

Meditation

Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Lord, thou hast been our refuge* is based upon tomorrow's psalm (Psalm 90). The text of the anthem is, in fact, an amalgam of Psalm 90 and Isaac Watts' famous paraphrase of the same: *O God, our help in ages past*. The composer brings coherence to these two texts through spatial differentiation. The piece begins with a semi-chorus singing Psalm 90, and a separate chorus responds with Watts' words sung to the familiar tune *St. Anne*. The semi-chorus' music is free and rhapsodic, perhaps symbolizing humankind, whereas the recurring presence of *O God, our help in ages past* communicates the stable timelessness of God.

The middle section of the anthem departs from the hymn entirely and is full of abrupt modulations. This seems to reflect the more anguished sections of Psalm 90: "As soon as thou scatterest them, they are even as a sleep and fade away suddenly like the grass. In the morning it is green, and growtheth up; but in the evening it is cut down, dried up, and withered." However, this gloom is punctured with an unexpected entrance of the organ, returning us to the opening major key. Stability and hope return; *O God, our help in ages past* is no longer voiced but now soars above the chorus, played by a solo trumpet.

Below is a link to a splendid performance by the choir of Valparaiso University, complete with high-definition videography. I hope you will enjoy this creative musical interpretation of Psalm 90.

With all best wishes,

Tim Pyper
Director of Music

Complete text of *Lord, thou hast been our refuge*

<https://www.sjcchoir.co.uk/listen/sjc-live/vaughan-williams-r-lord-thou-hast-been-our-refuge>

Ralph Vaughan Williams: *Lord, thou hast been our refuge*

<https://youtu.be/QCcr9VMNkh8>

Hymn 680: *O God, our help in ages past*

<https://youtu.be/lpBXIYUETFM>

Hymn 9: *Not here for high and holy things*

<https://youtu.be/pVrtpak3jaM>