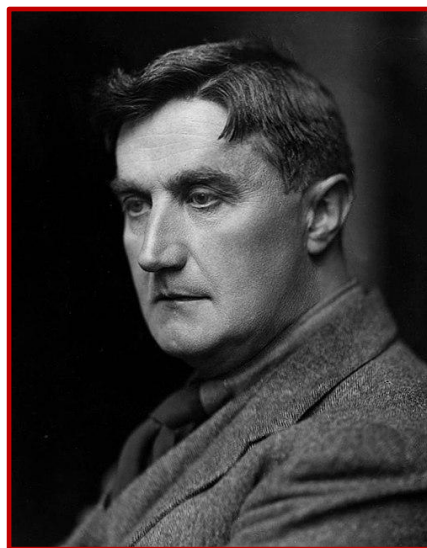

Classical Music Study 2026

January 2026: Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

For our first meeting of 2026, Steve Smith gave us an interesting introduction to the life and works of one of Britain's greatest composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams.

He is best known as a composer of several popular pieces such as *The Lark Ascending* and the *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, which were strongly influenced by English Folk Song. But, as Steve pointed out, the composer's output was noted for its very wide range of moods and styles, from stormy to tranquil, from mysterious to exuberant, from harshly dissonant to extremely consonant.



His works include operas, ballets, chamber music, secular and religious vocal pieces and orchestral compositions including nine symphonies, written over sixty years

We started by listening to the opening movement of the **Symphony No. 7**, subtitled *Sinfonia Antarctica* (1952), which was based on music Vaughan Williams wrote for the film *Scott of the Antarctic*. This vividly depicts the icy and windy conditions that Scott and his team encountered on their way to the South Pole.

We heard excerpts from **Symphonies 3, 4, 6 and 9** and from two concertos, one for oboe and strings and the other the *Concerto Accademico* for Violin and Orchestra, which clearly demonstrated the huge variety of styles in the composer's musical language.

We ended with two more orchestral works, the **Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus**, based on a traditional English folk song, and the *Fantasia* on a theme by Thomas Tallis, one of the composer's most popular and widely performed pieces.

Thank you, Steve, for a stimulating presentation including some truly great music.

February 2026: Antonio Sacchini (1730-86) & Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91)

Andy Jackson introduced us to an Italian composer who is largely forgotten nowadays.

Antonio Sacchini, who studied in Naples and lived in Rome, Venice, Munich, Stuttgart, London and Paris, where he was under the patronage of Marie Antoinette and produced his best opera, *Oedipe à Colone* (1786), just before he died.

In fact, Sacchini wrote about 50 operas as well as 2 symphonies, chamber music and large quantity of sacred choral music, but it is as an opera composer that he is largely remembered for today, if at all.

Unfortunately, very little of Sacchini's large

output has been recorded, so Andy played excerpts from two of his operas available on *YouTube* (the above-mentioned *Oedipe à Colone* and *La Contadina in Corte*) and an oratorio entitled *L'abbandono delle ricchezze di San Filippo Neri*, and contrasted these with works by Mozart, Sacchini's younger contemporary.



We heard an aria from **Mozart's** early opera *Ascanio in Alba*, which was very florid with lots of coloratura singing and then we listened to excerpts from two of Mozart's mature operas, *The Magic Flute* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, where his musical language had advanced to such an extent that he took the art form to a new higher level.

Thank you, Andy, for introducing us to a composer who most of had never heard of, let alone heard any of his music. Just a shame that more of Sacchini's music isn't available to enjoy today.

March 2026: Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

In our March meeting, Paul Martinez gave the second part of his survey of the 15 symphonies of Shostakovich, covering the symphonies written between 1941 and 1971.

Shostakovich wrote 15 symphonies which can be thought of as a musical chronicle of 20th-century Soviet history, blending personal expression with sometimes biting political commentary.

The cycle is renowned for its intense emotional range, ironies, and structural power.



We started with the second movement of the **Symphony No.7**, known as the **Leningrad Symphony**. Shostakovich's longest symphony, the work typically takes approximately 80 minutes to perform. The composer wrote the first three movements in Leningrad while it was under siege; he completed the work in Kuybyshev, where he and his family had been evacuated, and premiered in that city on March 5, 1942. At first dedicated to Lenin, the symphony was later rededicated to the city of Leningrad, where it was first played under dire circumstances on August 9, 1942, nearly a year into the siege by German forces.

We then heard two movements from the **Symphony No. 8**, which has been described as the composer's most tragic symphony. The short third movement, driven onwards by strong motor rhythms, has been interpreted as a depiction of battle, or as "the crushing of the individual" by the Soviet system. It finally erupts into a massive climax, leading to the penultimate movement, a subdued passacaglia.

I don't have space here to give details of the rest of Paul's programme, which consisted of carefully selected movements from symphonies 9, 10, 12, 13, 14 & 15.

Some of this music was quite challenging but I would like to thank Paul for his stimulating, well-researched and thought-provoking presentation.

April 2026: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Following our exploration of the late symphonies of Shostakovich last month, this month our focus of attention was the early works of another great Russian composer.

Mike Johnson gave the first of six planned presentations on Tchaikovsky, surely one of the most popular composers today.

He produced three handouts: a complete list of Tchaikovsky's works, a detailed summary of Tchaikovsky's life and a playlist of the music featured in the meeting. Thank you, Mike, for all your hard work producing these documents, which helped place the music we heard in context.



We started with the first two movements from the **String Quartet No. 1**, the second being the well-known Andante Cantabile based on a folk song and which famously moved Tolstoy to tears when he heard it performed in 1876 at a tribute concert in his honour. Next up was the second movement from Tchaikovsky's first Symphony, subtitled '**Winter Daydreams**' and then the famous Fantasy Overture **Romeo and Juliet** based on Shakespeare's play of the same name.

After the coffee break, we continued with the lively Finale from **Symphony No. 2** 'Little Russian', based a Ukrainian folk song. Then we heard the first movement of the ever-popular **Piano Concerto No.1**. However, the concerto was not initially popular with Tchaikovsky's friend and mentor Nicolai Rubinstein, who the composer had hoped would give the first performance. When he played the concerto to Rubinstein, the latter criticised it severely and refused to play it unless major revisions were made. Tchaikovsky refused to change a single note and instead approached the German pianist Hans von Bülow, who gave the first performance in Boston during his American tour in 1875, where the concerto was so popular that Bülow was obliged to repeat the Finale.

We look forward to next month's meeting, when Mike will be giving the second instalment of his presentation on Tchaikovsky's music.
