

Ralph Vaughan Williams: IFMC President, 1947–1958

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The October 1972 *Bulletin of the International Folk Music Council* celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Council. It includes a transcript of a report on the 1947 conference at which it was founded (pp. 6–26), miscellaneous “jottings” on the Council from 1947 to 1963 (pp. 27–33), and a message from the president, Willard Rhodes (pp. 33–34).¹ Sandwiched between these is a notice acknowledging the centenary of the birth of Ralph Vaughan Williams:

Ralph Vaughan Williams 1st President of the IFMC 1947–1958

October 12th, 1972, is the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Ralph Vaughan Williams, and celebrations of this event are being held not only in England but in many other countries. We, the members of the International Folk Music Council, remember with special pride and gratitude that this great musician was our President from the foundation of the Council in 1947 until his death on August 26th, 1958.

He presided at the inaugural meeting of the Council and during the nine years of his Presidency he was a constant help and source of inspiration. (*BIFMC* 41, Oct 1972:26)

Indeed, Vaughan Williams served as IFMC president from the establishment of the Council on 24 September 1947 until his death on 26 August 1958, almost eleven years.² At 75 years of age, he was the second oldest president at the beginning of his presidency (bettered only by Zoltán Kodály who was 79), and the oldest president at the end (85 years old). The length of his term was exceeded only by Erich Stockmann (1982–1997). Yet, rather than the direct involvement in Council affairs that we take for granted in Council

presidents today, Vaughan Williams’s relation was indeed more inspirational.

Friendship with Karpeles

In 1903, Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) started collecting English folk songs, three months after Cecil Sharp (1859–1924); eight years later, both would be on a committee of the English Folk Dance Society (EFDS) with Maud Karpeles (Pakenham 2011:29). Vaughan Williams would collect more than 800 songs, singing games, and dance tunes, mostly before 1910. Although some were recorded with a phonograph, the majority were written down. One issue of the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* (vol. 2/8, 1906) was devoted to songs he had collected (Wikipedia Contributors 2020c).

The common interest between Vaughan Williams and Karpeles was English folk song, but he was also known to admire Karpeles’s dancing and musicianship, particularly her opinion of his compositions. Karpeles collaborated extensively with Sharp, and after his death in 1924, Vaughan Williams constantly provided encouragement for her and worked hard for the EFDS (Pakenham 2011:152–153; Haywood 1972).

There were a number of published, musical collaborations between Vaughan Williams and Karpeles, sometimes also involving Sharp. For example, *Twelve Traditional Country Dances* were “collected and described by M. Karpeles,” with “pianoforte arrangements by R. V. Williams in collaboration with M. Karpeles” (Karpeles and R. Vaughan Williams 1931; also see Pakenham 2011:166). And tunes from *English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachian* (Sharp and Karpeles 1932) were later harmonized by Vaughan Williams in the *Nine English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachian Mountains* (Sharp, Karpeles, and R. Vaughan Williams 1967; also see Haywood 1972:6).

Throughout his career, English folk song remained an important part of his work, not through imitation, but to help give substance to his vision (Karpeles 1958:122):

1 I appreciate the materials and information supplied by Nicholas Wall and Malcolm Barr-Hamilton from the Vaughan Williams Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society. Suggestions from Naila Ceribašić and Svanibor Pettan greatly helped me refine my text and boosted my confidence to write about our first president. Access to JSTOR through my position at the Australian National University has been essential. As always, I am very grateful for the ongoing support from the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.

2 How the centenary notice calculates only nine years is unclear.

his direct encounter with what seemed to him an expression of the deepest aspirations of England's common people struck with the force almost of a religious conversion. Although its actual stylistic impact on his own music has been exaggerated, as a philosophical and emotional touchstone of artistic authenticity folk-song was crucial to Vaughan Williams's developing views of national identity, community, and the social mission of the composer. (Frogley 2009)

Vaughan Williams wrote about the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) (R. Vaughan Williams 1958b) and served as its president from 1932 until his death.³ An article by Vaughan Williams celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the society appears in the same issue of their journal as Karpeles's obituary for him (R. Vaughan Williams 1958a).

Yet, it was not just Vaughan Williams's interest in folk song that drew Karpeles to him. Her biographer observed that

she had a deep devotion to Vaughan Williams, but there she was one of an army, for he fatally attracted nearly every female who came in contact with him. (Pakenham 2011:184)

Karpeles also developed a long-lasting friendship with Ursula Wood (1911–2007), who would become Vaughan Williams's second wife in February 1953 (*ibid.*:210–211). Indeed, the two of them spoke in the morning on the day of Karpeles's death; Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote Karpeles's obituary in the London *Times* (*ibid.*:256).

Following the deaths of Edward Elgar, Frederick Delius, and Gustav Holst, all in 1934, Vaughan Williams came to be regarded as a leading figure in British music, composing many songs, instrumental works, choral works, and symphonies (Frogley 2009; Wikipedia Contributors 2020a). Demands on his time became greater, but his friendship with Karpeles remained strong throughout. Karpeles drew on this to involve Vaughan Williams in the founding of the Council and her ongoing efforts to legitimize it.

Involvement with IFMC

While Vaughan Williams was chair at the 1947 International Conference on Folk Song and Folk Dance in London, at which the IFMC was established, he actually appears to have been absent from most conference activities. At the initial morning session on 22 September at 10:30, he accepted the invitation from Karpeles to be chair, gave an opening address, listened

to Karpeles read the apologies for absence and give her report outlining the reason for the conference, but right before discussion about the formation of the IFMC, Vaughan Williams left and the vice chair, Steuart Wilson, took over. It was still the morning session. The actual discussion about the establishment of IFMC and the vote itself were chaired by Wilson.

Vaughan Williams would later re-appear to chair sessions (or parts thereof) on 24 and 26 September, and on the latter date also provided the closing speech (Karpeles 1972:6–8, 17–18, 26).

Although it is not clear when it took place, Karpeles recalled one incident with Vaughan Williams as chair:

Once constitutional matters were out of the way (and it might be mentioned that at this point Dr. Vaughan Williams asked from the Chair: "Now has any one got anything more they want to say? I hope they haven't." *Applause*), the Conference passed eagerly to the discussion of a multitude of plans for the future, many of which have been, or are being, carried out, while others alas have fallen by the wayside. (Karpeles [1976]:218)

Ursula Vaughan Williams recalled the same incident and noted that her future husband

was obviously not feeling like being there, for he opened the proceedings ... fiercely ... Ralph was very glad when Steuart resumed his chair; so possibly were the delegates, for under Steuart's less severe rule some of the meetings were very entertaining. And Maud Karpeles, inventor of the Council as well as its Secretary, kept the many foreign visitors busy and happy. (U. Vaughan Williams 1964:277)

The final session of the conference ended with friendly words from Poul Lorenzen:

Mr. Lorenzen (Denmark) in proposing a vote of thanks to Dr. Vaughan Williams said that he had given the right spirit to the Conference from the very beginning and they would remember him always as a good friend. (Karpeles 1972:26)

Parkenham bluntly observes that while Vaughan Williams was Karpeles's obvious choice for chair, his life was very busy, so he really only agreed because he was "always anxious to oblige her" (Pakenham 2011:223). Indeed, obliging Karpeles seemed to be the glue that held Vaughan Williams to his IFMC presidency. It was certainly not through his participation in Council events.

In more than a decade as president, Vaughan Williams (*figure 1*) only attended one IFMC conference: the 1952 conference in London.⁴ Thus, he could give

3 While some sources date his presidency from 1932 (e.g., English Folk Dance and Song Society 2020; Frogley 2009; Wikipedia Contributors 2020a); others note 1946, after the resignation of Dowager Lady Ampthill (e.g., Karpeles 1958:121; Wikipedia Contributors 2020c).

4 Announcements of his inability to attend appear for the following conferences: 1948 (*BIFMC* 1, Oct 1948:5); 1949 (*BIFMC* 2, Nov 1949:2); 1950 (*JIFMC* 1951:5); 1951 (*BIFMC* 5, Nov 1951:7); 1953 (*BIFMC* 7, Sep 1953:11); 1954 (*BIFMC* 8, Jan 1955:4); 1955 (*BIFMC* 9, Oct 1955:7); 1956 (*BIFMC* 10, Oct 1956:6); 1957 (*BIFMC* 12, Sep 1957:5); 1958 (*BIFMC* 14, Oct 1958:6).



Figure 1. Ralph Vaughan Williams and Douglas Kennedy (in the back) presenting a badge to the squire of the Morris Ring. Late 1950s (photo courtesy of Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society).

the address of welcome in person on 14 July 1952 (R. Vaughan Williams 1953; also see *BIFMC* 6, Sep 1952:4; Pakenham 2011:229–230). Correspondence from Vaughan Williams to Karpeles prior to all other conferences contains brief messages that he asks to relay to participants, such as this for the 1953 conference in Biarritz:

Please give my kindest greetings to all my friends at Biarritz: among whom I venture to include all who are present at the Conference. I am sorry I cannot be present but I have already committed myself to another engagement in England. (13 Jun 1953; ICTM Archive MS 10017, series 4, folder 211)

There are other such messages to be read prior to the conferences in Venice (1949), Bloomington (1950), Opatija (1951), and São Paulo (1954).⁵ The letter concerning Opatija (figure 2) is one of the few examples available where Vaughan Williams uses IFMC letterhead.

One of the most intriguing letters about his inability to attend an IFMC conference comes from 17 January 1955, concerning the Oslo conference to be held in mid-year:

Dearest Maud, So sorry, can't manage Oslo, am due at the South Pole. Love, (ICTM Archive MS 10017, series 4, folder 211)

It is very doubtful that Vaughan Williams actually went to the South Pole, although he had scored the film *Scott*

of the Antarctic (1948), and subsequently reworked this into his seventh symphony, dubbed *Sinfonia antarctica* (1949–1952).⁶ The latter was first performed in 1953, well before the 1955 comment above (Wikipedia Contributors 2020b), hence it is not sure what the note refers to, although it may be simply dismissive of the idea of going to Oslo.

At the London conference he did attend, Vaughan Williams noted the

distinct cleavage between the true folk song composed *by* the people and the popular song composed *for* the people. It is the former with which this Council has to deal. (R. Vaughan Williams 1953:7)

He further expanded on his thoughts regarding the work of the Council:

Our duty then is twofold. Only that which is genuinely traditional must be preserved, and all that must be recorded in our libraries and museums; but only that which has the germs of great art must be let loose on the simple-minded public whom we invite to sample our wares. (ibid.:8)

His *Folk Songs of the Four Seasons: Cantata for Women's Voices with Orchestra or Piano* (1949) was performed at the same London conference (Karpeles et al. 1959:3).

Vaughan Williams also never attended any Executive Board meetings, even those associated with the 1952 London conference at which he gave the opening address.

5 Letters from Vaughan Williams to Karpeles (23 Aug 1949, 26 Jun 1950, 27 Aug 1951, and Jul 1954; ICTM Archive MS 10017, series 4, folder 211).

6 In a paper considering some of the compositions of early Board members, Torp (2017) focusses on Vaughan Williams's sixth symphony, composed in 1944–1947.

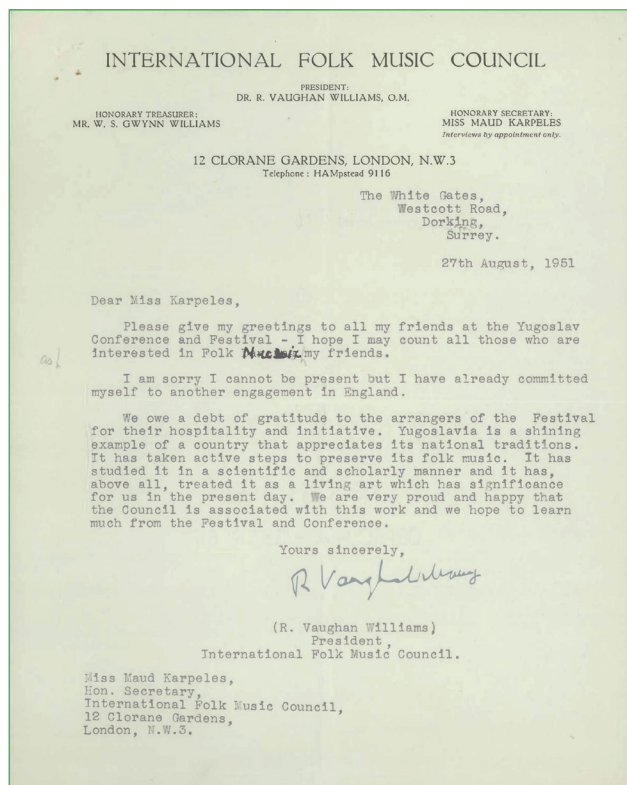


Figure 2. Letter from Vaughan Williams to Karpeles (27 August 1951), expressing the former's inability to attend the 1951 IFMC conference in Opatija, Yugoslavia (ICTM Archive MS 10017, series 4, folder 211).

But at the time, the president did not chair Board meetings, instead the chair was elected by members.⁷

Five vice presidents served during Vaughan Williams's presidency: Poul Lorenzen (Denmark, 1947–1951); Albert Marinus (Belgium, 1947–1962); Antoine-Elysée Cherbuliez de Sprecher (Switzerland, 1948–1964); Ole Mørk Sandvik (Norway, 1954–1968), and Marius Barbeau (Canada, 1958–1969). All of them quite regularly participated in conferences and Executive Board meetings; they were certainly much more involved in Council affairs than the president.

Vaughan Williams did, however, contribute to the occasional IFMC publication. For example, Karpeles wrote to him on 17 September 1953 about recording an introduction to a disc of music that was made at the 1953 conference and festival in Biarritz, France, and Pamplona, Spain (ICTM Archive MS 10017, series 4, folder 211). Vaughan Williams provided a general,

⁷ The first Council president to attend an Executive Board meeting was Zoltán Kodály in Gottwaldov, Czechoslovakia (EB minutes, 28th meeting, 21 Jul 1962). Yet, even then, someone else was elected as chair, in this case, Willard Rhodes. Rhodes ultimately served four years as chair (1962–1966); then, as IFMC president, he continued to chair Board meetings until the end of his term (1967–1973). Presumably, this established the precedent of the president chairing Board meetings, but it was only with the ICTM Statutes (2017) that it was codified.

spoken introduction, while Douglas Kennedy gave spoken commentary and written notes on each item in a four-page booklet. After a number of delays, the disc was released by Westminster Recording Company in 1954 (Westminster WL 5334 1954) (*BIFMC* 8, Jan 1955:8, 10; 9, Oct 1955:11). Vaughan Williams also wrote an introduction to Norman Fraser's *International Catalogue of Recorded Folk Music* (1954), a publication supported by the Council.

Vaughan Williams died on 26 August 1958, a few months short of his eighty-sixth birthday. Karpeles wrote in her autobiography:

For me, his death was one of the great sorrows of my life. For many years in fact ever since Cecil Sharp's death I had become dependent on him. I used to pour out to him all my hopes and fears concerning folk music and many other matters. He was always a patient and sympathetic listener and I derived great comfort from him. (Karpeles [1976]:245–246)

Obituaries in the 1959 *JIFMC* by the editor (Maud Karpeles),⁸ Zoltán Kodály, and Stuart Wilson describe some of Vaughan Williams's work as a composer and his other accomplishments; only an extract from a letter by Danica S. Janković in Belgrade directly refers to his involvement with IFMC:

We think that all members of the IFMC will join you in the sorrow for a man of wisdom, of understanding, of unprejudiced erudition and of a human concern in the affairs and welfare of our Council. To have had such a man as the head of our organization means not only an honour, but also a really happy circumstance. For his moral support and his other generous assistance all those wishing prosperity to the IFMC ought to be grateful to him. (Karpeles et al. 1959:4)

On 19 September 1958, at a crowded memorial service, Karpeles was part of a select group of six mourners to witness Vaughan Williams's ashes being interred in the north choir aisle of Westminster Abbey, near the burial plots of English composer Henry Purcell (1659–1695) and Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), Irish composer, musician, and Vaughan Williams's teacher (Haywood 1972:8; Karpeles [1976]:246).

Conclusions

The long, mutual affection between Vaughan Williams and Karpeles motivated most of his involvement in the Council. In a collection of 5,088 letters by Vaughan Williams, 144 are correspondence between him and Karpeles, 1925–1958. But only two of these have any mention of the IFMC.⁹ Stockmann observes that Vaughan Williams's

⁸ Although unsigned, it is certainly by Karpeles, as editor and his close friend.

⁹ <http://www.vaughanwilliams.uk/> (accessed 22 Jun 2020).

name helped the new association gain the recognition so badly needed in the beginning. Vaughan Williams, however, limited himself to moral support and did not participate in the activities of the Council, so that he can justly be called an honorary president. (Stockmann 1985:2)

This is essentially the view also shared by Simona Pakenham, friend and biographer of both Vaughan Williams and Karpeles:

Vaughan Williams had taken on the presidency of the IFMC out of affection for Maud, as he had supported all her projects since the death of Sharp. But the truth is that he had no real interest in international folk dance, was totally out of patience with the internal quarrels that had always rent the EFDSS, and was profoundly relieved that, with nine out of ten IFMC conferences held in foreign countries, where he had not the time to go, his role was more or less that of a figurehead. (Pakenham 2011:230)

But whether he is considered an honorary president or a figurehead should not diminish acknowledgement of Vaughan Williams's important contribution to the fledgling Council. The Executive Board recognized this:

In his lifelong work for the preservation and dissemination of folk music as well as his enshrinement of it in his own compositions, he nobly served those aims for which the Council was founded twelve years ago. We may be happy that the Council had the leadership of this great man during the initial years of its existence. (EB minutes, 22nd meeting, 10–11 Aug 1959:app. A)

Karpeles and the other members of the Executive Board looked after the activities of the Council, while Vaughan Williams's reputation as a respected and distinguished composer brought positive attention, seriousness, prestige, and legitimacy to the Council from its very beginning, qualities that probably no one else could have managed so immediately and effectively. The long, close friendship between Karpeles and Vaughan Williams firmly helped establish the IFMC.

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