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Bach Choir/Tongue at Fairfield Halls, Croydon

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For a century it sat, barely noticed, in the University Library at Cambridge — a bit like my old tutor. But the world has now finally heard the 45-minute mass that Vaughan Williams submitted for his doctorate in 1899.

I won't say that A Cambridge Mass (as its rescuers call it) is a masterpiece. It isn't even a full mass, since it lacks Kyrie, Gloria and Agnus Dei, and its middle movement is a charming but incongruous orchestral intermezzo.

Nor does it sound remotely like the composer's mature works. This is Vaughan Williams before the lark ascended. Instead of the archaic modes of English folksong, the diligently crafted counterpoint is modelled on 19th-century Continental masters. Vaughan Williams was apparently thunderstruck at the time by his first encounter with Verdi's Requiem. That's apparent in the bold brass writing, especially the theatrical trumpet fanfare that heralds the explosive Et resurrexit section — one of several massive fugues and canons that were included, presumably to satisfy academic regulations.

But Verdi isn't the most obvious influence. That orchestral intermezzo sounds like easy-going Brahms or Dvorák, with touches of Schubert's Unfinished, while a distinctive triplet phrase evokes Berlioz. The antiphonal handling of the double choruses, on the other hand, harks back to Bach, though opening this concert with Parry's Blest Pair of Sirens reminded us that Vaughan Williams's own teachers were pretty adept at devising grandiose walls of choral sound.

So, to say that A Cambridge Mass is derivative is like noting that the Sahara is sandy. Yet it does have qualities that are unmistakable RVW: a boldness of declamation, striding bass lines that suggest a vigorous ramble, deft handling of big forces, and sympathetic treatment of voices (including a solo quartet). The spirit of the future giant is there, even if his unique language is as yet unformed.

Conducted by Alan Tongue, who transcribed it, the Mass received an assured premiere from the superb Bach Choir (a credit to David Hill's training) and the New Queen's Hall Orchestra on their quaint Victorian instruments. Bath Choral Society performs it in October; I hope others will follow.