1951 production. Dent says on May 2, 1951, "I am very glad to hear that you are firmly determined to reserve the *Pilgrim* for the theatre and not to allow it to be performed as an oratorio. I have only seen the last dress rehearsal and the first performance, but I was completely convinced by it as a work for the stage, and I accept your music whole-heartedly,

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Premiere (Continued from page 6)

though I dare say you will eventually make alterations such as you yourself suggest. Newman said it wanted the environment of a cathedral, but I am sure he is quite wrong; that is just what a conventional-minded critic *would* say. I am sure it would be dreadfully boring as an oratorio, and hard pews would make it unbearable! It does not want a cathedral environment, because Bunyan stands for "pure" religion without the external decorations of a church."

Dent follows with another letter on May 6, 1951, saying "I am more and more convinced by the music, and more and more certain that it must be an Opera on the stage and not an oratorio. I have read several criticisms and think them mostly stupid and unintelligent.

I think I know more about Opera than all of the lot of the critics put together, and I have a more analytical mind than any of them; I am a complete unbeliever and generally a scoffer but I have no difficulty or reluctance to surrender wholeheartedly to Bunyan and to your music."

Vaughan Williams, in a response to a May 12, 1951, letter from Rutland Boughton, said "I on purpose did not call the Pilgrim "Christian" because I wanted the idea to be more universal and apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life, whether he is Xrian, Jew, Buddhist, Shintoist, or 5th Day Adventist. As regards the cathedral---it is, to my mind, essentially a *stage* piece and I said I would not allow it in a hall or church till it was fully established on the stage."

The Pilgrim's Progress was dropped from Covent Garden's repertoire after the 1951-52 season. It had one subsequent performance at Leeds on July 12, 1951. Productions have been rare since. The misunderstanding of the nature of his opera wounded Vaughan Williams, and he wrote to Ursula Wood (who would later become his second wife), "They don't like it, and they won't like it, and perhaps they never will like it, because it hasn't got a love story or any big duets and it's not like the operas they are used to; but it's the sort of opera I wanted to write, and there it is."

Dear Readers,

Our discussion of *The Pilgrim's Progress* will continue in our next issue of *The Sacred in Opera*.

We would greatly appreciate your input or any production photographs that you have regarding this work. Please e-mail submissions to Ruth Dobson at

rdobson@uoregon.edu

The Sacred in Opera

Committee Members:

Ruth Dobson (Chair)

John Pfautz

Carl Gerbrandt

Kurt-Alexander Zeller

Linda Snyder

The Sacred in Opera is a project of the National Opera Association.

For more information, please visit us online at http://www.noa.org/initiatives/sio_home.html

Layout by Daniel S. Hammond