

Total performance time: approximately 125', including an interval of 20 minutes

BBC Concert Orchestra

[BBC Concert Orchestra](#)

Nathaniel Anderson-Frank violin

Barry Wordsworth conductor

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

Overture to *The Wasps* (1909) 10'

The Lark Ascending (1914) 15'

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Soirées musicales, Op.9 (1937) 11'

- i March*
- ii Canzonetta*
- iii Tirolese*
- iv Bolero*
- v Tarantella*

William Walton (1902–1983)

Crown Imperial: 'Coronation March'
(1937) 6'

Arthur Bliss (1891–1975)

Checkmate (1937) 53'

- i Prologue—The Players*
- ii Dances of the Red Pawns*
- iii Dance of the Four Knights*
- iv Entry of the Black Queen*
- v The Red Knight's Mazurka*
- vi Ceremony of the Red Bishops*
- vii Entry of the Red Castles*
- viii Entry of the Red King and Queen*
- ix The Attack*
- x The Duel*
- xi The Black Queen Dances*
- xii Finale—Checkmate*

INTERVAL

All of the music in this evening's concert was composed between 1909 and 1937 – in fact 1937 saw the premieres of *Soirées musicales*, *Crown Imperial* and *Checkmate*. We begin with the oldest music – the overture from the incidental music that Ralph Vaughan Williams composed for a Cambridge University production of the Aristophanes comedy **The Wasps** in 1909. The 'wasps' of the title are, in fact, not insects but a group of old men – Athenian jurors – who form the 'chorus' of the play and who are on the receiving end of a great deal of Aristophenian satirical humour. We hear them buzzing about their business at the very beginning of the overture, which then goes on to include a number of memorable melodies, sparkingly lively and, at the heart of the overture, gently lyrical. Towards the end the lyrical and the sparkling are combined in a cunning piece of counterpoint that would certainly have pleased Vaughan Williams's old Cambridge teacher Charles Wood, who conducted the first performance.

Five years after he completed *The Wasps* Vaughan Williams composed what, nowadays, is his most popular piece **The Lark Ascending**. It consistently tops polls of favourite works and has been recorded by leading violinists from both sides of the Atlantic. There is, however, a good deal more to it than might be immediately obvious. Firstly its rhapsodic nature, with solo violin writing that often omits bar-lines, was very unusual for its time, especially in Britain. A critic who attended the 1921 first performance of the orchestral version (originally it was for violin and piano) wrote that 'Violin cadenzas are apt to have a family likeness but these jubinations will hardly remind anybody of anything else. It is pure carolling'. Vaughan Williams took his title from an 1881 poem by George Meredith, a writer whose work he particularly admired. He wrote out 12 lines from the poem at the top of the score:

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.

For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup
And he the wine which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes.

Till lost on his aerial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

And the music is a perfect reflection of those words. Gentle chords from the orchestra set the mood and the soloist 'rises and begins to sound' in an opening solo cadenza. This leads into a gently rocking melody, the soloist singing out over the orchestral landscape. The melodies are undoubtedly inspired by English folksong but are completely original (another 'modern' idea). There is a central quicker section with another folk-like melody but the slower music returns, ending with a final ecstatic cadenza taking

the soloist high into the stratosphere 'lost on his aerial wings'. Vaughan Williams composed the music just before World War I, but the first performance had to wait until the war was over. Is it just hindsight that imbues the music with a sense of nostalgia and loss? Violinist James Ehnes has written that 'It's a piece that captures an atmosphere that is very specific but very difficult to define. That's ultimately why music exists: to capture emotions that other artforms can't express. If we could write it, we wouldn't need the music.'

Benjamin Britten spent part of the 1930s working for the GPO Film Unit, writing music for its short but ground-breaking information documentaries. For one of them, *The Tocher* (inspired by a Scottish folk-tale but ending as an advert for the Post Office Savings Bank!) Britten arranged some tunes taken from a collection of pieces by Rossini called **Soirées musicales**. This was published in 1935 as a three-movement *Rossini Suite* and over the next couple of years Britten added two more sections and borrowed Rossini's title. A perky March kicks things off, followed by a lyrical Canzonetta, a Tirolese whose melody includes a little mountain yodel, a gentle Bolero complete with castanets and finally a high-speed Sicilian Tarantella. Britten's orchestration is typically witty, colourful and full of fun.

When it came to commissioning a march for the 1937 coronation of King George VI the BBC, slightly riskily, turned to the 35-year-old William Walton. He was fresh from the successes of his oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast* and 1st Symphony and he had a reputation of being somewhat 'avant-garde' for the time (how things change!). What the corporation really wanted was an Elgarian 'Pomp and Circumstance' march but, rather inconveniently, Elgar had died three years previously. Walton, however, did exactly what was required and composed a brilliant, memorable, exciting piece of, in the very best sense of the word, 'occasional' music.

Crown Imperial (the title derived from a poem by William Dunbar) was so successful that it was repeated at the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, Walton also writing a new march (*Orb and Sceptre*) for the ceremony. More recently it was heard at Prince William and Catherine Middleton's wedding in 2011. You will be humming the tunes during the interval!

Sir Arthur Bliss, 11 years older than Walton, initially shared with him a love of what at the time was regarded as outrageous modernism ('... a reputation as a tearaway' wrote *The Times* in 1922). But by the mid 1930s that had softened and it was a more 'traditional' Bliss who composed his first ballet-score, **Checkmate**, to his own scenario, in one act and lasting about 50 minutes. It was premiered by the Vic-Wells Ballet in Paris in June 1937, the first British performance, at the Sadler's Wells theatre, following in September. The original cast included Frederic Ashton, Robert Helpman and Margot Fonteyn and the choreography was by Ninette de Valois. The story takes place on a chessboard with the pieces becoming animated and taking on human personalities. There is an opening Prologue in which we see two chess players, one

representing love and the other representing death.
Death takes the black pieces and love the red.

The opening music is dark and anticipatory. The ballet proper begins as the pieces assemble for the game. First the Red Pawns arrive (jolly woodwind). The 'Dance of the Four Knights' begins with the Red Knights strutting onto the stage, followed by the Black Knights. After some preliminary marking out of territory the Black Knights kneel at the entry of their overlord, the Black Queen – the most evil piece on the board (a sinuous clarinet melody telling us that she's sexy as well as bad). She captivates the red pieces and the Red Knight in particular. He's fallen in love with her and dances a mazurka (confident 3-in-a-bar music with the occasional catchy syncopation). This leads straight into the quiet chorale-like opening of the Ceremony of the Red Bishops. They bless the proceedings and are followed by the entry of the Red Castles (urgent quick music). Then we hear the fanfares as the Red King and Queen arrive. The Red King is represented by a slow gentle theme heard first on the horn – he's an old man and needs support and help. The Red Pawns move into place and the game begins.

The Attack starts with a soaring melody and lively bubbling accompaniment. There is plenty of action (six minutes or so of music – fast and slow), culminating in the Black Queen having the Red King in 'check'. After a sinister drum-roll there follows a duel between the Red Knight and the Black Queen. He has her at his mercy – but, as heavy chords sound, he drops his sword. He can't kill her, he still loves her. She takes advantage of the situation, stabs him and, to mournful woodwind solos, his body is carried offstage. The Black Queen is triumphant and dances a tango that combines catchy rhythms with hints of her true character. She's taunting the poor Red King. We have reached the Finale as the Red King tries to find an escape route and each time his hopes are raised (in slow music with woodwind solos) the black pieces cut off his exit (short violent outbursts in brass and timpani). Then the denouement begins. The Red King is chased and surrounded. He makes it to his throne and briefly recalls how things might have been. But the Black Queen has the final triumph, appearing behind him and stabbing him in the back. Checkmate!

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