In a long and extensive career, Ralph Vaughan Williams composed music notable for its power, nobility, and expressiveness, representing, perhaps, the essence of ‘Englishness’. He received his musical training from Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry at the Royal College of Music, Max Bruch in Berlin, and Maurice Ravel in Paris. At the turn of the twentieth century he was among the very first to travel into the countryside to collect folk-songs and carols from singers, notating them for future generations to enjoy. For many years, Vaughan Williams conducted and led the Leith Hill Music Festival and was also professor of composition at the Royal College of Music in London. During his lifetime, he eschewed all honors with the exception of the Order of Merit, which was conferred upon him in 1938. In a long and productive life, music flowed from his creative pen in profusion and hardly a musical genre was untouched or failed to be enriched by his work which included nine symphonies, five operas, film music, ballet and stage music, several song cycles, church music, and works for chorus and orchestra. An artist of extraordinary creative energy, Vaughan Williams continued composing with undiminished powers until his death at 87.

As the title would suggest, the inspiration for the “Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis” was the work of composer Thomas Tallis (1505 - 1585). Tallis was both a great composer and an astute politician. He remained a Roman Catholic throughout the social and religious changes of 16th century England, but managed to endear himself to every monarch that took the throne. He was even a favorite of Queen Elizabeth, a Protestant, who granted him the exclusive privilege of printing music and music paper for all of England.

The theme for the Fantasia comes from a hymn by Tallis published in 1567 in the Metrical English Psalter. When Vaughan Williams was serving as editor for the English Hymnal for the Anglican Church, he included Tallis’ hymn (it is still found in many Christian hymnals, albeit with a different text). Vaughan Williams used the tune in a production of his opera Pilgrim’s Progress in 1908 and again in 1910 when he was asked to write a new piece for the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester Cathedral.

Vaughan Williams’ score calls for a large string orchestra, a smaller and separate string orchestra, and a solo string quartet. The antiphonal (performed alternately by two or more groups) writing and the resonant, open sound so characteristic of English music is ideally suited to expansive spaces. At its premiere, the piece was an immediate success. The London Times review of the premiere said, “Throughout its course one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new. The work is wonderful because it seems to lift one into some unknown regions of musical thought and feeling.” The critic Hubert Foss wrote that the pages of the Fantasia “hold the faith of England, in its soil and its tradition, firmly believed yet expressed in no articulated details. There is quiet ecstasy, and then alongside it comes a kind of blind persistence, a faithful pilgrimage towards the unseen light.”