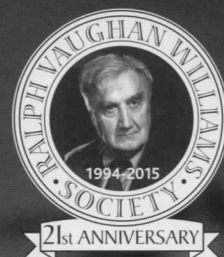


RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS SOCIETY JOURNAL

WIDENING THE KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF THE MUSIC OF RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS



MICHAËL KENNEDY C.B.E. 1926-2014

Arthur Foxton Ferguson: A Vaughan Williams Singer and Collaborator

Marcus DeLoach

"Vagabondage does not mean to me simply long hair and filth. It means being one's self. Every true vagabond is himself. It is of the greatest importance to be one's self."

These words were spoken in March 1913 by Arthur Foxton Ferguson (1866-1920) at Dallas High School in Texas where the English baritone presented a two-hour lecture recital entitled "Vagabondia, or Songs of the Open Road." Just one day earlier, through the Standard Club of Dallas, he had lectured to an audience of almost two hundred women in the dance hall of the Adolphus Hotel. There he focused on the universal nature of folk song, stressing: "These songs are not England's any more than they are yours." As Foxton Ferguson toured Texas, Ralph Vaughan Williams was laboring in London to complete the first version of *A London Symphony* (1913). Although their careers appeared to be unconnected in 1913, a decade earlier the two had been regular collaborators whose creative interaction resulted in a small but unique body of music.



Arthur Foxton Ferguson c. 1913

Foxton Ferguson's appearances in Texas came in the middle of an extensive lecture-recital tour of the United States – one of five he made in the years leading up to the Great War. The tours included such venues as Harvard University, Johns Hopkins, New York's Mendelssohn Hall, and The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, where he presented a four-part lecture series on "English Folk Songs and Folk Lore" in 1914. He once told *The New York Times* "What impressed me more than anything else in America is, first, the readiness of all to listen to anything that has promise in it, novelty being no bar; and, secondly and above all, there is a genuine belief in the value of education, not merely as an asset, but as a thing to be followed for its own sake. The only thing America will not stand is dullness."

Known for his wit, exuberance, and pithiness onstage, Foxton Ferguson gave lecture recitals in England, the United States and, on occasion, Germany throughout most of his professional life. Often appearing through colleges, libraries, and women's societies, he was a beloved persona with a vast knowledge and strong robust singing voice.

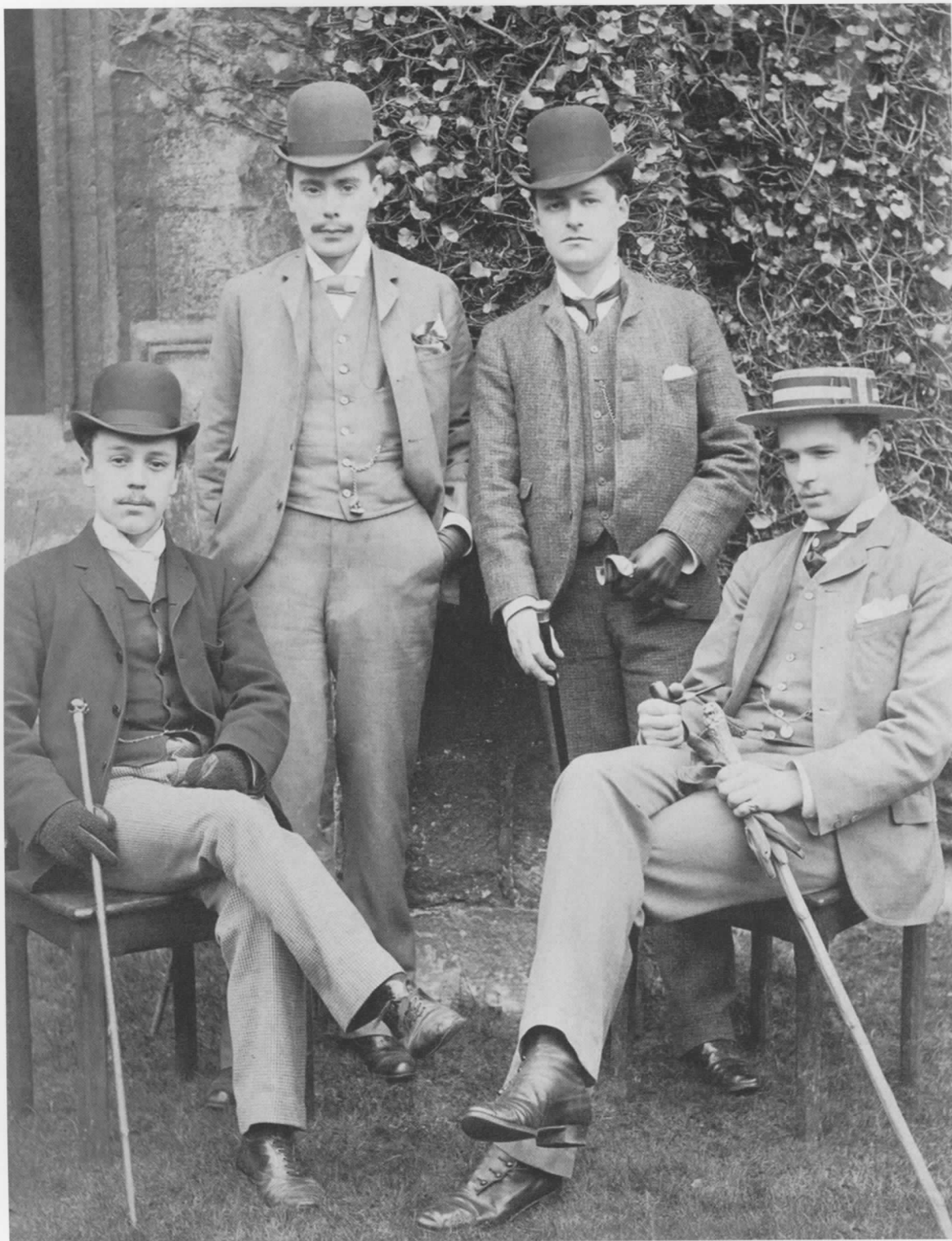
Foxton Ferguson began his studies in 1885 at New College,

Oxford but moved on to Magdalen in 1887, where he received an academic clerkship. During his days at Oxford and in the ensuing years, he laid the foundations of his musical and professional life. In addition to his choral duties he was a member of the Magdalen "Vagabonds" under the baton of John Varley Roberts, a member of John Henry Mee's Oxford University Musical Union, and sang part-songs in a male vocal quartet. After graduating with his B.A. in 1890, he traveled to Germany for additional musical training. It is known that he studied in Leipzig with a teacher likely affiliated with the *Königliches Konservatorium der Musik zu Leipzig*, although Foxton Ferguson was not officially enrolled there.

After Leipzig, Foxton Ferguson went on to Frankfurt where he engaged in study with the famous German baritone Julius Stockhausen at the teacher's own school of music. Stockhausen taught an Italianate singing technique he learned while training with the famous vocal pedagogue

Manuel García II. That training, along with the German master's own expertise in the art of the Lied, helped hone Foxton Ferguson's singing, art, and command of the German language. The latter was further developed with Susanne Delphine Alexandrine Engel (1868-1961), a concert pianist who had studied at the Hamburg Konservatorium, and whom he married in 1897. Foxton Ferguson's skill and proficiency with German became so advanced that he created translations of several German carols, including Charles Macpherson's "The Shepherds' Cradle Song" (based on Karl Leuner's "Des Hirten Wiegenlied") and Colin Taylor's "A Christmas Song" in 1912. Foxton Ferguson also produced an internationally successful translation of Gottfried Jolsdorf Ottfried's book *Schubert Fantasies* in 1914, which became one of his most enduring creative accomplishments.

It is likely that Foxton Ferguson and Vaughan Williams first met in the circles of Lucy Broadwood's English Folk-Song Society, and their relationship presumably blossomed around a mutual appreciation of both folk song and German art music. It is



Arthur Foxton Ferguson (second from the left) in
a male vocal quartet in 1897 (possibly the Magdalen "Vagabonds")

therefore not surprising that Vaughan Williams felt comfortable having Foxton Ferguson translate three German folk song texts for musical arrangement as duets: "Adieu," "Think of Me," and "Cousin Michael" (1903). The singer's craft and skill in converting German into practical and attractive English served Vaughan Williams well, whose own German had grown rusty after returning to England from his studies in Germany.

Foxton Ferguson's wide repertoire included Mozart and Wagner opera, a substantial body of German Lieder, and modern English art songs. His earliest documented musical collaboration with

Vaughan Williams was in January of 1903 when he sang three of the composer's folk-song arrangements. In April of that year, Foxton Ferguson premiered several of the composer's songs at a concert at Exeter including "If I Were a Queen," and two of the German folk-song duets: "Adieu" and "Cousin Michael." His duet partner for the occasion was the soprano Kathleen Wood and her sister was the accompanist. In 1904, he also sang "Boy Johnny" and the folk-song inspired "Blackmwoore by the Stour" which, although written for James Campbell McInnes (a favorite baritone of the composer), was surely a perfect vehicle for Foxton Ferguson's personality and musical intelligence.

From his earliest days, the baritone was an industrious singer who engaged in varied and extensive musical activities, and in 1901 he formed the popular "Folk-Song Quartet." The group was his answer to the professional need of a ready-made ensemble for performances of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony and the large and ever-increasing body of quartet music. The Folk-Song Quartet's personnel went through a number of changes as it developed, and the soprano position proved especially challenging to cast. For a time, the famous Austrian soprano Marie Fillunger, Eugenie Schumann's lover, held the post and the group was known as her quartet. After several permutations, Foxton Ferguson finally found a winning blend with the young soprano Beatrice [Fanny] Spencer (1877-1961).

Almost twelve years his junior, Spencer's professional career would be entwined with the baritone's for the next two decades. Of working class roots, she trained with the famed voice teacher Blanche Marchesi, another proponent of the teachings of García. A review in *The Athenaeum* of 28 March 1898 praised Spencer as a "newcomer" possessing "a pleasing light soprano voice, well cultivated." In addition to completing the Folk-Song Quartet, she also appeared regularly with Foxton Ferguson in duo concerts and folk-song lectures. Study of the primary materials suggests that Foxton Ferguson acted as an agent for the duo and greatly aided the young soprano's developing career. Together they appeared on the Broadwood Concerts and, in March 1904, gave the London premiere of Vaughan Williams' German folk-song duets. The concert included the world premiere of the third duet "Think of Me," though it had actually been published the previous October in *The Vocalist*. The composer Ernest Walker, an old friend of the baritone's from his Oxford days, accompanied the performance. Evidence suggests that Walker's "Balliol College Concerts" at Oxford may have been the setting where Foxton Ferguson first heard Spencer sing.

In December of 1903 the baritone appeared alone on Eveline Fife's Chamber Concerts series in Reading, singing songs of Schubert, Purcell, and C. S. Macpherson amongst various chamber works. He was wonderfully received and invited back to the series in 1904, when he appeared with Spencer for the premiere a new composition by Vaughan Williams. The piece, based on the poetry of Walt Whitman, was entitled *Vocal Duets*: a. "The Last Invocation" and b. "The Birds' Love Song" (the work is now known as *Two Vocal Duets* and the second movement as "The Love-song of the Birds"). Katharine Eggar, a composer and regular pianist on the series, reported in a 1920 article for *The Music Student* that it was Foxton Ferguson's idea that Vaughan Williams should provide the duets for the Reading engagement. An inscription in the composer's hand on a surviving vocal part supports her story: "For A.F.F. from R.V.W." Though his first conception of the piece was for soprano, baritone, pianoforte, and violin obbligato, Vaughan Williams added second violin, viola, and cello parts for the excellent string quartet on hand in Reading: Maurice Sons, Dorothy Blunt, Alfred Hobday, and W. E. Whitehouse. While there is no direct musical relationship, it has been generally accepted that Vaughan Williams's combination of Whitman's existential poetry with the soprano and baritone voicing in *Two Vocal Duets* served as a precursor to *A Sea Symphony* (1909), which he had been sketching in 1903.

The Whitman duets were quite experimental in nature and proved challenging for both the musicians and the Edwardian concert-

going audience. The unusual instrumentation, the free-verse American poetry, and the through-composed Wagnerian-style music were less appreciated by the audience than the simple duet "Adieu," which was also heard on the concert. The latter received high praise in the *Reading Mercury*: "a very charming setting ... sweetly tuneful and not difficult 'morceau' which should prove very popular in drawing rooms." The same reviewer raised an eyebrow at *Two Vocal Duets*, but praised the singers and said, "a better opinion could no doubt be formed on a second hearing."



Arthur Foxton Ferguson reading in a garden c. 1906

If the reception of the Whitman duets in Reading was taken as lukewarm, their reception in two subsequent London performances was outright disappointing. The London premiere on 27 November 1904 was billed as a "Special Vocal Concert" by Alfred J. Clements's South Place Sunday Popular Concerts and featured the Folk-Song Quartet. For the event, Spencer and Foxton Ferguson premiered the duets in the obbligato version with the talented Cornish violinist Mr. Spencer Dyke and the pianist Dorothy Wood. The decision to premiere the trio version on the occasion may have resulted from difficulties rehearsing and performing the quartet version in Reading. Unfortunately the press gave little attention to the duets on the South Place concert, save only a brief mention of their "introduction" and a remark on the concert's "modern spirit".

The lack of an adequate critical reception in November no doubt led to the composer's decision to include *Two Vocal Duets* again one month later on his self-generated 2 December showcase concert with Gustav Holst at Bechstein Hall (now Wigmore Hall). The singing duo reprised their parts, again in the obbligato version, but with new players: the violinist Harriet Solly and the pianist Hamilton Harty, who was regarded as "the prince of accompanists." The same concert included the premieres of Vaughan Williams's substantial cycles *Songs of Travel* and *The House of Life* and, though they were not written for her

specifically, Spencer premiered the solo songs "Claribel" and "Orpheus with his Lute."

Though less musically progressive in nature, the two grand cycles overshadowed *Two Vocal Duets* at the Bechstein Hall concert. The reaction in the press was strong but mixed, criticizing the duets' lack of clear melody and, curiously, their poor musical preparation and vocal execution. The well-known critic E. A. B. (Edward Algernon Baughan) wrote: "A couple of duets, 'The Last Invocation' and 'The Birds' Love-Song' (the poems from Whitman's Sea-drift) [*sic*] have the air of experiments, and they were not well enough performed to give one a very distinct idea of their success."

Interestingly, Georgia Pearce of the weekly socialist newspaper *The Clarion*, gave an enthusiastic response, saying: "The best of all were the duets, settings from Walt Whitman, his 'Last Invocation' and the 'Birds' Love Song.' Through both runs a most melodious violin part, with the voices sometimes in unison."

After the London performances of the *Two Vocal Duets*, collaborative activity between Vaughan Williams and Foxtan Ferguson slowed. The composer gave the premieres of *A Sea Symphony* and *Five Mystical Songs* (1911) to Campbell McInnes, whom he had met through Lucy Broadwood and who had premiered the cantata *Willow-Wood* in 1903. It's impossible to know if the negative response in the press to the duo's singing at Bechstein Hall was a view shared by the composer. Changing personnel, insufficient rehearsal, abstract musical ideas, and programmatic placement (the subtle pieces were heard directly after the six expansive songs of *The House of Life*) all may have conspired to seal the fate of *Two Vocal Duets*. Vaughan Williams, who had attended all three performances that fall, was so bothered by the critical response that he withdrew the duets from circulation. Katharine Eggar reported that the composer later confided in her that one was "perfectly awful" and the other "an unconscious crib". However, his true opinion of their worth is best revealed by the fact that he kept the manuscripts in his files for the rest of his life, perhaps planning to mine them for musical material at a later date.

Intellectual conversations on the topics of folk song, its archetypes, and musical importance were certainly a point of connection for Foxtan Ferguson and Vaughan Williams, who were both prominent members of the English Folk-Song Society. As the composer had in 1903, the baritone himself also took to the open road collecting folk song melodies. Though Foxtan Ferguson's surviving output is of a very modest scope, the tune "Southill", which he collected in 1905, was included by Vaughan Williams in his 1906 version of the *English Hymnal* to the words "Jerusalem, my happy home." While the decision to use the tune was undoubtedly a musical one, it could be construed as a conciliatory gesture by Vaughan Williams toward his colleague. Although there is no way to confirm as much, the fact does suggest the two were still in contact at the time of publication.

In subsequent years Foxtan Ferguson continued singing and lecturing with Spencer and the Folk-Song Quartet at his side. On occasion he provided pre-show lectures for Charles Manners' Moody-Manners touring opera company. The baritone was also a great proponent of women in music, and he often performed and collaborated with a significant number of pioneering female musicians, including the conductor Gwynne Kimpton, Harriet Solly (the founder of the revered Solly String Quartet, which

featured Rebecca Clarke as its violist), and Katharine Eggar, who was a founding member of the Society of Women Musicians. His dedication to the cause is shown by a series of articles he wrote for *The Girl's Own Paper* in 1903-1904 entitled "Music as a Profession for Girls."

Sometime around the beginning of the Great War, Foxtan Ferguson became a Master at Eton College, where he was beloved by his students. A heartfelt obituary in the *Eton College Chronicle* reads:

His face was irresistibly humorous; you could not see him without feeling a keen interest in him. His singing (how often and how gladly we have heard him sing) was a constant joy, and abides, though we shall never hear him sing again, a joy for ever. Of this great gift of singing he made unselfish and unsparing use. It seemed as if he could never resist any charitable call: and he would go long distances at great inconvenience and at a cost which he could ill afford to sing for every cause which appealed to his all-embracing sympathy ... A man who always acts on generous motives is bound to wear out quickly, for some virtue goes out of the giver every time, especially if the gift is precious. And it was so with him ... you could not meet him without feeling some influence for good: always he lived in harmony with the best and in peace with all ... to love others first, with or without return, is what matters most ... he came to us already knowing it, it was in this spirit that he lived and died.

Foxtan Ferguson died unexpectedly of a duodenal ulcer while singing a concert in November 1920. His wife, children, and Spencer, whose career declined after his passing, survived him. Though his name is now mostly forgotten, Foxtan Ferguson was a pioneering and important professional musician in his day. Like Vaughan Williams and all great artists, he embraced the vagabond's charge to "be himself" and set out vigorously on the unique and varied creative paths that lay before him. Although there is no evidence he ever performed it, the baritone was certainly familiar with Vaughan Williams's rustic and virile setting of Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Vagabond" (*Songs of Travel*, 1904). It contains a sentiment the singer surely understood:

Give to me the life I love,
Let the lave go by me,
Give the jolly heaven above
And the byway nigh me.
Bed in the bush with stars to see,
Bread I dip in the river
There's the life for a man like me,
There's the life for ever.

SOURCES

[In preparing this article for publication I have omitted a long and detailed list of sources. I will send the original version of the article, complete with sources, to any members wishing to follow up the issues discussed here – Ed.]

"Sees Progress Here in Musical Culture," *New York Times*, December 31, 1911.

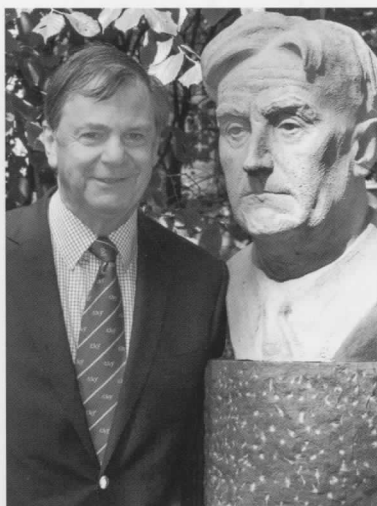
E.A.B., "Bechstein Hall: Two Song Cycles," *Daily News*, December 3, 1904.

Georgia Pearce, *Clarion*, December 9, 1904.

"In Memoriam: Arthur Foxtan Ferguson," *The Eton College Chronicle*, November 5, 1920. ♪

From the Chairman

It is a great pleasure to be invited to take over the reins from Em Marshall-Luck, only the second Chairman of the Society in twenty years. For seventeen of those, I have been Vice-Chairman, succeeding Robin Ivison in 1997 after his untimely death. I supported Stephen Connock for eleven years and then Em for six, from a distance during my ten winters in Malta, and am delighted to find myself holding those reins as we enter our twenty-first year and start to plan the celebrations which the trustees feel to be appropriate. I am immensely fortunate to have a strong and able group of officers committed to the success of the Society, providing legal and financial expertise, musicological experience second to none, and tremendous enthusiasm for organising the events with which we intend to mark our "coming of age".



Most of those events and activities, details of which you will find in this and subsequent editions of the *Journal*, will inevitably take place in various locations in England, where the majority of our members live. I am acutely conscious, however, that we are an international society. Roughly a third of our membership is based outside the United Kingdom, and I am keen not only to increase support in the rest of the world, but to do more to demonstrate our gratitude for the support we receive from our existing membership in the USA and Europe, and in many other countries.

Unless our overseas members are able to attend the AGM (and we were delighted to welcome three from the USA in October), their principal benefit comes from the *Journal*, the highly regarded website and from Albion Records, which continues its mission to make CDs of rare and hitherto unrecorded Vaughan Williams works. An important by-product of that policy is the growing number of other labels now keen to record music that has remained unpublished until now. There are several well-established champions of Vaughan Williams's music, Naxos, Chandos, Somm and Dutton Epoch; nevertheless it is an Albion release, *The Solent*, which has been nominated for a Grammy award for Best Classical Compendium in February. We hope that this will stimulate greater interest in Vaughan Williams's music in America, and lead to an even larger membership of the Society in due course. May I invite our overseas members to act as ambassadors for the Society by seeking for other devotees and persuading them to become members?

Overseas members will be particularly interested to learn that we are planning a bumper issue of the *Journal* later this year, which will celebrate our first twenty-one years, and look back at how far we have come in that time. To take one example, members who have the very first issue (September 1994), might look at the list of works that Lewis Foreman demanded should be recorded forthwith, and reflect on the works which would make up such a list today!

All our members will have been sad to learn of the death, on New Year's Eve, of our President, Michael Kennedy. A man of many talents, a delightful companion, a tireless champion of English music, and a vital link with Vaughan Williams, whom he described as the greatest man he ever knew, Michael is irreplaceable and will be sorely missed by us all. Those who worked with him will be writing in this and succeeding issues of the *Journal*.

At the beginning of this eventful year for the Society, I wish every member a peaceful and musically prosperous 2015.

Simon Coombs

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