

Completing the incomplete

By Andrew Glover-Whitley

Music; there is no other field of the arts that I am aware of that actually completes the incomplete works of fellow artists who are deceased. A slightly morbid thought but you don't see a "Da Vinci (*completed by Joe Bloggs 2012*)" or a poem by Ted Hughes (*completed by Fred Jones 2011*) or a "Henry Moore completed by Damien Hurst!" (*Now that would be interesting*). So why is it that in the musical world we feel that it is right and just too complete unfinished compositions of our fellow composers? The most famous of course is Mahler's 10th Symphony which has something like 5 different completions by various musicians when only the astonishing slow movement was actually completed in Mahler's life time.

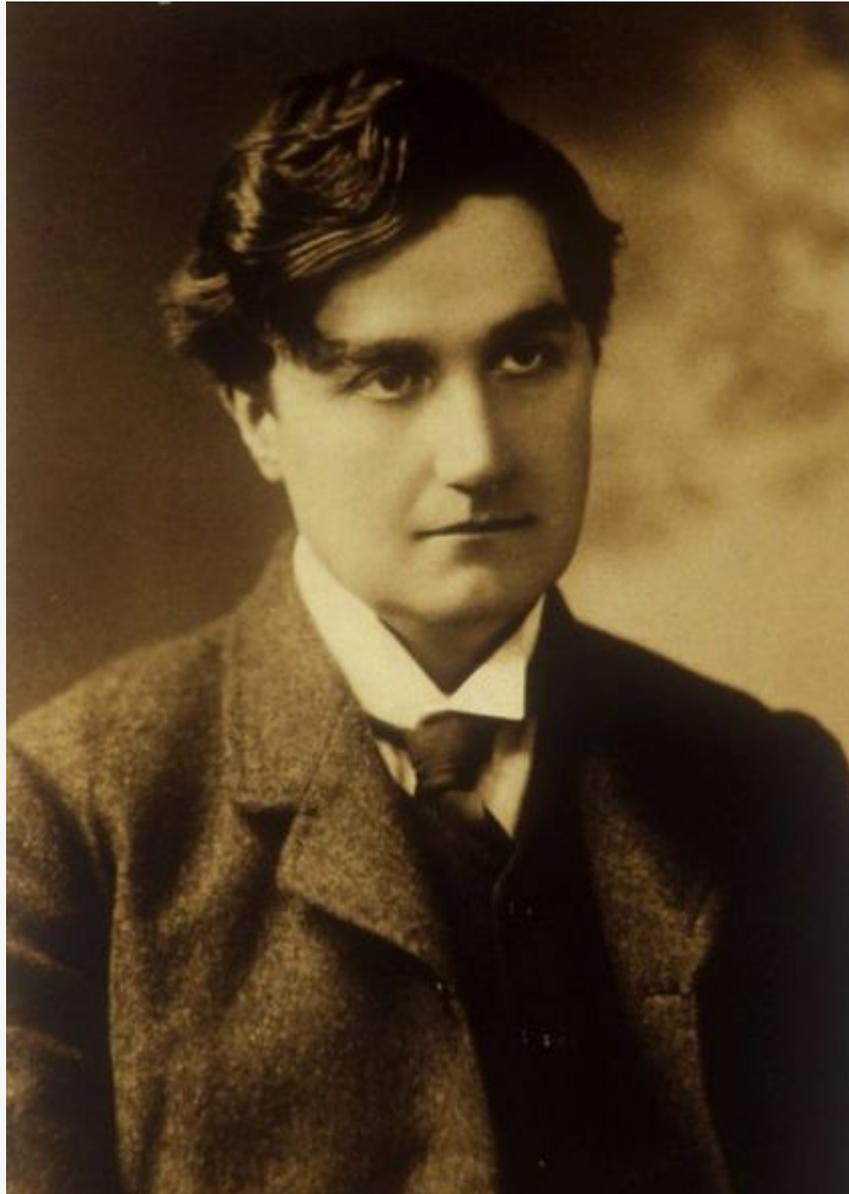
There is a growing trend towards this type of dubious completion work, particularly amongst British works. The famous incomplete works are of course Schubert's unfinished Symphony which no-one thankfully has attempted due to the lack of any short score sketches unlike the Mahler 10th and Bruckner's great 9th Symphony. In Britain we tend to think that a composer's thoughts may be tampered with and altered to reflect possible supposition of ideas and stylistic developments. The work that comes to mind immediately is Elgar's Third Symphony completed by Anthony Payne who thankfully did a grand job, and in the language of late Elgar, in a way that was not of his own style. As excellent as this completion is it still is not Elgar's own orchestration or bridging passages or material development. Payne did acknowledge that he did take some free licence and added a few small touches of his own such as a Tam Tam at the end of the last movement. It is now a well-known fact that just before his death Elgar asked that the short score and what was completed be destroyed to stop this very thing from happening. Thankfully we now have an idea of what he wanted but it still has a moral question of should we be tampering with a person's last wishes in this way.



Sir Edward Elgar

Other examples of 'completion tampering', if I may use that phrase, is another work by Elgar, his sketches for a Piano Concerto. The completion is less successful than the Third Symphony, this is due to even less sketches being in existence and a lot of pure speculation as to developmental ideas from Robert Walker who realised a performing version of the work. It works and it doesn't work. No more can really be said on this piece.

Another attempt at realising an incomplete work comes from Ralph Vaughan Williams's oeuvre in the form of the work "Dark Pastoral for Cello and Orchestra" completed by David Matthews. This unknown, and I mean unknown, work is so typical of Vaughan Williams at his pastoral best. There was only four minutes worth of music completed and very little else. It now exists as a fifteen minute work in a ternary form very closely based on the earlier masterpiece "The Lark Ascending". This though isn't the pastoralism of the "*Cowpat movement*", it is a pastoralism of half-light, shadows and mysteriousness. An England that is glanced out of the corner of your eye, and never full-on like his "Lark Ascending". I say the "Lark Ascending" because it is in this work that we see the roots of the "Dark Pastoral". It is in close affinity with it in its form, language and colouration. It has a feeling of great loss and yet encouragement for the future. It has a richness that is welcoming and enveloping and yet uncertain and edgy. A work that is the 'Larks' younger and more morose sibling. Is it Vaughan Williams who has given this beautiful work these attributes or is it David Matthews? I would like to think Vaughan Williams, but with only four minutes completed, and very little else to go on I fear it is an excellent piece of pastiche on Dave Matthews' behalf. I still love it though, even if it is purely conjectural.



Portrait photograph of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Another work that has again been completed with a dubious amount of new material being written in, even though it is supposedly based on the composer's sketches, is the completion of E.J. Moeran's Second Symphony by the conductor Martin Yates. This is a fine attempt and even though I personally have reservations about the completion it does give us an insight into what would have been a major Symphony by any British composer. Like Elgar there were extensive sketches but no orchestration to speak of. Moeran himself indicated as late as 1948 that the work was fairly close to completion in sketch form, although he subsequently seems to have had serious doubts about it, and even considered scrapping it altogether. His wife lodged the sketches with the Victorian College of Arts in Melbourne, Australia. There was very little to suggest a complete score was anywhere near completion. Speculation can only guess at whether or not Moeran did scrap the near completed score. It may well have been complete, but only in his head, at the time of his unfortunate demise in the sea.



Ernest John Moeran portrait photograph.

As an academic exercise, all of the works mentioned are very useful to get an idea of what the composers' intentions may have been for study purposes. As final all-encompassing true statements by the mentioned composers it is at the very least questionable, no matter how good the completions are. It seems it is merely a British obsession, abroad they prefer to only guess at what may have been rather than trying to second guess what the composer meant or would have done. No-one can really be sure and as such should the works be left alone and enjoyed as what may have been rather than saying that this is what the composer meant. I have written works where after completion and working through the pieces I have scrapped whole movements, and rethought ideas and come up with something that was not the original intention. So what makes these "realisation editors" think that this is what the composer really would have done? Is it because there happens to be a small amount of an idea and a little development somewhere else? 80% of a sketched score never makes it into some composers' works and is scrapped, and forgotten, as dead ends, so what is to say these sketches were not just that for Elgar and Moeran et al? We will never know, and so why does someone else think that they do?

As an addendum, I sometimes feel for the composers who get asked to complete these works as, more often than not, it is a source of income that they are in desperate need of and really cannot refuse, and it detracts from their own work in composition. Not only this they then get tagged with the epithet of being the person who completed 'so-and-sos' incomplete work and this then detracts from their own reputations.

So please, don't anyone get the thought or idea and rush off and try and complete Bruckner's unfinished, that would about finish me off as a musician once and for all.