

By Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Vaughan Williams's *Tuba Concerto*: Composition and First Performance

by Clifford Bevan

**Editor's Note:** Throughout the years we have received a variety of questions pertaining to historical low brass instruments, and we continue to address these queries with our annual Questions and Answers section. For this issue, we move forward a few decades and attend to a question stemming from the on-line publication, The Tuba News website, which recently published an interesting essay by Roger Bobo entitled "The Vaughan Williams Concerto: It doesn't belong in the Tuba Ghetto" (September 9, 2007; www.tubanews.com). Among Mr. Bobo's normative and interpretive comments, he describes Philip Catelinet's "odd" selection for premiering the work and states, "I'm sure there is an interesting story about how he became the one to premier this concerto but I have never heard it." Well, as it turns out, a few *ITEA Journal* readers posed that same question to the Historical Instrument Section. I recalled reading about Catelinet's involvement with the concerto in Clifford Bevan's *The Tuba Family* (2nd edition) years ago. So I contacted our researcher-of-the-moment and, with characteristic wit and substantial historical knowledge, Bevan willingly accepted the request to *tell us more*.

~ Craig Kridel

When Philip Catelinet performed Vaughan Williams's Concerto for Bass Tuba and Orchestra on 13 June 1954, it was the first time in history that anyone anywhere had played a tuba concerto. This needs to be borne in mind when considering the significance of the event, the pioneering nature of the composer's work, and the demands made on the soloist. Other questions are inevitably raised: why was it Vaughan Williams who composed this first work of its kind and

why was it Catelinet who was the soloist?

The Tuba Concerto seems to have been the culmination of a number of influences and events, beginning with the character of the composer himself. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was born into a privileged family and was sent to a leading public school, Charterhouse. While his close relatives included distinguished judges, he chose to study at the Royal College of Music in London, where he struck up a long-lasting friendship with Gustav Holst (whose background was far more modest: Holst came from a family of professional musicians). What they had in common was a lively interest in English folk song in contrast to the prevailing English musical establishment's taste for the works of the great German composers.

In his thirties, Vaughan Williams studied briefly in Paris with Ravel. Superficially his music shows no influences of the French composer. Vaughan Williams's characteristic orchestral tone tends towards the solid, almost organ-like density of sound found in the works of so many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English composers. But a closer look at his scores does show one important influence of his teacher, a man who was renowned for the striking use he made of orchestral color. It was presumably because of Ravel that Vaughan Williams featured tenor saxophone in the sixth symphony, three saxophones and flugel horn in the ninth symphony, and a wind machine in *Sinfonia Antartica*. For Larry Adler he composed a *Harmonica Concerto* in 1951. Thirty years earlier, in his masterly orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Ravel had included solos for saxophone and, of course, tuba (in "Bydlo"), specifically the small French C tuba of the time. Can anyone find a solo

for tuba in an orchestral work composed before Ravel's?

This is not the place to use Schenkerian Analysis to pursue a detailed comparison of two different works. However, there may be more than coincidence in the structure of the opening phrases of "Bydlo" and the slow movement of the Tuba Concerto. Note what occurs at the peak of each phrase—Ravel's in Example 1 and Vaughan Williams's in Example 2.

Example 1



Example 2



While working on the unfamiliar task of devising a soaring melody for solo tuba, did Vaughan Williams subconsciously tread the path previously traveled by his mentor?

John Fletcher has suggested that Vaughan Williams had been interested in the idea of a concerto for tuba long before he was approached by the London Symphony Orchestra with a request that he compose a work to mark the orchestra's jubilee in 1954. The LSO was the first of the great independent London orchestras and has consistently occupied the high ground. John Fletcher himself was eventually to become the orchestra's distinguished tubist. In 1954, the tuba player was Philip Catelinet. Like almost all professional English orchestral tubists up to the 1960s, he had previously been a euphonium player. Many of his contemporaries had been army bandmen, but

Catelinet's army had been the Salvation Army, where he was a distinguished bandmaster, arranger and, on a number of vocal recordings, accompanist. He is remembered today by candidates taking their Associated Board Grade 7 and 8 tuba exams for two excellent arrangements of baroque pieces. Like his contemporaries, the instrument he played in the orchestra was the English F tuba. The common use of the EE-flat tuba began later, in the 1960s, with John Fletcher himself. There is a famous photograph of Vaughan Williams alongside Catelinet with his F tuba (seemingly a Boosey). My tracing of Catelinet with his tuba shows that the proportions are those of the English F shown in Fig. 12.4 (a) of *The Tuba Family*.



The solo part of the Concerto lies beautifully on the F tuba, but there is also another English influence on the writing. This is often virtuosic, as required in any concerto: it was the dexterity of euphonium players turned orchestral tuba players that had inspired the technically demanding orchestral tuba parts of Elgar and later Vaughan Williams, Walton, Britten, and others.

As a celebration, the LSO Jubilee Concert in 1954 was a joyous occasion. The conductor was Sir John Barbirolli, musical director of the Hallé Orchestra 1943–70. Vaughan Williams would have been delighted, as to him Barbirolli was “Glorious John,” dedicatee of *Sinfonia Antartica* and the eighth symphony. There may have been composers who, having decided that the tuba was to be featured, would have exploited its more grotesque or comical sides. This was not Vaughan Williams's approach. His biographer Michael Kennedy states, “the composer took his idea seriously, as a challenge, to

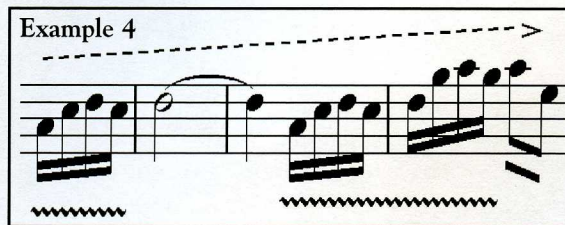
‘give a show’ to an instrument which was never in the limelight.” Vaughan Williams scholar Simona Pakenham confirms this: “He would be the last person in the world to bring a musical instrument out of its decent obscurity only to make it a figure of fun.”

So what of the material? The critics point to the beauty of the slow movement's theme and to the tuba's ability to cope with the light, skipping figures found elsewhere. But attention has not so far been drawn to the opening theme of the first movement, due to become so well known that it is quoted in Edward Gregson's *Tuba Concerto* of 1976.

In 1914 Vaughan Williams, under the influence of English folk music, began work on a piece for solo violin that was finally completed and first performed in 1921. This was *The Lark Ascending*, described as a romance for violin and orchestra, and based on a poem by George Meredith. The sky-lark is, of course, celebrated for the beauty of its song. Here is the work's opening theme (Example 3):



and here is the opening theme of the Tuba Concerto (Example 4):



Was Vaughan Williams making a point when he wrote this?

When I was a student at the Royal Academy of Music, Vaughan Williams lived within walking distance and was a regular visitor. On one occasion in 1957, when a student orchestra was rehearsing a work of his, he had cause to comment on my contribution. (It's a good story, but this is not the place to tell it.) Looking like the archetypal English country gentleman, he had the archetypal English sense of humor. Colleagues always

addressed him fondly as “Uncle Ralph” (pronounced, of course, Uncle Raif). It would be nice to think that the allusion to the earlier violin work was quite intentional, although we shall probably never know.

Two other matters remain to be considered. One is the nature of Vaughan Williams's program note, which has sometimes been considered scarcely worth writing as it is so uninformative. This is not restricted to the Tuba Concerto. Vaughan Williams was a severely practical musician (conductor as well as composer) who communicated through music and is known to have felt that the provision of program notes was a nuisance. This nonsense approach was shared by Benjamin Britten, who strongly disapproved of analyses of his own music.

The second matter relates to the problems that have been caused by discrepancies between the solo part of the orchestral version of the Concerto and those of other published editions. Vaughan Williams's musical associate from 1947 to 1958 was Roy Douglas who

wrote out the full score of the Tuba Concerto in just twelve days in order to meet a deadline. He later stated: “Unfortunately, I was not given the opportunity of checking this score with the composer's piano sketches, and this led to complications many years later.” Douglas subsequently edited the Concerto for the Eulenberg Edition miniature score.

Reassessments of Vaughan Williams's Tuba Concerto seem to be under way in several quarters at the present time. This can only be for the good. Perhaps now, over fifty years

after the first performance, we are gradually accepting that this trail-blazing, eminently playable and listenable work is in fact a much better and more significant piece of music than many of the tuba concertos composed in the intervening half century. 