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## Against Representation: Ralph Vaughan Williams and the Erotics of Art

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more. . . . In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

—Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

ALTHOUGH THE INDEX TO ALEX ROSS'S *THE REST IS NOISE* includes a few references to Ralph Vaughan Williams, there is in fact no account of this composer in Ross's review of twentieth-century Western music, and in the text of the book itself Vaughan Williams is only a name mentioned in passing. On the other hand, Ross's treatment of Aaron Copland is extensive. Moreover, there is a good deal of cheerleading by Ross for Webern, Berg, and Schönberg, enough to induce me to buy a copy of James Levine's Berlin Philharmonic collection of their orchestral pieces, a CD that Ross recommends but that I seem never to have a *desire* to listen to. This is a set of circumstances that says more than meets the eye—and *desire* is at the heart of it: not only the aesthetic desire of music listeners that drives their response but the motivational desire of Vaughan Williams that expressed his compositions.

Despite all of his pages touting Copland, Ross fails to face the fact that the living repertoire of Copland's works is minuscule. How many times can one listen to *Appalachian Spring*, for all its excellences? When the infrequency of their performance is taken into account, Copland's early experimental and atonal compositions (however much their weight) might just as well not exist, and his other ballet music, however much fun, is rarely performed and, at best, can only be regarded as lightweight.

Vaughan Williams is another story altogether. And a good deal of that story is enriched by Oxford's publication of *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895–1958*, an elegant volume, well edited, annotated, and introduced by Hugh Cobbe.<sup>1</sup> With the help of Ursula Vaughan Williams, Ralph's second wife (who died at 96 in October 2007, a month after Cobbe's book was completed), about 3,300 letters had been collected, of which 757 were selected for this volume. A foreword by

<sup>1</sup> LETTERS OF RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS 1895–1958, ed. by *Hugh Cobbe*. Oxford University Press. \$190.00.

VW's most assiduous expert, Michael Kennedy, tells us, "In Vaughan Williams' letters you will not find the personal confessions and the insights into creative processes that illuminate Elgar's correspondence. He refused to discuss his music with anyone except his very closest friends." As discouraging as this might at first appear, it turns out that these letters add up to a powerful portrait of a great composer and man, eminently worth reading. Moreover, the letters in fact *do* deal mainly with his music, but from the outside, the world of performance, of newspaper reviews, of daily life, of relations between the composer and his friends as well as both his wives, Adeline Fisher for fifty-four years and Ursula Wood for the last five. So a good deal is learned about the musical milieu of VW and his times, even while parts and wholes of some of these letters have appeared in earlier books and articles.<sup>2</sup>

After several centuries of famine in English music, Ralph ("Rafe") Vaughan Williams, born in Gloucestershire in 1872 and buried (as ashes) in Westminster Abbey in 1958, was a fully appreciated feast in the U.K. during his lifetime. He vied perhaps with Elgar as the first such superstar since Henry Purcell, who died in 1695 at less than half of VW's age. Today, available CDs of VW's music exceed in number even those of Copland. Admittedly, compared to limited performance in the U.S., in the U.K. the airwaves and concert halls were saturated with VW's music during his lifetime and ever since. Here in America, in the forties, fifties, and sixties, his music was often performed by luminaries such as Mitropoulos and Bernstein, and even Leopold Stokowski could claim a first with his recording of the Sixth Symphony in the early days of LPs. Today, you are more likely to hear VW on classical music radio stations in the U.S. than in the concert hall. But the reason for this is not far to seek.

Vaughan Williams' early years were distinctively English, as might befit someone who was closely related to the famed Wedgwood and Darwin families (Charles was his great uncle). After music school and Cambridge, VW spent large blocks of time roaming the U.K. countryside for folk songs from the unlettered who could still sing or say the texts of traditional indigenous music. Folk songs became the foundation of almost everything he did in the earlier years, from printed collections and composer-scored versions to original compositions

<sup>2</sup> To eliminate multiple footnotes, I give all the sources and resources here at once. Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London, 1964). This massive volume of 776 pages, consists of 393 pages that are a narrative account of the music with ancillary biographical information followed by close to 400 pages of a densely annotated list of VW's works. When republished by Oxford University Press in later editions, the narrative and the list were separated into two volumes, the list now entitled *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*. The 1964 volume is a hard to find and expensive rarity. Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, (London, 1964) and several subsequent paperback editions. Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (London, 2000). *Vaughan Williams on Music*, ed. by David Manning (New York, 2008). *Vaughan Williams: The Collector's Edition*, 30 CDs boxed, EMI Classics, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams writes, "Ralph's name was pronounced Rafe, any other pronunciation used to infuriate him."

based upon them (everyones knows his version of “Greensleeves”) and then as themes in various of his later works. They fueled his obsessive desire to resurrect an unmistakably English music minimally beholden to the nineteenth-century Viennese tradition of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and the Romantics that dominated Western music almost everywhere. In a letter to a German musical acquaintance, VW writes, “Do not force a ‘Little Austria’ on England . . . There is a tendency, clearly, among English people to take it that ‘Schmidt’ is musical—while Smith is *ipso facto* unmusical.” And in a long letter of advice to an aspiring musical son of an English friend, he remarks that “creative work must grow out of its native soil.” In “Introduction to English Music” (1931), he wrote, “In every nation except ours the power of nationalism in art is recognized. It is this very advocacy of a colourless cosmopolitanism which makes one occasionally despair of England as a musical nation. . . . The great composer of the twentieth century is yet to come. By all the historic precedents he should be born in 1985 just as John [*sic*] Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 . . . . The artistic surroundings into which Bach was born were distinctly ‘parochial.’” A good thing, he felt.

Add to this nativism Vaughan Williams’ dislike of the “modern” music of some of his contemporaries, such as Stravinsky, and his distaste altogether for the atonalists and serialists. “I find more & more that modern music means nothing to me,” he writes in 1940; and in 1952, after attending Berg’s *Wozzeck*, he reports (ironically, according to Michael Kennedy) that though he was interested in the staging he didn’t bother to listen to the music, “which perhaps is the best way to listen to it.” Thus it is not implausible to infer that the combination of nativism and anti-modernism might have been responsible for his being written off by America’s avant-garde academics and taste-setters who bullied our musical sensibilities for almost a century despite the antipathies of the musical public to serialism. Moreover, VW’s life (despite his radical stances) offered little of the political intrigue or cold war provocations that the lives of composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev served up in bleeding hunks to only too receptive musical historians. Or ethnicity, flirtations with Soviet-style communism, and sexual identity in the case of Copland.

Nonetheless, Ursula’s biography (and many exchanges in the letters) reports, “The acute conscience he inherited from both the Darwin and the Wedgwood families nagged: he consulted his friends and came to the conclusion that he should go to France [to develop his musical style],” which resulted in a long relationship with Ravel, from whom he took lessons in Paris for several months in 1907. The fruits of this can be seen in the lush orchestration of some of his works, most notably in the 1921 orchestral rewrite of *On Wenlock Edge*, a very Francofied augmentation of the splendid 1909 song cycle using some of Housman’s Shropshire poems, originally set for small chamber group and tenor but further enriched into a minor orchestral masterpiece.

Beyond the Englishness, consider his psychological dexterity: VW

started out as a left-wing atheist socialist who disbelieved in all the Church of England doctrines, gradually softening only slightly into agnosticism while hardening toward Soviet style communism (but never hardening toward Labour, liberals, and socialism), even as his musical output was in large measure based on traditionally conservative liturgical texts and religious conceits. On the one hand, in 1931 he writes to a dean of Liverpool Cathedral in regard to turning down a potential honorary doctorate, "I have no real connection with anything ecclesiastical & no longer count myself a member of the Church of England. . . . I drifted into hymns more or less by accident (chiefly to prevent someone else doing it & making a mess of it)." But on the other hand, Ursula writes, "Although a declared agnostic, he was able, all through his life, to set to music words in the accepted terms of Christian revelation as if they meant to him what they must have meant to George Herbert or to Bunyan." Fusion points of these disparities are visible in VW's attachment to seventeenth-century Tudor music, to the tonal modes and religious ambience of that period, and to his use and appropriation of the poetry of Walt Whitman as texts for some of his most powerful vocal compositions.

This ecclesiastical strain, however, can be misleading. VW twisted and tweaked the traditional liturgies to serve his secular but mystical purposes, into which the quasi-religious and ambiguous Whitman fit too well. Although he did make some fairly straightforward use of religious texts, such as several George Herbert poems for *Five Mystical Songs*, his cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem* is not a spinoff of the Latin Mass but a potpourri of Whitman, the Bible, and other texts to produce a very powerful peace cantata; his *Magnificat* does not use the familiar Latin text but instead a translated revision that treats of an ecstatic Mary awaiting her lover, using words from the King James Bible. His *Flos Campi*, while using text from the Song of Solomon, is another ecstatic love paean. His *Sancta Civitas* is an over-the-top amalgam of the Book of Revelation, Taverner's Bible, and Plato. As Michael Kennedy puts it in his notes to the EMI recording, that curious combination "is a clue to Vaughan Williams' own beliefs, once aptly, if paradoxically, summarized as 'Christian agnosticism.'" His Mass in G Minor, however, uses the standard Latin text for a very Tudor-influenced liturgical composition. "There is no reason," he wrote, "why an atheist could not write a good Mass." Exemplifying his own aesthetic creed, he writes, "May we take it that the object of all art is to obtain a partial revelation of that which is beyond human senses and human faculties—of that in fact which is spiritual? . . . The human, visible, audible and intelligible media which artists (of all kinds) use, are symbols not of other visible and audible things but of what lies beyond sense and knowledge." And as someone who conducted Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* annually for thirty-five years, not to mention the *St. John Passion* and many of the cantatas, for him Bach represented everything to which music could aspire.

One can readily see how Walt Whitman fits into all of this to become

VW's favorite poet and provider of texts, outside of the King James Bible. So, for example, his choral work *Toward the Unknown Region* uses Whitman's "Darest thou now, O soul, / Walk out with me toward the unknown region / Where neither ground is for feet nor any path to follow," moving on to "Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bound bounding us." And VW's first, *A Sea Symphony*, uses Whitman to limn its infinite expanses: "Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail." But for the moment I must leave ecstasy and mysticism—the most important keys to his work—in order to deal with VW's major compositions, the nine symphonies that form the bedrock of his accomplishments and acclaim. Their trajectory tells us much about him as artist and human being.

Although composers after Beethoven have tended to be skittish about dying before (or right after) their ninth symphony, Mahler, Bruckner (a slightly complicated case), and Vaughan Williams all made it to the finish gate in time, though VW's Ninth Symphony was first performed only four months before his death in August 1958. But the real wonder is that *A Sea Symphony*, his first, was completed as late as 1909, when VW was already thirty-seven. At that age, both Mozart and Schubert had not only produced their complete *opera omnia*—but were already dead! This sometimes too overwhelming oratorio for chorus and soloists begins right in your face with total forces shouting "Behold, the sea itself" from Whitman. Its prophetic, orgiastic, ecstatic style is in sharp contrast with the curiously pastoral reputation VW somehow picked up despite many works of great violence. Next came the more representative second symphony better known as *A London Symphony*, with four movements alternately lyric, folk, and urban, starting and ending with the sounds of Big Ben as time elapses over the work's course, gripping and inspired from start to finish. With the so-called *A Pastoral Symphony* of 1922, his third, we begin to reach the heart of VW's aesthetic. In a 2008 fiftieth anniversary article in the *New York Times* of July 13<sup>th</sup>, Steve Smith provided an excellent overview both tonic and reconstructive, quoting some of the strange and inaccurate remarks made over the years about this work and others: "a cow staring over a fence" or, worse from Aaron Copland, "cow-pat music." How wrong and self-serving these remarks have turned out to be. The *Pastoral* is a crux in the VW canon, written after his volunteer service during the First World War in the Royal Army Medical Corps as a wagon orderly, where his bad feet would not be a liability. Older at forty-five and more educated than most of his military peers, he wrote to his best friend Gustav Holst that it was his job to "go up the line every night to bring back wounded & sick in a motor ambulance." And Hugh Cobbe alludes to VW's experience of "the full horror of the Western Front."

This third symphony provides an ideal moment in which to deal with the whole question of representation in VW's art and music, one of the ongoing major subjects of his writings both private and public as well as the foundation of his musical aesthetic.

VW's naming of this symphony as "Pastoral" was surely a curious misnomer. There's not much that's pastoral about it—one lively movement, three very slow movements, the last of these a yearning song by soprano in the wordless style that he liked so much. Wordlessness in VW intimates that words can't express the soul, which is preverbal and filled with longing, remorse, and ecstasy. He hated programs, explanations of meaning in his works, discursive reductions of the music to feel-good commonplaces. Michael Kennedy, in his foreword to Cobbe's edition of the letters, quotes VW explicitly: "Of course, music has a meaning but I think that can only be expressed in terms of music. I know that some people try to narrow the effect of music to something visual or verbal. To my mind, when they do so they make a horrible mess of it." In fact, to Kennedy VW wrote that "to attach 'meanings' to music is a mistake. Each person may attach their own meaning if they like, but it does not follow that their meaning will have the same meaning to anybody else—music is too universal for that." To another friend he wrote, "I do not like to be pinned down to 'meaning' anything in particular, like Bernard Shaw's ridiculous degradation of Wagner's 'Ring' into political propaganda." He disliked Shaw's didacticism altogether. "After all," he wrote to yet another friend, "musical appreciation is inexplicable in words," and he thanks the anthropologist Charles Myers for writing that "song (at all events) came through excited speech." Excited speech, like dance, which he thought aboriginally profound, is the autonomic outpouring of the body's unreflective consciousness, the real authentic thing before reduction to conventions by the transient discourses of culture.

In his 1938 remarks on *A Pastoral Symphony*, years after his war service in France but decades before they were to be married, VW wrote to Ursula Wood, "I'm glad you liked the symph. I did rather myself after many years. It is really war time music—a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night in the ambulance wagon at Ecoiv[r]es & we went up a steep hill & there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset—its not really Lambkins frisking at all as most people take for granted." So from a rare moment of self-revelation, we learn (hardly to the surprise of anyone tuned in) that the strange *Pastoral Symphony* is not about cow plop and not even "about" war, though it came out of the war. The military trumpet solo in the second movement is, yes, a recollection of what he actually heard at the front, but it is really the music of indelible traces of affective life inscribed in the neurons, prior to "rational" discourse, as an emotional code not yet cracked by the neurosciences. Had he named it the *Elegiac Symphony* there would at least have been a show of plausibility for war as aesthetic subtext—but he did not choose to do even that much in the way of a program.

The *Pastoral Symphony*, though well received after its first performances, is difficult emotionally and formally. Many hearings are needed to "get it." But it may be VW's most "spiritual" work, undeniably haunt-

ing and almost great. Despite the wordless soprano in the last movement, however, things are not pulled together there with sufficient conviction to make a concentrated impact after the ambiguities of the first three movements awaiting resolution. Disappointingly, it seems to wander off aimlessly amidst scattered gestures that dissipate any sense of an aesthetic whole, leaving the affect of the listener unresolved. But the work that followed, the Symphony No. 4 in F Minor from 1934 is, to put it boldly, one of the great masterpieces of twentieth-century music, an honor it shares with the Sixth. Coming as it does between the low-keyed, somewhat private Third and the more public, gentle, and structurally integrated Fifth, the Fourth is a shocker whose effect has not lessened with time. Violent and overwhelming, harsh and relentless except for its slow movement, it makes use of one of VW's favorite devices, a brief repeated motif, here a *Dies Irae* clone of four notes pounded away. If a secret aim of VW's aesthetic (maybe secret also to him) is to dissolve the fibers of "rational" consciousness clouded by discourse and meaning, this work and particularly its final fifteen seconds realize that aim with a sequence of superfast poundings, followed by a nanosecond pause (one of the most pregnant silences I know), and then one final immense thump that is almost assured to leave the shocked listener in tears. The Fourth Symphony was a sitting duck for the programmatic critics who immediately dubbed it—and later the Sixth Symphony as well—a "war symphony," purported to "represent" the destruction and horror of WWI. VW's letter to Robert Longman about it, undated but estimated as December 1937, is worth quoting at length:

I wrote it not as a definite picture of anything external e.g. the state of Europe—but simply because it occurred to me like this—I can't explain why—I don't think that sitting down & thinking about great things ever produces a great work of art (at least I hope not—because I never do so—& when you state your belief in me, dear Bobby, I feel the completest of frauds)—a thing just comes—or it doesn't—usually doesn't—and I always live in hope, as all writers must, that one day I shall 'ring the bell'—in younger days when one thought one was going to do the *real thing* each time & each time discovered one hadn't done it, one said hopefully 'next time'—but when one touches on 65 one begins to wonder.

Hugh Cobbe remarks that the Fifth Symphony "is a point of repose between the two fiercer symphonies" and "perhaps testimony to the role which Ursula was now playing in his life" as Adeline's infirmities and confinement to a wheelchair became more and more restrictive for both of them.

During the war years from 1939 to 1945, VW was as involved as an aging citizen could possibly be at such a time, but when the war was over and he produced his Sixth Symphony, again violent but this time jazzy, bluesy, syncopated, with the use of an ominous saxophone, he wrote to

a friend, "I see in the 'Times' that the notice of my Symphony calls it 'the War Symphony.' I dislike that implied connection very much." The astonishing final movement, which doesn't rise much above a pianissimo for strings and winds, only served to encourage the notion that it was a death lament for the losses from the war. Even worse, a horrible blunder in 2008 by the English filmmaker Tony Palmer mars an otherwise admirable documentary, *O Thou Transcendent* (from Whitman), on the life and music of VW. Enriched with stills, film clips, sound recordings, and interviews with just about all the principals in the VW story, including the master himself (and now available on DVD), it shows graphic scenes of slaughter from films and photos of the two world wars as VW's music plays in the background. Carried on for much too long (even five seconds would have been excessive, because unwarranted) this misstep blights an otherwise laudable effort with scenes that Palmer's honoree would probably have found reductive and falsely representational.

The Seventh Symphony, derived from music for the film *Scott of the Antarctic* and known as *Sinfonia Antartica* (using the Italian spelling), is a pastiche that comes off more as a suite than a symphony, yet its wordless soprano is again strangely affecting. The delightful Eighth Symphony, composed from 1953 to 1956, was made even more so by VW's last-minute decision to add gongs and a panoply of Asian-sounding percussion instruments (that he sometimes jokingly characterized as "spiels," as in glockenspiel), an offshoot of a performance of *Turandot* that he attended with Ursula. And finally, the powerful Ninth Symphony of 1956–58, with its rare flugelhorn, is sometimes dark, always mature, but displaying a vitality that few 85-year-olds could match. Growing deaf and with failing eyesight, he had hardly lost the inventive powers that made him great.

I have failed, of course, to mention many notable works from VW's vast *oeuvre*—*The Lark Ascending*, the oboe concerto, the various versions of the *Serenade to Music*, the violent piano concerto that Harriet Cohen is said to have been almost unable to play, leading the composer to produce a version for two pianos, *Job*, *A Masque for Dancing*, two string quartets, and many, many songs. As if this were not enough for a lifetime, there were also half a dozen operas, the major one, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which occupied him for much of his life, based on Bunyan's allegory, so melodic, so ecstatic, that I wonder why it is not produced by opera houses outside of the U.K.

But what attentive readers will *really* want to know is how I could have failed to say even a single word about the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis, a towering fifteen-minute masterpiece from 1910, written before all his major works, a veritable seed of genius from which everything produced by VW's creativity subsequently appears to spring. Scored for double string orchestra and string quartet, this Tudor-inspired work opens almost immediately with the "theme," a psalm tune that Tallis wrote in 1567, here announced by pizzicato strings. Once it



has been fully enunciated, there is no really new thematic content. The result is perhaps the most “organic” piece of music I know: emergent interdependent parts functioning as an aesthetic whole, like a living body. The theme is embroidered, varied, hushed, alternated between full orchestra and quartet, and swelled into ecstasy, as if it emanated from the organs of the body, its juices and secretions, its pumpings and throbbings, its electrochemical neural firings. The music is a veritable polygraph of the human body/brain as it metabolizes second by second, transducing itself not into spidery squiggles on graph paper or a computer screen but into a sonic-mirror of what it feels like to be alive in human sentience and consciousness. Like digestion, orgasm, exhaustion, exhilaration, inebriation, it neither says nor “means” anything. To “interpret” what it “means” is not to be paying attention, to reduce it to discursive blather, to the conventions of cultural hermeneutics of the moment, like reading a sex manual while having sex. It is a printout of the affective program driving *Homo sapiens*. The only other music I can think of bearing any resemblance to the Tallis *Fantasia* is Strauss’s overwhelming *Metamorphosen* of 1945, twenty-seven minutes of harrowing strings worrying one single thematic complex. But whereas the Strauss piece is an emotional downer to leave you in tears if you are listening carefully (and not because it’s “sad”), the Tallis *Fantasia* is orgasmic, ecstatic, making you feel alive with an intensity otherwise unavailable from mundane daily life.

From distant prehistoric times of ritual and chant (often coupled with drugs) to the present’s teeming aesthetic possibilities, the most overpowering music has been doing just that: speaking to the pre-rational experience of the body of large-brained creatures like us, tinkering with our synapses. Right now, books and articles are pouring out on what music “really” is, not harps strummed by bodiless spooks in heaven (what are they using for hands, these days?), but something in the particular configuration of matter that is us. Daniel Levitin, Ellen Dissanayake, Stephen Mithen, and many others are trying to account for the effects of certain pitches, intervals, harmonies, progressions, timbres, to shed light on what the consciousness-altering, druglike effect of music *really* consists of and why.

I have used the word “ecstatic” in this overview more times than ever before in writing about the arts. “Ecstatic” is the heart of the matter. Plato thought it was bad, that the ecstatic poet had literally lost his rational mind—and (Zeus forbid!) *that* would be dangerous. Orgasm is the template. Sex, sports, music, and drugs are its chief media. But maybe you have to lose that “mind” to experience the powers that are prior to the merely discursive.

How could all of this possibly apply to Ralph Vaughan Williams? What are we to make of his multiple use of Walt Whitman, of erotic and apocalyptic biblical texts, of his own eros-skewed liturgies, of chanting high-pitched wordless voices and a string-style that makes the hairs on our bodies stand up, as it does so pre-eminently in the *Tallis*? What

about all those statements against meaning and against interpretation? (“I wonder,” he writes in a letter of 1933, “if we pay too much attention to peoples [*sic*] descriptions of their reactions to music. After all, I suppose music appreciation is inexplicable in words. . . .”) And what about this passage from a 1935 letter to Herbert Howells, his contemporary, about the death of Howells’ son at nine? “I don’t think it is really any comfort . . . but I cannot help believing that a life once begun can never really stop—though it has stopped for us and that there may, after all, be a real joining up some day.” What can this conventional religiosity mean from an atheist addicted to Whitman, the “unknown territory,” and the infinite horizons of the sea, a non-believer strikingly free of “spiritual” moonshine even as he makes use of the classic texts?

Among other things, VW was very susceptible to the charms of women. As faithfully devoted to two wives as he was, his sexual antennae were never inoperative. One of the most striking phenomena of these 700-plus letters are the two earliest to Ursula Wood in 1937 and 1938. As a young poet forty years his junior, she had written him about a possible scenario for a ballet using his music. His reply begins, “Dear Madam.” Less than a year later, she is “Bellissima Donna senza Misericordia.” After that it’s “My dear,” salutations from a mostly formal letter writer who takes years to break through the Victorian last-name convention between men and the politesse to women. With hindsight, one reads these letters as a force field of attraction between Ursula and Ralph a decade and a half before their marriage, which was a surprise to nobody.

The erotic Whitman and biblical texts, the notable sensitivity to female sexuality, the animosity toward reduction of the raptures of music to dry-as-dust discursivity, and a visionary hope for future escape from the boundaries of mundane daily life—what can all this be but a yearning for permanent ecstasy, to be experienced face to face after years through a glass darkly?

But permanent ecstasy is an oxymoron, like strumming angels. No default daily life could be anything but a relatively deadened routine except when it is exploded by “moments of being” produced by arts, sports, sex, and drugs. Most ironically, the unattainable cosmic visions of permanent ecstasy that lurk behind everything VW ever composed were in fact concretely realized over and over again by his own marvelous compositions, now made infinitely repeatable by Western civilization’s perfection of musical transcription to paper and to electronic sound media—as close as we can get to immortality’s strumming harps—even though he confessed he hadn’t a clue as to where it all came from.

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