Defining Englishness in Ralph Vaughan Williams's *On Wenlock Edge*

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Defining Englishness in Ralph Vaughan Williams's *On Wenlock Edge*

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Music in Music History in the School of Music, Jordan College of Fine Arts of Butler University.

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David G. Rugger
April 2011
INTRODUCTION

Alain Frogley neatly captures the composer’s lasting image when he states, “Mention the name Ralph Vaughan Williams and into most people’s minds come immediately three words: English, pastoral, and folksong.” Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) is well-known for a few works — The Lark Ascending, his fantasias on Greensleeves and a theme by Thomas Tallis, and a few of his earlier symphonies — all of which exist in numerous recordings the cover art of which invariably features dusky images of the English countryside which seem to shimmer with meditative nostalgia. The appraisal of the man and his music is certainly not unfounded: again and again in both his music and writings on music, Vaughan Williams invokes national character as a guiding force, the sustaining inspiration of folk song, and explicitly draws upon pastoral imagery often rooted in specific geographical locations (see figure 1.1).

A brief investigation points to cracks in this façade. His idiom extended well beyond contemplative beauty. The Fourth Symphony’s grating dissonance and the Sixth Symphony’s visions of nuclear devastation supply more than sufficient evidence of his versatility and conceptual scope. Of more interest, especially to this study, is and examination of his apparently unassailable Englishness. Vaughan Williams, reputedly the fountainhead of musical Englishness, developed his mature style only after incorporating a number of “French” harmonic and timbral devices that he acquired

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1 Alain Frogley, “Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the
through his teacher, Maurice Ravel. Supposedly insular and parochial, a brief survey of Vaughan Williams’s output would clearly demonstrate to even the most casual listener a keen awareness and integration of contemporary styles and devices.² This thesis does not intend to debunk Vaughan Williams’s reputation, but to examine the historical process that created such a perception and contextualize him within the broader resurgence of English music.

Figure 1.1: Typical images associated with Ralph Vaughan Williams as seen on CD cover art

The “English Musical Renaissance” of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century coincides precisely with a period of political turbulence and economic stagnation. During the late 1880’s, a royal commission was set up in order discern the causes behind the “Depression in Trade and Industry.” The cause was easily discovered: “We are beginning,” the commission reported, “to feel the effect of foreign competition in

² I discuss the conception of Vaughan Williams as “insular and parochial” as it relates to his writing on music, especially in National Music and Other Essays (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996). Vaughan Williams’s views on style and its relationship to place are further discussed in this thesis, especially in the first two chapters.
quarters where our trade formerly enjoyed a practical monopoly.\textsuperscript{3} Despite the simple diagnosis, no solution could be found for such a complex economic and political issue.

England occupied a curious space at the turn of the twentieth century as both an economic powerhouse with massive imperial holdings and a cultural backwater. Towards the end of the nineteenth century England was, especially compared to other nations, a markedly industrialized nation with over two-thirds of its population living in urban areas. Over one-quarter of the world's population was "British," and yet what it meant to artistically render "Englishness" remained undefined.

In his 1966 study, \textit{The English Musical Renaissance}, Frank Howes critically appraises the progress of English music by the mid-twentieth century:

There is a general agreement that English music is better in quality and English musical life healthier than it was in Victorian times. It is held in greater esteem and occupies a more important place in public life. The general agreement among ourselves and must not be accepted without scrutiny, since it may be due merely to the superficial view that old fashions are absurd and new ones always an improvement, or it may be due to an increase of national pride which likes to think that we cut a better figure, artistically speaking, in Europe today than we did a century ago.\textsuperscript{4}

England, by almost any measure, lacked the breadth and depth of the Austro-German symphonic and operatic tradition. To contemporary listeners, English music lacked a characteristic identity due to its heavy reliance on "foreign" models. French

critic G. Jean Aubry offers a typical, if rather sympathetic, assessment of turn-of-the-century English musical culture when he writes:

No other country, I am convinced, has a greater future in store for her in this respect if she is willing to take the right path and rid herself of the asphyxiating [read “German”] influences which have suffocated her for so long a period. 

Historian and composer Cecil Forsyth describes earlier English musicians as divided into two “castes:”

One meekly submissive and liable to be hanged in batches at Tyburn for stealing a loaf of bread; the other strongly aristocratic, wealthy, insolent, and ignorant. In the lower stratum of this atmosphere . . . a few semi-cultivated kinds of folk-song contrived to flourish: in the upper, music was contemptuously tolerated only so long as it was expensive and foreign.

Going beyond a mere description of the musicians, Forsyth offers a succinct and delightfully witty account of society’s view of musicians:

To the educated Englishman, a savant who deals with Greek manuscripts is a scholar (and a gentleman): one who deals with musical manuscripts is a scholar (but a musician). If he is a symphonist he is wasting his time pitting himself against his superiors the Germans. If he writes opera he has overlooked the fact that it can’t be sung in such a “vulgar” language as English. And whatever he is doing—symphony, opera, or chamber-

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music—he would be much better employed in the army, navy, or police forces.\(^7\)

In the early years of the twentieth century Ralph Vaughan Williams emerged as a leading star within the English school. He offered a novel construction of national musical identity founded upon an idealized interpretation of pre-industrial, culturally homogeneous England. In 1908, Vaughan Williams—despite a growing reputation, increasingly frequent performances of his works, and financial stability—felt that he was "lumpy and stodgy, had come to a dead-end, and that a little French polish would be of use."\(^8\) Vaughan Williams fulfilled his desire for "a little French polish" during a three-month study with Maurice Ravel in 1908. While stated matter-of-factly, to study in France was quite anomalous for a young English composer at the time, as Germany would have been the more "logical" choice. French music was largely unknown in English musical circles.\(^9\)

Talented English musicians were typically sent to Leipzig or Berlin to receive the "proper" training. Vaughan Williams had done just that when, in 1897, he studied for a time with Max Bruch.\(^10\) Such an experience only served to reinforce the Germanic models taught within the English Academy at the hands of Charles Villiers Stanford and C. H. H. Parry, two of Vaughan Williams’s teachers who were, unsurprisingly, both

schooled in Germany. Vaughan Williams’s style prior to working with Ravel was understandably Germanic, texturally complex, and Brahmsian.¹¹

As Vaughan Williams self-consciously attempted to craft a distinctively national compositional style in the early years of the twentieth century, the pervasiveness of German models posed a significant stumbling block. The symphonic repertoire emanating from the German-speaking lands constituted not only the bulk of works performed, but also served as the pedagogical foundation for fledgling musicians. The young musical minds were fed a steady diet of Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Handel, with Wagner providing satisfaction for the more adventurous palates. Such, also, was Vaughan Williams’s upbringing. When he came to the Royal College of Music in 1890, Hubert Parry, as well known for his efforts as a historian and pedagogue as a composer, found his new pupil to be terribly illiterate and remedied the situation with a hefty dose of Germanic repertoire.¹²

Vaughan Williams developed an affinity for Wagner during an 1895 trip to Munich. In listening to a performance of *Die Walküre*, he stated that “I experienced no surprise, but rather that strange certainty that I had heard it all before .... There was a feeling of recognition as of meeting an old friend which comes to us all in the face of great artistic experiences.”¹³ When asked by his cousin, Ralph Wedgwood, what he

¹¹ Vaughan Williams’s early chamber music provides a useful point of comparison to *On Wenlock Edge*, especially the String Quartet in C minor (1897), Quintet in D major (1898), and the Quintet in C minor (1903).
wished for his wedding present, Vaughan Williams replied, “I should prize a Wagner full
score more than anything, if you really cared to give me one.”

However, despite his obvious appreciation for the German tradition, Vaughan
Williams was careful to assert the need for English music to take an original path. The
composer writes in a letter to Ralph Wedgwood, “It seems to me that the future of music
lies between England and Russia but first the Russians must try to give up being original
and the English being imitators.” While obviously aware of the artistic merit of these
other traditions, Vaughan Williams suggests an intriguing experiment in National Music
to order to avoid undue influence from foreign traditions:

It has been suggested that in order to save its own soul every nation should
institute a kind of artistic ‘five year plan’ in accordance with which only
indigenous music would be allowed for five years. In this way the people
of each nation, being prevented from employing others to make music for
them, would be obliged if they wanted it, to make it for themselves.

And yet, despite such ideological rhetoric about national style and the supposedly
necessary isolation required to produce a viable “school” of nationalist composers,
Vaughan Williams looks surprisingly to Richard Wagner for his paradigm of nationalist
sentiment. In his famous 1932 lectures on national music, Vaughan Williams concludes:

14 From a letter published in Cobbe, “Vaughan Williams, Germany, and the German
Tradition,” 83.
16 Ralph Vaughan Williams, “Some Conclusions,” in National Music and Other Essays
I think there is no work of art which represents the spirit of a nation more surely than *Die Meistersinger*. . . . At the end of that opera Hans Sachs does not preach about art having no boundaries or loving the highest when he sees it, but says what I may slightly paraphrase thus:

‘Honour your own masters;  
Then even when Empires fall  
Our sacred nation’s art will still remain.’

In Vaughan Williams, there exists a palpable tension between his sense of national identity and his awareness of its fragility. In his essay *Nationalism and Internationalism*, the composer observes:

The Germans and Austrians have a great musical tradition behind them. In some ways they are musically more developed than we, and therein lies the danger. The question is not who has the best music, but what is going to be best for us. . . . We must be careful that, faced with this overwhelming mass of ‘men and material,’ we do not all become sham little Austrians or Germans.

Ralph Vaughan Williams sounded different after studying with Maurice Ravel. Vaughan Williams began producing works—such as the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* and *The Lark Ascending*—which to stand out as central expressions of his individual, and by extension England’s, musical voice. The song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* will serve as this study’s focal point because it brings to the fore a number of tensions and contradictions inherent in Vaughan Williams’s search for, and eventual formulation of, a musical voice which was at once individual and unassailably English. I further intend to

examine Vaughan Williams’s appropriation of and later reliance on French harmonic and timbral idioms, especially from his teacher, Maurice Ravel. Of greater importance is the manner in which Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries assessed and rationalized the formative influence of French music on the English style. *On Wenlock Edge*, as I intend to demonstrate, bears all of the markers of the composer’s mature idiom, and it served as a vehicle to solidify his reputation as a representative of a revitalized and aesthetically viable “English” school of composers.

This study hopes to complicate rather than simplify Vaughan Williams’s lasting image. Through a varied examination of *On Wenlock Edge*, I will bring to the fore the contradiction of a homogenous, pastoral national identity formulated by members of a culturally diverse, industrial empire. I will accomplish this through three case studies centering upon different aspects of *On Wenlock Edge*. First I will discuss Ravel’s influence on Vaughan Williams, as seen in *On Wenlock Edge*, and the many ways in which Vaughan Williams and his historians rationalized that influence into a broader nationalist agenda. Secondly I will examine how and why the English landscape was used as a source of national identity. Thirdly I will discuss Vaughan Williams’s evolving reputation as a central figure in English music through a performance and reception history of *On Wenlock Edge*. Finally I hope to emphasize the paradox of a man who could only achieve the “emancipation of our [England’s] national music from bondage to the continent” by appropriating and assimilating a distinctly continental idiom.
Chapter 1

ASSESSING FRENCH INFLUENCE

Ralph Vaughan Williams’s 1908 self-assessment—that he was “lumpy and stodgy, had come to a dead-end, and that a little French polish would be of use”—was not a sudden judgment, but rather the culmination of a long held dissatisfaction.\(^1\) A 1903 letter from Gustav Holst offers a revealing glimpse into Vaughan Williams’s feelings of insufficiency and also seems to suggest the stylistic direction Vaughan Williams eventually took:

You have never lost your invention but it has not developed enough. Your best—your most original and beautiful style or ‘atmosphere’ is an indescribable sort of feeling as if one was listening to very lovely lyrical poetry. I may be wrong but I think this (what I call to myself the real RVW) is more original than you think.\(^2\)

After studying with Ravel, Vaughan Williams began producing mature works that clearly built upon what Holst deemed “your most original and beautiful style or atmosphere.” *On Wenlock Edge* provides a unique perspective into Vaughan Williams’s

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\(^2\) Gustav Holst, “Heirs and Rebels: Letters written to each other and occasional writings on music by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst,” edited by Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst (New York: Cooper Square, 1974), 15. Holst wrote this letter in Berlin, where he was vacationing with his wife and attending concerts. Holst and Vaughan Williams were close friends, frequent correspondents, and compositional critics from their student days at the Royal College of Music in 1893, up until Holst’s untimely death in 1934.
stylistic development, and a clearer understanding of French influence, through Ravel's teaching, on an English national style as it evolved in important part from Vaughan Williams. This chapter will illuminate Vaughan Williams's pre-1908 dissatisfaction by briefly examining his early output and his aesthetic lack of connection with the English Academy. I will examine the manner of Ravel's influence, and how his tutelage allowed Vaughan Williams to create a distinctly English style but at the same time posed a threat, in English eyes, to aesthetic autonomy.

Critical reception of Vaughan Williams's early orchestral output illuminates his dissatisfaction with himself and his environs. After the 1906 premier of the Norfolk Rhapsody No. 1 for orchestra, a critic from The Times offered a typical response, stating that it was "a very taking and charming orchestral piece," but that by treating folk tunes, Vaughan Williams had "shirked a great part, perhaps the greatest part, of the composer's responsibility . . . the originating of new and beautiful themes," going on to assert that "it is unnecessary to remark on the dainty colours of the score, an art which nowadays is almost common property." The critic expresses a clear hierarchy of musical elements: in using an existing source of thematic material Vaughan Williams appears to the critic as aesthetically irresponsible. Color and orchestration are read as strictly decorative or frivolous, a surface adornment atop "meaningful" structural elements. This is the crux of

21 By "English Academy" I refer especially to Vaughan Williams's early teacher who were the leading English composers of the late nineteenth century: Charles Wood, C. H. H Parry, and C. V. Stanford.
the aesthetic disconnect between Vaughan Williams and his critic, and by extension, between Vaughan Williams and the English musical academy. The composer’s use of rhapsodic rather than sonata procedure depends on the sense of the “picturesque” and the “fanciful” as constructive elements, elevating those “dainty colors” to a place once reserved for “form.” In utilizing a musical object of commonly understood semantic content, such as a folk song, Vaughan Williams was not required to condition the audience with programmatic associations, but rather was able to work within an established associative context. Michael Vaillancourt suggests that Vaughan Williams treated the folk songs in a manner similar to Charles Villiers Stanford in his *Irish Rhapsody No. 1* (1902). Both works utilize fragmentary gestures, derived from the folk songs, which “coalesce during the course of the movement.”

The *Norfolk Rhapsody* was by no means a solitary venture into the picturesque; Vaughan Williams’s early orchestral output is surely characterized by its evocation of “place” as an object of musical contemplation. *The Times* responded to a 1907 performance of “Harnham Down” and “Boldre Wood,” two movements drawn from the never completed *Four Orchestral Impressions*, as a “beautiful study in wood-magic,” commenting on the composer’s use of “modern harmonies” and “strange orchestral

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24 I use rhapsody in this paper in the manner defined by Oxford Music Online “An instrumental piece in one movement, often based on popular, national, or folk melodies. . . Rhapsodies may be passionate, nostalgic, or improvisatory.”
26 Ibid.
27 The *Norfolk Rhapsody* is based on three Norfolk folk tunes Vaughan Williams collected in 1905. The 1906 manuscript is lost. The work underwent heavy revision after World War I. The Second Norfolk Rhapsody was withdrawn, but was finally recorded in 2002. *Norfolk Rhapsody No. 3 in G* was withdrawn and has yet to resurface in any form.
effects” for the sake of making the “intended impression.” Again, Vaughan Williams’s colorful orchestration and evocative writing are portrayed as merely decorative. In his character pieces Vaughan Williams creates interest by allowing the thematic material to gradually take shape. Perhaps the critic received works such as the *Norfolk Rhapsody* dismissively because they lacked the rhetorical *Seig und Kampf* of sonata procedure, or that the use of folk material cheapened high art. Even at this early stage in his career, Vaughan Williams’s output, especially instrumental, can be characterized as picturesque and contemplative, reflecting what Holst characterized as listening to lyrical poetry. And yet in conducting his own works and hearing them under other interpreters, Vaughan Williams felt that his work was still deficient. Perhaps Vaughan Williams believed his style lacked a well-defined identity. However, he consulted with his colleagues as to where he might find some additional, and hopefully antidotal, tutelage.

Vaughan Williams’s search did not lead him immediately to Ravel, though France seemed from the onset a likely destination. For instance, on 24 October 1907, a few days after hearing Frederick Delius’s piano concerto played at a Promenade Concert by Theodor Szanto, he wrote:

> Dear Mr. Delius,

> I hope you will not think I am making a very audacious request. I should so much like to show you some of my work. I have had it in my mind (and especially now that I have heard you beautiful concerto) that I should profit very much by your advice and if you saw my work you might be able to suggest ways in which I could improve myself—either by going to Paris or not. Have you ever any time to spare—and if you have would you

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28 Kennedy, *Works*, 89.
allow me to come and see you? I don't know if I ought to ask this on so slight an acquaintance.

Yours very truly,

R. Vaughan Williams²⁹

While “placing” Delius’s style within a geographical confine would be a rather tricky proposition when one considers his wide travels and various influences, the piano concerto is harmonically lush and would certainly sound novel to British ears in 1907. Finding in it a distinctly French idiom would not be unreasonable. While he never studied formally with Delius, Vaughan Williams’s infatuation with that sense of difference is quite telling. Finally settling upon Paris as his eventual destination for further study, Vaughan Williams was initially recommended by English critic Edwin Evans to study with Vincent D’Indy at the Schola Cantorum. Critic and scholar Michel Calvocoressi suggested Maurice Ravel as a possible teacher, and it was with Ravel that Vaughan Williams decided to study.

In a letter to Calvocoressi dated December 1907, Vaughan Williams enthusiastically writes, “I must . . . thank you for introducing me to the man who is exactly what I am looking for. . . . As far as my faults he hit on them all exactly & is telling me to do exactly what I half feel in my mind I ought to do—but it just wanted saying.”³⁰ Vaughan Williams says he learned from Ravel that “the heavy Teutonic manner was not necessary,” that “one should only develop things for the sake of arriving

²⁹ Kennedy, Works, 89.
at something better” and avoid “development for its own sake.”

Of Ravel’s influence, Vaughan Williams states that “After three months [of study with Ravel] I came home with a bad attack of French fever and wrote . . . a song cycle with several atmospheric effects, but I did not succumb to the temptation of writing a piece about a cemetery, and Ravel paid me the compliment of telling me that I was the only pupil who ‘n’écris pas de ma musique [did not write my music].” Luckily, according to Vaughan Williams, “My French fever soon subsided, and left my musical metabolism on the whole healthier.”

Vaughan Williams suggests Ravel provided a strictly purifying influence, excising the Germanic “excesses” of dense counterpoint and “meaningless” development. Vaughan Williams portrays his attraction to the French style as an infatuation, as a passing fad or fancy quickly dispelled, leaving his musical language free from both German and French influence: only the English remained. Herbert Foss, in his 1950 survey of Vaughan Williams’s life, puts forward this hypothesis most poetically:

If the Frenchman had any influence at all, he made Vaughan Williams realize that he was not a Frenchman, might have been Prussian, but remained an Englishman. The cycle [On Wenlock Edge—“the song cycle with several atmospheric effects’] splashed into our [English] musical stream, muddy as it was with tributaries of Brahms and Dvořák and the ebbing trickles of Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Spohr, as a bather, a very simple English countryman, naked and unashamed, in his own stream.”

Vaughan Williams’s song cycle “with atmospheric affects,” On Wenlock Edge, serves well to demonstrate both a continued preoccupation with landscape and a clear

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33 Vaughan Williams, Musical Autobiography, 191.
manifestation of Ravel’s influence.\textsuperscript{35} Vaughan Williams draws his text from A. E. Housman’s \textit{A Shropshire Lad} (1896), drawing especially on the poet’s depiction of Shropshire as a returning symbol of permanence in a chaotic and transient world. Housman’s collection of sixty-three poems focuses generally on the themes of death and nostalgic remembrances of the Shropshire countryside. Though it sold slowly at first, the collection grew in popularity after the Second Boer War because of his depictions of rural life and his emphasis on the fragility of life.\textsuperscript{36} Arthur Somervell, an older English contemporary of Vaughan Williams, was the first to set poems from a \textit{Shropshire Lad} in 1904. Vaughan Williams’s more memorable effort utilized only six of the sixty-three poems, choosing only those that utilized the “evocative magic of place names.”\textsuperscript{37} From Housman’s set of sixty-three poems, Vaughan Williams chose to set six of them for tenor, piano, and string quartet.

Though a break with traditional harmonic practice seemed anticipated in his early works—such as his Rosetti and Stevenson settings, the \textit{Norfolk Rhapsody}, \textit{In the Fen Country}, and \textit{Toward the Unknown Region}—the ultimate break with functional tonality did not occur until after his Paris sojourn.\textsuperscript{38} A clear and lasting French influence can be clearly seen throughout \textit{On Wenlock Edge} in Vaughan Williams’s harmonic and timbral

uses. The clearest and most commented upon manifestation of French influence occurs in the fifth and longest song of the cycle, “Bredon Hill.” Vaughan Williams begins with an extended instrumental introduction. The composer evokes a shimmering still atmosphere with a hazy minor-minor seventh sonority, built on E5, set in the upper tessitura of the string instruments (see example 2.1 for this and all subsequent references to this movement). Strings allow the sonic haze to hover, seemingly in perpetuity, because of the string players’ ability to change bow direction with an apparently seamless sound matched only by an organ.

When the piano enters (m. 2), it utilizes the same sonority, but built on A2, creating a bi-tonal blur that evokes a sense of harmonic tension. The two instrument groups—strings and piano—then rock back and forth in gentle rhythmic counterpoint, both planing minor-minor seventh chords (mm. 5–7). The prevailing sonority, comprised of two minor-minor seventh chords set a perfect fifth apart, lacks a sense of tonal direction. It evokes a sort of a-temporal stasis disregarding function but rather using sonority as a property of color. Despite the tonal ambiguity of this diatonically dissonant sonority, Vaughan Williams establishes it, through repetition, as a tonic substitute distinguishable only through timbre.

Although he studied with Maurice Ravel, certain aspects of Vaughan Williams’s new harmonic usage point to Claude Debussy as another formative influence. Debussy is

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39 Since my discussion of French music centers upon harmony and timbre, I will leave my discussion Vaughan Williams’s text setting for the later chapters.

40 Interestingly, organ is often mentioned in relation to Vaughan Williams’s string writing, especially concerning the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis.

41 Michael Kennedy, A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 65. He rather comically refers to this movement as a “kind of G major,” which is the only entry in the entire catalogue to warrant such an ambiguous description.
arguably the most notable and pervasive utilizer “stacked” extended tertian harmony moving by root motion, and probably served as a model for Vaughan Williams. This common-chord technique, developed fully in France, can be seen pervasively in *On Wenlock Edge* and later throughout Vaughan Williams’s output.
Example 2.1 Non-functional pan-diatonic harmony in the introduction to “Bredon Hill” from *On Wenlock Edge* (1908), mm. 1–23.

After establishing such a tranquil atmosphere the voice enters with a simple melody (see Example 2.2). Taken in isolation it seems as if it could be a folk song because of its gentle pentatonicism and symmetrical phrasing. A folk idiom seems utterly natural for the protagonist, a lad from Shropshire, to express himself in a manner evokes a sense of place and “which is not only purely lyrical, but derives its poignancy from its very simplicity.”

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44 Vaughan Williams, *Musical Autobiography*, 191. The composer states “I practiced chiefly orchestration with him” and that Ravel’s piano pieces, along with works by Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin provided the bulk of his study material.
Example 2.2 “Bredon Hill” mm. 24–35, voice with piano reduction to show harmonic context

Vaughan Williams evokes the bells heard by the protagonist through melismatic fourths: a technique “cribbed,” to use the composer’s own term for such borrowing, from one of his teacher’s compositions (see example 2.4 and compare to mm. 16–24 of example 2.1). The bells of “Bredon Hill,” which figure heavily into my later discussion of On Wenlock Edge’s critical reception, are clearly derived from Ravel’s earlier piano work. Vaughan Williams clearly states that he practiced orchestration partly through orchestrating Ravel’s piano compositions, making it very likely that Vaughan Williams

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44 Vaughan Williams, Musical Autobiography, 191. The composer states “I practiced chiefly orchestration with him” and that Ravel’s piano pieces, along with works by Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin provided the bulk of his study material.
came into contact with “La Vallée des Cloches” (the Valley of the Bells), the fifth movement of Ravel’s *Miroirs*, written in 1904-1905.

Vaughan Williams’s new French harmonic uses in *On Wenlock Edge* point not only to Ravel but also to Claude Debussy as an important influence. The similar use of parallel root movement and non-functional extended tertian harmony can be seen, among numerous other possible examples, in the “Sarabande” from Debussy’s *Suite: Pour le Piano*, written in 1901 (see example 2.3). “Bredon Hill” was by no means the only song in the cycle to clearly demonstrate French influence. In the second, third, and sixth songs, Vaughan Williams generates each movement’s characteristic harmonic gesture by alternating between non-functional block harmonies. As I will discuss in the next chapter, he uses this oscillation to create a sense of timelessness in reaction to the text (see example 2.5, observe the similarity with example 2.3). Regardless of the composer’s dramatic intent, the harmonic vocabulary has a distinctively French accent.

Example 2.3: A possible source of inspiration for Vaughan Williams’s similar parallel chord movement. Claude Debussy “Sarabande” from *Suite: Pour le Piano* (1901)
Example 2.4 Maurice Ravel, “La Vallée des Cloches” from Miroirs (1905), mm. 1–3. Vaughan Williams borrows Ravel’s technique of evoking bells through melismatic fourths.

“From Far, From Even And Morning,” mm. 1–3, expression marks removed by author.

“Is My Team Ploughing?” mm. 1–4

Example 2.5: Characteristic harmonic gestures of songs 2, 3, and 6 offer no harmonic direction, but merely oscillate between block harmonies suggesting circular rather than linear motion, suggesting a strong French influence.
Example 2.5: Continued.

Vaughan Williams melodic structure—generally modal and pentatonic—can be read as both folk-influenced and linked to Ravel’s very similar uses. Two works Vaughan Williams possibly encountered during his time in Paris are Ravel’s *Sonate Posthume* for violin and piano and the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. Although not published during the composer’s lifetime, Ravel composed his *Sonate* in 1897. Ravel composed the *Pavane* for piano solo in 1899 while studying at the Conservatoire, and later orchestrated it in 1910. Both works exhibit a freely modal melodic style and a colorful harmonic idiom with frequent parallel chord movement—all characteristics which, though not exclusive to Ravel, are certainly French and can be seen in *On Wenlock Edge* (see example 2.6).
While a direct link with his Ravel and the broader French school can be easily observed in *On Wenlock Edge*, the symptoms of Vaughan Williams’s “French Fever” did not subside, but rather became an integral part of his musical idiom after 1908. The “atmospheric effects” clearly seen in *On Wenlock Edge* can be found repeatedly in his later output, most immediately in the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* (1910) that demonstrates a persistent use of parallel chord movement and static string sonorities. “Love Bade Me Welcome,” from the orchestral song cycle *Five Mystical Songs* (1912) serves as another clear example (see Example 2.5 for both the *Fantasia* ans “Love Bade Me Welcome”). Again there is a preference for the same sonority, the minor-minor seventh chord, expressed as a stable harmonic entity, and elaborated in a sort of organum in order to create a sense of atmosphere rather than harmonic direction.

*The Lark Ascending* (1914) provides another “mature” manifestation of Vaughan William’s technical expertise and his gravitation towards the picturesque, with its sense of timelessness, accomplished through the meditative ruminations of non-developmental, static harmonies. Ravel’s lasting influence is writ large across the pages of his English student’s post-Parisian output. Of more importance, and less obvious, is the reason why Vaughan Williams and his early biographers downplayed Ravel’s role.

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47 Palmer, “Delius, Vaughan Williams, and Debussy,” 476.
Sonate Posthume for violin and piano (1897), mm. 1–9

Pavane pour une infante défunte for piano (1899), mm. 1–7.

Example 2.6: Possible sources of inspiration for Vaughan Williams that clearly illustrate the techniques he acquired and integrated into his harmonic and melodic idioms.
Vaughan Williams’s motivation to hide his teacher’s influence was by no means personal. Vaughan Williams and Ravel maintained a lasting friendship. Ravel avidly promoted Vaughan Williams’s work, referring most affectionately to Vaughan Williams as “a pupil of whom I am very proud.” Most likely, the perceived fragility of the English “school” led to an anxiety of influence, rendering Ravel, no matter how friendly a mentor and influential a teacher, a threatening “other.” French author and critic Georges Jean-Aubry astutely appraises the place of English music in the early twentieth century:

It is startling to observe to how great an extent Handel, Mendelssohn and Brahms have become household gods of English music during the course of the nineteenth century. It is not my purpose to dispute the undoubted genius of these three composers, but to lament the slavery to which England has been subjected by them and from which she is by no means completely set free.

English composers felt oppressed under the enormous weight of the Austro-German tradition. Those hungry for a distinctly English musical style saw it as a stultifying influence that had to be forsaken. To achieve aesthetic independence along national lines, as Vaughan Williams intended to do, English composers were burdened with proving that their style was not derivative.

Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis (1910, edited 1913, 1919), mm 1–8

Largo sostenuto \( \frac{J}{56} \)

“Love Bade Me Welcome” from Five Mystical Songs (1912), mm. 1–5. Piano Reduction by author.

Andante sostenuto

Example 2.7: Lasting French influence on Vaughan Williams’s harmonic vocabulary.

In 1912, Vaughan Williams argues, “if it [art and music] is to be of any value it must grow out of the very life of himself [the English composer], the community in which he lives, the nation to which he belongs.”\(^50\) Despite the richness of other national traditions, he argues “it is all very well to catch at the prophet’s robe, but the mantle of Elijah is apt, like all second-hand clothing, to prove the worst of misfits.”\(^51\) Vaughan Williams sets originality as the essential precondition for legitimacy and viability. Therefore non-English models must be either purged or portrayed as insignificant. In his famous 1932 lectures on national music, Vaughan Williams further asserts:

\(^{50}\) Ralph Vaughan Williams, “Who Wants the English Composer,” Royal College of Music Magazine 9/1 (1912), 12.
It is not even true that music has an universal vocabulary, but even it were so it is the use of the vocabulary that counts and no one supposes that French and English are the same language because they happen to use twenty-five out of twenty-six letters of their alphabet in common [sic.]. . . . As Hubert Parry said in his inaugural address to the Folk Song Society of England, "True Style comes not from the individual but from the products of crowds of fellow-workers who sift and try and try again till the have found the thing that suits their native taste. . . . Style is ultimately national." 52

Note how Vaughan Williams juxtaposed French and English so as to emphasize their differences. The paradox of the English style becomes clear: in Vaughan Williams's eyes, the essential pre-conditions for "style" are both a native vocabulary and, as Parry suggests, mass appeal to native taste. However, to achieve mass appeal, the harmonic vocabulary required a distinctly French accent. In the interest of national image, Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries painted Ravel as only a remover of Germanic influence and all sullying foreignness.

I have thus far depended largely on formal similarities to demonstrate Ravel's "French" influence on Vaughan Williams. This leads to the question: Are syntactical elements, in and of themselves, meaningful in a discussion of national style? 53 Can an internationally utilized technique, such as pentatonic melody, legitimately express the national simply because the composer self-consciously uses it in a "nationalist" manner?

Carl Dahlhaus raises an issue of further-reaching consequence. Do "individual characteristics proceed out of the national substance or is the concept of what is national

formed by generalization on the basis of individual characteristics?" In this light, the English "pastoral" idiom could be seen as merely as a convenient appropriation of Vaughan Williams's personal idiom put to national use. As Vaughan Williams's career developed, there were relatively few exemplary English composers. Lacking many options, basing a national style on the work of a very few composers seems an act of necessity more than choice. Viewing Vaughan Williams as an excellent composer who is English is far less problematic than proving him an excellent English composer.

Defending Vaughan Williams as an English composer necessitates "placing" the composer within the geographical and racial confines of "pure" Englishness in order to legitimize his output as worthy of emulation. Ravel's seemingly benevolent influence would therefore be perceived as a malicious threat to the overtly binary construct of identity.

Viewed alternatively, especially considering Vaughan Williams's socialist views, foreign influence is equally threatening to a style predicated upon the concept of anonymous, communal authorship. Parry's concept of style as that which suits native tastes seems to a certain extent founded upon the belief that the indigenous population will gravitate towards a native musical style, although this formulation depends only on the collective "sifting" and choosing as markers of authenticity, making the choice of a French-inspired, impressionist idiom ironic but no less valid.

Ravel obviously exerted a strong influence on Vaughan Williams's stylistic development. Michael Kennedy succinctly articulates the "Ravel issue":

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If Vaughan Williams had died leaving only the *Norfolk Rhapsody* of 1906 as a token of his emergence from the chrysalis, he would be remembered only as a promising composer of songs. . . . But a lifetime of study of his music convinces me that Ravel's was a potent and lasting influence. . . . So where does that leave the art firmly planted in the composer's own soil? What is an English composer?55

Maurice Ravel provides a stumbling block to the new English school's nationalist agenda. Vaughan Williams, and by extension all English composers, felt compelled to define and express a sense of aesthetic difference. Ravel provided Vaughan Williams with the necessary tools and techniques to create a viable English school of composers, though ironically using a style of questionable Englishness.

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Chapter 2

LANDSCAPE AS NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

Ralph Vaughan Williams’s music teems with evocations of folk life and the English countryside. While the previous chapter showed how Vaughan Williams acquired the necessary means to convey musical Englishness from a Frenchman, this chapter will investigate Vaughan William’s use of landscape and pastoral imagery as it relates to his nationalist agenda.\(^{56}\) I will examine *On Wenlock Edge* as a nationalist document and the manner in which the composer uses landscape as an instrument of identification and justification in the process of defining Englishness. In this chapter, I utilize W. J. T. Mitchell’s definition of landscape as a “physical and multisensory medium (earth, stone, vegetation, water, sky, sound and silence, light and darkness, etc.) in which cultural meanings and values are encoded.”\(^{57}\) While most frequently associated with painting, I will discuss landscape as an aesthetic experience and projection of place that can be expressed through various media, including music. Before focusing on landscape, I will begin by briefly discussing Vaughan Williams’s well-known association with folksong, but as a signifier of landscape and place rather than self-contained symbols of Englishness (see figure 3.1).


Folk song figures strongly into Vaughan Williams’s development and lasting reputation. He began lecturing on the subject in 1902 and began collecting in 1903. Notably, his view on the role of folk music in English musical life was markedly different before he began collecting. In his first published writing, a 1902 article entitled “A School of English Music,” Vaughan Williams asserts:

Now, English composers do not spring from the peasantry. Indeed, in England there are no true peasantry for them to spring from. Why, then, should an English composer attempt to found his style on the music of a class to which he does not belong, and which itself no longer exists?60

60 Ralph Vaughan Williams, “A School of English Music” The Vocalist 1/1 (1902): 8. This article, and others, can be found reprinted in David Manning, Vaughan Williams on Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
After collecting hundreds of folksongs, Vaughan Williams developed the views we now commonly associate with him, as can be seen in his *Musical Autobiography*:

There has been a lot of cheap wit expended on “folk-song” composers.... This is really nothing more than the old complaint of the vested interests who are annoyed when anyone drinks a glass of pure water, rather than a glass of beer which will bring profit to the company. This appears to involve a moral rather than an artistic question; from the point of view of musical experience it seems to me that so long as good music is made it matters very little how it is made or who makes it. If a composer can, by tapping sources hidden in folk-song, make beautiful music, he will be disloyal to his art if he does not make full use of such an avenue of beauty.  

In the nearly fifty years between these two writings Vaughan Williams justifies and exalts the use of folk song as raw musical material. In the latter writing Vaughan Williams carefully avoids mentioning the issue of class. How could a composer authentically draw upon a tradition not his own? In “A School of English Music,” Vaughan Williams writes:

Experience of the past is a warning to avoid artificiality. In former times, musical England came to grief by trying to be foreign; no less surely shall we now fail through trying to be English. It is useless to invent a style and then model individual utterances upon it. The national English style must be modeled on the personal style of English musicians.

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62 Though he ironically accuses other musicians, the “vested interests,” of profiteering when he was one of the richest musicians in England.

In 1902, Vaughan Williams asserts that authentic style must avoid "external" models. He rearticulated this view quite consistently throughout his long career, but his criterion for indigenous and external models changed critically in the intervening years. To Vaughan Williams in 1902, the difference of social context, class, and education made folk songs and pastoral imagery as foreign a model as Brahms or Mendelssohn. Folk songs belonged to a particular group of people, during a particular time, and within a particular social context.

Later Vaughan Williams discusses folk song as a universally valid expression of Englishness ("a glass of pure water") devoid of social context. Influenced by emerging ruralist nationalism, Vaughan Williams and his fellow collectors invest the folk songs they collect with almost mythical powers. Pre-industrial England ceases to be a tangible place and becomes an idealized "cultural artifact uniquely expressive of the feelings of the nation."64 In order to provide a platform for identity construction, the folk song and the pastoral had to be divorced from their particular social and geographical contexts and be abstracted into generalized symbols of common Englishness. Folk song ceased to be a signifier of class and became a signifier of place.

One claim made in the former article that Vaughan Williams did not see fit to contradict in the latter was the rural peasantry's virtual extinction. At the turn of the nineteenth century, England dominated world finance and industry and had, by far, the lowest percentage of its population making its living in agriculture relative to other industrialized countries. For the sake of perspective, in 1801 agriculture constituted

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almost one third of gross national income, falling to 20.3 percent in 1851, 10.4 percent in 1881, and a meager 6.1 percent by 1901. As a proportion of the workforce, 27 percent of occupied males worked in agriculture in 1851, 17 percent in 1881, and a mere 12 percent in 1901. Why then would a member of such an industrialized state choose to construct a national aesthetic identity on places few occupied and a way of life few lived?

In *On Wenlock Edge*, Vaughan Williams sets only poems in which the poetic voice is divorced from the present. Similarly, in almost every poem, life’s fragility is constantly used to highlight the landscapes sense of a-temporality. Edward Casey asserts in his book *Representing Place: Landscape, Painting, and Maps*:

> Just as a given landscape cannot be contained in a finite part of space, so its full perception cannot be confined to an instant of time. By its radical circumstance, landscape exceeds both kinds of unit, the indecomposable and uncontainable excess of the natural world over chronometric and spatiometric delimitations.

Landscape transcends time. A folk song can be lost, and a way of life die out, but the sense of place remains permanent. In mapping a sense of national identity onto the landscape, the sense of self is validated because it appears, as Benedict Anderson posits in *Imagined Communities*, to “loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important,

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66 See appendix for the complete text of all poems set in *On Wenlock Edge*.
glide into a limitless future." The only immutable aspect of Englishness is England itself, and not any characteristic or achievement of those who live there.

Folk songs and folk-like idioms become convenient evocations of place throughout *On Wenlock Edge*, and were employed frequently because they bridge the essential sensory gap between music and the primarily visual experience of landscape (see example 3.1). In a painting, the artist evokes place by representing an arrangement of objects, natural and man-made, associated with the location. The composer relies on aural cues. Rather than painting a river or field, they use the sound of the water’s movement or the birdsong. In texted music, such as *On Wenlock Edge*, the words are an equally important sound object. Vaughan Williams chooses a text with frequent references to specific locations, and evokes that place through generic sound imagery (such as the tolling of bells in “Bredon Hill” or the wind in “On Wenlock Edge”). Folksong suggests the sound world of a specific location because the listener would only expect to hear folksong in a particular time and place. In the course of his folk song collection, Vaughan Williams nurtured the association of folksong with a non-industrial sense of place. He went almost exclusively to isolated rural areas to collect, and often discarded those songs that showed the influence of urban popular music. The cultural artifact he sought to preserve became in part shaped by the collector’s ideology, and became a signifier of the place Vaughan Williams hoped to evoke.

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“From Far, From Eve and Morning,” mm. 3–11, voice only.

Example 3.1 Vaughan Williams’s uses a folk-like melodic idiom, as seen in his vocal writing throughout On Wenlock Edge to denote a sense of place.

“Is My Team Ploughing?” mm. 5–9, voice only.

“Oh, When I Was In Love With You,” mm. 1–8.

“Bredon Hill,” mm. 24–35, voice only.
"Clun," mm. 7–22

Example 3.1: Continued.

Vaughan Williams draws on the theme of timelessness explicitly in the first movement of *On Wenlock Edge* in utilizing a poem that evokes the Englishman’s ties to Roman antiquity through a common experience of the landscape:

Then, ‘twas before my time, the Roman  
At yonder heaving hill would stare:  
The blood that warms an English yeoman,  
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,  
Through him the gale of life blew high;  
The tree of man was never quiet;  
Then ‘twas the Roman, now ‘tis I.\(^\text{70}\)

An early twentieth-century English audience could identify with the Romans as powerful builders of empire, but also appreciate the transience of such power in the

waning years of their own political influence. The common experience of place, although accidental, offers a powerful connection to something lasting, the land, on which a sense of self can be built. The resurgent interest in all things Tudor can be seen as another manifestation of the same impulse, which utilizes constructs of an idealized past as either an antidote or an escapist drug to mitigate the turbulence of modern industrial life. The Great War intensified Vaughan Williams’s nationalist rhetoric: ruralist ideals took on “tremendous emblematic importance in the trenches.” The idealized landscape of one’s homeland could be perceived as a bastion of permanence amid the chaos of wartime that could weather the storm of human activity. Retreating from international politics and defining the collective “self” in a manner immune to the Empire’s perceived waning could preserve national identity.

The a-temporal nature of the land is further explored in “On Wenlock Edge.” Vaughan Williams exploits the contrast between the turbulence of human existence and the mute endurance of the land as the source of dramatic energy. The nervous explosion of energy at the onset of the cycle, depicted through the rushing triplet figures and an agitated tremolando in the strings suggests the tempestuousness of human existence or the ravages of time: “On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble / His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves; / The gale, it plies the sapling double / And thick on Severn snow the

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leaves” (see example 3.2). The cycle begins in medias res, lacking a build of tension and instead grabbing the listener insistently. The “gale,” a symbol of destruction and upset merely dies away, exhausts itself—“It blows so hard, twill soon be gone / Today the Roman and his trouble / Are ashes under Uricon”—giving the listener a sense of grave perspective.

In “Is My Team Ploughing?” there is not so much a desire to reclaim to the simplicity and purity of country life, but rather a dead man musing on the symbols which once defined his existence: his love and his livelihood. In keeping with the rest of the cycle, the poetic voice offers descriptions of a rural life. The poem is in the form of a dialogue between the dead man and his still-living friend.

"Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?"

Aye, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;
No Change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.

The deceased expresses himself exclusively in through a plaintive, folk-like melodic idiom (see example 3.1, to see how Vaughan Williams alters his setting for the living man, see example 4.2). The folk idiom, as I have discussed, remains a consistent marker of place, and Vaughan Williams builds upon this association by explicitly using it

74 Housman, A Shropshire Lad, 36.
75 Housman, A Shropshire Lad, 32. See appendix for complete text.
to express nostalgia for lost innocence and happiness. In “Bredon Hill,” the bells and the
tolk-like melody evoke the protagonist’s fond memories of youthful love in summertime.

In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shire they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

The bells would ring to call her
In valleys miles away:
“Come all to church, good people;
Good people, come and pray.”
But here my love would stay.76

Finally in “Clun,” the rivers become symbols of permanence highlighted by
human fragility. Julian Johnson conveys this phenomenon concisely:

Nature music, in its apparent self-containment and avoidance of linear
motion, seems to suspend time. In this it seems to offer an analogy for the
experience of spaciousness in which there is little or no movement. Space
without perceived directed movement appears timeless.77

In each song, harmonic stasis is used to convey the landscape’s a-temporality. In
the case of “On Wenlock Edge” the frenetic energy of the opening evokes the “gale of
life” that sputters out and exhausts itself at the end of the movement rather than achieving

76 Housman, A Shropshire Lad, 27. See appendix for complete text
77 Julian Johnson, Webern and the Transformation of Nature (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1999), 232.
a sense of resolution. In this case, the active harmonies are poetically futile, waning against the landscape’s permanence (see example 3.1).

In “From Far, From Even And Morning,” “Is My Team Ploughing,” and “Clun,” Vaughan Williams uses harmonically weak chord progressions to remove any sense of linear harmonic motion (see example 2.5). And in “Bredon Hill,” Vaughan Williams’s use of dissonant tertian sonorities similarly defies harmonic direction.78

Example 3.2: Explosive rhythmic energy in the opening of “On Wenlock Edge” mm. 1–3.

While both verse and music seem to offer vivid aesthetic experience, the landscape was no less abstracted for the poet and composer. Neither A. E. Housman nor Ralph Vaughan Williams visited that part of Shropshire and the ruggedly beautiful limestone escarpment known as Wenlock Edge.79 Because neither had specific experience with that location, there is an ability to maintain a certain distance from the subject. The listener does not experience Vaughan Williams’s steps through the muddy

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78 Discussed at length in chapter 1: Assessing French Influence.
road, his hypothetical encounter at the Inn trying to find just one more old man with a
unique folksong, or his wish that he had brought thicker coat for that heaving wind. Both
poet and composer offer a more romanticized experience of the landscape that has a more
universal appeal. The location ceases to be physical, because it never existed within that
plane of perception, and transmutes into the symbolic and the abstract realm. The
landscape becomes a vessel for a universal English meaning.

Similarly the antiquarian appeal to both folk and Tudor sources could stem from a
degree of disillusionment with the industrialized political powerhouse of Victorian and
Edwardian England. Such a mercantile identity makes sense when the economic and
political tides are favorable, but with the political uncertainty of the early twentieth
century and the ominous rise of German industry during the late nineteenth century, the
purity of folk music and the grandeur of Tudor England could seem immune to such
changes. This is not to suggest that Vaughan Williams was a simple country boy yearning
for his simple upbringing. Vaughan Williams was certainly no farmer. He grew up with
“a small silver spoon in his mouth” because of his family money, which granted him the
freedom to pursue music without the burden of finding “real” work. He did not come
from an agricultural family and had no first-hand experience with that back-breaking
lifestyle, although he did have a small vegetable patch and a few chickens late in life.

Housman had a similar white-collar upbringing. The English soil was never a source of
subsistence, but rather a potently romantic symbol of Englishness. Throughout his life,
Vaughan Williams always preferred living amidst the vibrant energy of London, though
he spent much time in the countryside on holiday. Vaughan Williams noted frequently
that his *London Symphony* could be more appropriately titled *Symphony by a Londoner*.
Vaughan Williams's dissociation from the soil was the rule in England rather than the exception. It is rather ironic that the resurgence of English musical identity drew upon rural life as its banner. The Romantic connection was not fostered with English soil, the English countryside, and English country life because it represented a richly shared experience, but rather because it was at once local and exotic. Rural England was something specifically and indelibly English with which few Englishmen had any day to day connection, but rather it was something nationally specific on which an entire population could build a sense of national identity.

In his 1920 essay *The Letter and the Spirit*, Vaughan Williams posits

> A musical score is like a map. The expert map reader can tell fairly exactly what sort of country he is going to visit, whether it is hilly or flat, whether the hills are steep or gradual, whether it is wooded or bare, what the roads are likely to be; but can he experience from a map the *spiritual exaltation* when a wonderful view spreads before his eyes?^{81}

It is often in his nature music that one encounters the spiritual Vaughan Williams. Despite a predilection for the spiritual and the meditative, and his numerous religious compositions, one finds with Vaughan Williams a complex and often contradictory relationship with the otherworldly. His father, Arthur Vaughan Williams, was an Anglican priest, but his premature death in 1875 prevented him from indoctrinating his son in the canons of the church, or really having any significant contribution to Ralph's moral upbringing. The liberally intellectual atmosphere of Leigh Hill Place, his mother's

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family home, surely fostered a great love of literature and learning, but it was certainly not a shrine to orthodoxy, although “churchgoing was inescapable.”

The great appeal of religious faith is its appeal to a power unfettered by mortality, the mundane, and the temporal. The concept of God offers a tantalizing permanence, which Vaughan Williams seems to depict in his music about nature. Notably, the landscape often looms very large with Vaughan Williams, a backdrop that consumes and embraces rather than merely supports any temporally bound subjects. Hubert Foss finds this particularly true in “Bredon Hill” stating that the “‘colored counties’ are so close, so important, that they dwarf the human figures in the foreground.” The first song of the cycle calls upon this sense of permanence. The grandeur of the Romans could not outlast the permanence of the land: “The Roman and his trouble / Are ashes under Uricon.”

Vaughan Williams rejected the traditional Judeo-Christian view of God as the source of such permanence in his life, but perhaps nature served as a substitute. In this Vaughan Williams demonstrates a kinship with many Scandinavian composers, such as Grieg, Nielson, and Sibelius, in that they express landscape as “a static, contemplative object. . . . defined by its sense of difference from normative musical behavior.” “Bredon Hill” provides a perhaps the most obvious example of this a-temporality, especially in the instrumental introduction.

There is no comfort in such a sense of permanence. Nature does not offer a comforting embrace to the weary mortal, or offer easy nourishment. Considered somewhat callously, Wenlock Edge is antipathetic. It does not care about the Romans, or

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82 Ursula Vaughan Williams, “Vaughan Williams and His Choice of Words,” 81.
84 Hubert Foss, Ralph Vaughan Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 105.
anything for that matter. It does not love or condemn in the manner of the Christian God, but there is comfort in its surety and permanence. There is not need to have faith in a river or hill. The relationship to the land is one of convenience and necessity, brought about by the simple coincidence of coexistence. Shropshire offers the only anchor for both poet and composer. Perhaps Housman's verse appealed to Vaughan Williams because the poet offered no god to buffer the austere surety of grave. There is not the comfort of heaven, nor the hope of an eventual reincarnation or resurrection. The endurance of the land—of Wenlock Edge, of Bredon Hill, of the ploughing team, or of flowing Clun—serves to only to highlight the temporality of human existence.

Landscape therefore provides Vaughan Williams with means to legitimize his nationalist agenda. Through timelessness, landscape offers a justification of the present. The quintessential Englishness of Vaughan Williams and his music can perhaps be seen as an extension of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of re-constructed historical reality propagated expressly in order to symbolize social cohesion and solidify collective identity. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, landscape has a semiotic value similar to paper money: it useless without a role within a system of exchange-value. In signifying landscape through evocations of rural space, Vaughan Williams participates in appropriating the English countryside as a tool in creating an aesthetic identity. As a nationalist document, On Wenlock Edge's beauty becomes less important than its suggestion of timeless permanence.

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Chapter 3

CRITICAL RECEPTION AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY

In his 1912 essay, “Who Wants an English Composer?,” Vaughan Williams articulates the disconnect between the English public and what he believes to be its rightful priorities:

Nobody wants the young English composer; he is unappreciated at home and unknown abroad. And, indeed, the composer who is not wanted in England can hardly desire to be known abroad, for though his appeal should be in the long run universal, art, like charity, should begin at home. If it is to be of any value it must grow out of the very life of himself, the community in which he lives, the nation to which he belongs. 89

Vaughan Williams expresses the central paradox of rejuvenating England’s musical life through a nationalist approach. To create universally valid art, the English composer must appeal first to the public’s taste, even though the English historically construed music as either frivolous entertainment or a status symbol. This chapter intends to chronicle the evolution of the English public’s relationship with On Wenlock Edge.

I will track the English Musical Renaissance’s birthing pains through a case study of On Wenlock Edge’s early performance history and critical reception. I intend to illuminate On Wenlock Edge’s role in establishing Vaughan Williams’s career as a leader of the new English school of composition, and as a cornerstone of a new English canon. I

will further demonstrate how *On Wenlock Edge*’s critical reception eventually
transcended mere critique of the composition or performance and became a debate over
contemporary trends in English music.

*On Wenlock Edge* provides valuable insight into Vaughan Williams’s career
development because it represents a rather awkward congruence of styles and genres. As
a work of vocal chamber music, *On Wenlock Edge* goes beyond the domestic intimacy of
the traditional combination of voice and piano yet lacks the sheer size of a “public” genre
like symphony or opera. There are stylistic inconsistencies in the work, as will be
discussed later in the chapter. However, as the work became more popular, *On Wenlock
Edge* became a proxy for the whole of English music. By extension, any deficiencies in
the particular work were read as deficiencies in the quality of the nation’s music.

*On Wenlock Edge* received its first public exposure on a 25 January 1909 concert.
Tenor Gervase Elwes, supported only by a piano, performed “Is My Team Ploughing” to
positive reviews. The complete work, with the all six songs and the expected string
quartet in addition to the piano, was first performed at Aeolian Hall on 15 November
1909 with Elwes, the Schwiler String Quartet, and Frederick Kiddle on piano.

It is uncertain whether Vaughan Williams conceived *On Wenlock Edge* as a
complete song cycle, or whether the eventual instrumentation (tenor, piano, and string
quartet), so integral to the work’s affective power, was part of the original conception.90
While Vaughan Williams includes the string quartet throughout the cycle, his inconsistent
use of performance forces raises some interesting issues, especially when considering this
work as a product of Ravel’s orchestration lessons. If Vaughan Williams took from

Ravel, as he claimed, the ability to “orchestrate in points of colour rather than in lines,” then why does the string quartet play such a subordinate role? Very practically the composer makes allowances in the score, in the form of an alternate sections for the piano, in the case that work might be performed without string quartet.

Considering the scoring of the song first performed, the third in the set, “Is My Team Ploughing?,” it is not surprising that the string quartet does little than double the piano part, especially because this song made its debut absent the rest of the cycle and with only voice and piano. Again, the difference between the printed and the alternate piano parts are nominal, and the composer deems a substitution of only five measures necessary to make the song work in its reduced instrumentation.

The first song, “On Wenlock Edge,” features a similar level of emotional intensity and an equally piano-dependent orchestration. Furthermore, the first and third movements make use of similar devices that, as is oft noted by critics and historians alike, hearken to an earlier period in Vaughan Williams’s stylistic development, especially in the use of pulsing triplets and sinuously chromatic lines.

In contrast, the second song, “From Far, From Eve and Morning” isolates piano and strings to create both an agreeable formal division and a to signal a change in poetic tone. Vaughan Williams begins with widely voiced common chords—a technique that re-occurs to great effect throughout the composer’s oeuvre (see example 4.2, mm. 1–7). Despite prominent use of only a few chords, E major, G major, and F major, the gentle cross modality nullifies any functional pull from one to the other. The voice in the initial section remains predominantly on a B, occasionally dropping away and returning in a

chant-like gesture typical of Vaughan Williams’s mature melodic style. When the strings enter in m. 12, they offer a timbral contrast to the large rolled piano chords of the opening, and further offer a sense of urgency to reflect the change in poetic tone (see example 4.2, mm.12–14).

“Oh When I Was In Love With You,” the fourth song in the set seems to be conceived as an integral part of the cycle, and with strings considered a necessary and independent component rather than a superfluous accessory. At just under a minute’s duration, the rippling piano accompaniment, coupled with the rustic twang of the plucked strings bring a wry playfulness to the text (see example 4.3, with special attention to the viola and first violin). The wonder and energy of new love expressed by the speaker is of course in the past, and with the departure of such feelings, the speaker regains himself. The little minor third motive, according to Kennedy, “rarely fails to bring a wry smile to the lips.”

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Example 4.1 “Is My Team Ploughing?” mm. 27–34 chromatic melodic contour and pulsing triplets reminiscent of earlier works

“Oh When I Was In Love With You,” the fourth song in the set seems to be conceived as an integral part of the cycle, and with strings considered a necessary and independent component rather than a superfluous accessory. At just under a minute’s duration, the rippling piano accompaniment, coupled with the rustic twang of the plucked strings brings a wry playfulness to the text (see example 4.3, with special attention to the
viola and first violin). The wonder and energy of new love expressed by the speaker is of course in the past, and with the departure of such feelings, the speaker regains himself.

The little minor third motive, according to Kennedy, “rarely fails to bring a wry smile to the lips.” With “Clun,” the final song of the cycle, Vaughan Williams offers a sense of musical and poetical closure, but again the strings seem rather superfluous, often merely offering a bridge between phrases or a sense of sectional separation.

*On Wenlock Edge* obviously contains a number of inconsistencies. The work lacks a unified style, especially to those listeners such as the work’s early critics, who were aware of Vaughan Williams’s evolving compositional voice. Judging the piece in isolation, these inconsistencies are little more than novel observations. But in viewing *On Wenlock Edge* as a representative example of musical Englishness, as it eventually came to be, such criticism became an attack on English music’s viability. An examination of the evolving critical provides insight into this phenomenon.

\[\text{mm. 1–4}\]

Andantino

![Example 4.2 “Far From Eve and Morning” Using instrument groupings to create formal divisions and mark a change of poetic mood.](image)

Example 4.2: Continued.

Critical reception of *On Wenlock Edge* was positive, even enthusiastic. The Schwiller Quartet performed the work again in a mostly English program on 18 May 2010. Little was mentioned in the *Times* beyond Mr. Elwes expressive singing.\(^9^4\) By 1913, *On Wenlock Edge* seems to have achieved broader recognition and a stable place in the repertoire. *The Musical Times* described it as an "imaginative flight," and "a work almost unequalled among British works in musical expressiveness and colour."\(^9^5\) In 1915, *On Wenlock Edge* appeared again during the summer concert season, but intriguingly in an April 20 event at the Swindon Mechanic’s Institute, entitled *Popular Classical Concerts at Swindon: An Experiment in Musical Education*, which boasted "genuinely popular prices before a genuinely working-class audience."

\(^9^4\) "London Concerts," in *The Musical Times* 51/808 (June 1, 1910): 388.
This series of concerts included “classic” works of an immediate appeal, most of which came from the historical canon. Vaughan Williams offered one of the only English pieces to be found amongst works by Bach, Mozart, Gluck, Schumann, and Dvořák.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{96} “London Concerts,” in \textit{The Musical Times} 55/856 (June 1, 1915): 399. The only other English piece was Percy Grainger’s \textit{Mock Morris}.
This was not a specialist concert providing exposure to little-known composers, but an educational outreach concert meant to elevate and educate working-class taste through a carefully chosen mixture of canonical works. Such events tend to pick only those works that are both popular in appeal to appease the listener, and of sufficient artistic merit to warrant its inclusion. By 1919, critics discussed *On Wenlock Edge* in reverent terms, asserting that it garnered “universal approval from musicians of all sorts and is the most performed of any work of its type today.”

In 1919, a fiery critical exchange developed between Edwin Evans and Ernest Newman over *On Wenlock Edge*, which offers valuable insight into how critics received Vaughan Williams’s new “style” in the immediate aftermath of World War I. Evans, editor of *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, remained staunchly in the pro- *On Wenlock Edge* corner throughout. Evans’s article is not simply an assessment of Vaughan Williams’s work, but also it situates it as a representative example of a national tradition. Evans discusses all of English song through the lens of Vaughan Williams’s approach. He begins, somewhat tellingly, with a discussion not of German, but of French style:

Within the same number of years (25), or less, from their publication, the poems of Verlaine, in which the essential lyrical qualities of the French language have the same prominence, had supplied the foundation of a veritable library of French song which threatens in course of time to become as formidable as that which owes its existence to the poetry of Heinrich Heine.

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97 “Occasional Notes,” in *The Musical Times* 50/917 (July 1, 1919), 346.

There is a clear point of departure: the Germans have a monopoly on the genre if assessed by sheer output, but one can catch up, just as the French have with Verlaine. Note also the manner in which Evans calls attention to the “essential lyric qualities of the French language,” which makes the achievement of French composers analogous to that of the Germans because they are dealing with essentially different materials. National style in this sense (as it is later echoed in Vaughan Williams’s writings on Nationalism) is language-based. However it seems a rather steep claim to distill the sonic qualities of an entire language to its “essential qualities.”

Notably, Evans grasps upon the sensual quality of the French language—the lyric experience of the words and the external signs of meaning—rather than extolling the French composers’ interpretive insights in distilling a poem’s meaning. Similarly, when discussing Housman’s poetry, Evans finds particular significance in the sound of Housman’s verse:

For instance, in Housman's poems the phonetic flavour, if one may use the word, is largely derived from the overwhelming predominance of words of genuine English derivation which, quite apart from their meaning, have an aesthetic effect upon the ear essentially different from that of a succession of syllables which have a physical affinity with the Romance languages.99

The essential Englishness of A Shropshire Lad stems from, in Evans’s eyes, its English sounds, rather than that its English meaning, or subject matter. Of course this is not a purely original impulse, especially in vocal music, to alter or derive the artifice of the

setting from the pre-extant, "natural" quality of the language. Evan’s elevates his discussion of language to the level of vitriol when he writes:

One needs only to have heard an English boy recite

'The boy stood on the burning deck'

and a German boy

'Er stand auf seines Daches Zinnen.'

to realise how different is the material that has to be accommodated. Note that the English line has a dramatic content which the German line has not, for it is a more dramatic thing to stand upon a burning deck than upon a sumptuous Eastern terrace, but not even the feminine ending can relieve the German line of its phonetic crudity and arrogance.  

While one can understand a certain amount of anti-German rhetoric from an English critic writing in the summer of 1918, such an insularly bigoted view seems shocking and very difficult to separate from the general, and not necessarily threatening, impulse for a fully formed and differentiated aesthetic identity. To a contemporary reader, such language seems almost comically racist, but perhaps the German musical tradition served as a “safe” point of differentiation for the English critic. In a national process of self-discovery, it must have seemed necessary to distance oneself from the other, or at least to create a palpable opposition with the aesthetic other in order to fully define the self. In order to discover a sense of identity, the English perhaps had to do a bit of sifting and categorization in order to sculpt themselves in sound. Germany represented a threat to political autonomy, which could help to magnify the importance of escaping an artistic identity languishing under the weight of a compelling, but suffocating German musical

100 Evans, “English Song,” 248.
culture. Evans therefore represents a rather extreme example of this, but it was certainly not a unique perspective.

Ernest Newman, another critic for The Musical Times, had more sympathy for German music and far less for Vaughan Williams than his colleague Evans. Newman suggests Vaughan Williams’s setting lacks sensitivity to the basic text rhythm. He begins his argument by extolling the German composers and their ability to set their own poetry thusly, but in a manner concedes the simplicity of this task by noting the metric regularity of typical German folk poetry when compared with the “variable, fluid, organic” rhythm of Shakespeare. Newman finds Vaughan Williams’s gift “a very small one” suggesting that the composer “is always glad when the poet offers him some pictoral suggestion. . . . He fastens upon this and makes an instrumental picture of it, and builds the voice part in as best he can.”

Evans makes a point to directly attack Ernest Newman’s criticism of Vaughan Williams and On Wenlock Edge:

Mr. Newman writes: “In “Bredon Hill” the main effect comes from the persistent imitation (and very well done it is) of the bells in the accompaniment; the vocal part is without poignancy. The frame is bigger than the picture; the background is more important than the foreground.” This is true of some settings of this song, but in that of Vaughan Williams exactly the contrary is the case. Instead of realistic chiming, we have a background of the blurred sonority of bells that remains unobtrusive for the greater part of the song and a vocal line which is not only purely lyrical, but derives great poignancy from its very simplicity.

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103 Evans, “English Song,” 248.
In contrast, Newman suggests:

What I meant was that it was a falsification of the spirit of the poem to concentrate so persistently upon the bells, and to give so poor an expression of the human psychology. In the mere sense of sonority the bells may be mostly only background, as Mr. Evans says; but in the intellectual sense they are emphatically in the foreground of the song. We can never escape them.\textsuperscript{104}

While Newman’s distaste for both \textit{On Wenlock Edge} and its composer is evident, the critic couches his discussion within a broader attack on musical nationalism:

The little misunderstanding comes from my critics failing to perceive the difference between ‘English’ (or ‘German’ or ‘French’ as the case may be) and ‘national.’ I have often denied that any composer’s music is or can be national, but I have not denied that it is German or French or Italian or Russian. . . . If he feels deeply and sincerely about life, and can find beautiful and convincing expression for what he and the rest of us living people feel, he will make great English art even though he may never have heard a folk-song and never have seen an agricultural labourer.\textsuperscript{105}

In light of his outright attack on German-ness, Evans’s view of French musical influence takes a rather more subtle and revealing tone. Evans, vehemently defending “Bredon Hill” from Newman’s attacks, does so by emphasizing the vocal line’s merits rather than defending the accompaniment’s picturesque quality. The vocal line’s poignancy of is surely a subjective appraisal, but when viewed in isolation it seems beautiful in its simplicity but utterly incomplete. The folk-like idiom of the voice could perhaps be seen as a virtue in Evans’s eyes. Later in the article, Evans notes the lasting influence of

\textsuperscript{105} Newman, “Concerning ‘A Shropshire Lad,’” 395.
Vaughan Williams's Paris studies in the accompaniment of "Bredon Hill," though he disregards the similarity as "purely external, but obvious enough to disquiet those who concern themselves mainly with externals."\(^{106}\)

Dismissing the external seems self-contradictory, for how is the phonetic experience of a language anything other than external. In suggesting only an external similarity between Ravel and Vaughan Williams, does Evans imply that Vaughan Williams merely appropriates a novel syntax and assigns a new semantic value? Moving away from the external would undermine the basic premise of Evans's argument, but in this instance he felt obliged to in order to defend Vaughan Williams's nationalist authenticity. Evans concludes that the value of *On Wenlock Edge* stems from its "plastic quality that is wonderfully human," or in other words, that it is to be celebrated because of its external manipulation. The listener should, according to Evans, appreciate the carefully, though imperfectly, crafted sound object. *On Wenlock Edge*'s aesthetic worth and the effectiveness of Vaughan Williams's style is determined, in Evans's opinion, by its appeal to the external:

There is in modern music much that makes its emotional appeal more directly though the sense and less through the intelligence, than was the rule when the great rhetorical forms of the sonata and the symphony were at their zenith. . . . *On Wenlock Edge* derives some of its power from a similarly direct appeal that, for want of a better word, one may designate as physical. Hence it is not inapposite to speak of its beauty as a plastic, or even a physical quality.\(^{107}\)

\(^{106}\) Evans, "English Song," 249.

\(^{107}\) Evans, "English Song," 249.
That Vaughan Williams saw fit to orchestrate the cycle around 1920 suggests that the cycle had become widely popular and that the work was “significant” because it could be held up as representative example of musical “Englishness.” Intriguingly, Vaughan Williams’s orchestral version was not the first. The assistant conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra created a version in 1920, although it was quickly passed over in favor of the composer’s version. Vaughan Williams conducted the orchestral version, played by the London Philharmonic, on a January 24, 1924 concert that included Strauss’s *Don Juan* and Brahms’s Symphony No. 1. The critic approached the piece with the familiarity of a well-loved classic rather than a little-known twentieth century work. The review reads:

This music is not the latest Vaughan Williams. The composer was long in working out for himself the admirably spare and quintessential idiom of his recent works, and *On Wenlock Edge* shows, by comparison, some indecisions of style and effect. Nevertheless the beauties of the work are rare and attaching, and the scoring enhanced them. . . . The classic economy of Housman’s lyrics and the open-air feeling in Vaughan Williams’s music together made a novelty, not only in name, but also in effect at a concert which otherwise contained nothing later than the luxurious Strauss.

The critic discusses Vaughan Williams as a fixture of the musical firmament: a name and style well known to both reader and reviewer. The critic’s discussion of the work’s style provides further insight in his apparent grasp of the composer’s

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113 Kennedy, “A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams,” 43. Kennedy notes in that when he asked the composer for a specific date of creation for the orchestral version, RVW replied, “I don’t remember.” However, Kennedy suggests 1921-1923 as likely dates due to stylistic traits and the first dates of the performance.

"quintessential idiom," ironic not the least because of Vaughan Williams's understandably small output during the years of World War I, and the very few works produced between the end of the war and the review in question.\textsuperscript{115} The concert's programming further suggests Vaughan Williams's rise to prominence. Again, as in the educational concert, \textit{On Wenlock Edge} stands along side incontrovertibly "classic" works, of sufficient age to pose little threat of comparison with the modern representative of musical Englishness. There is no threat to Vaughan Williams as the practitioner of the new and relevant national art. The classics are Germanic, and the modern expression of classical worth occurs, conveniently, close to home. \textit{On Wenlock Edge} appears somewhat paradoxically as at once an aesthetic foil to the great classical symphonist Brahms and the "luxurious Strauss," because of the composer's new "admirably spare and quintessential idiom." Vaughan Williams is established as the new paradigm of "open-air sentiment" which replaces the formality of Brahms and the heady sensuality of Strauss.

Such a rise in popularity can be read in a few ways. Firstly, the increased attention to the work could simply be the product of public familiarity. The English text, affective coloration, and general tunefulness could account for a generally popular appeal and justify its inclusion within the Educational concert. Such an inclusion with works of the undisputed canon, the common musical heritage of all western musicians can be seen either as a recognition for the work's aesthetic merits, or as part of a broader nationalist agenda in which the work achieves canonic status simply by association. The organizers of the concert, who explicitly intended to educate, or in less flattering terms, indoctrinate,

\textsuperscript{115} Vaughan Williams was deployed during World War I and wrote very little during his time in the trenches.
the mass audience with a general knowledge of worthwhile culture. Associating On Wenlock Edge with works of Beethoven and Mozart suggests equal esteem and attempts to demonstrate the worth of modern British culture. On Wenlock Edge was either included out of perceived aesthetic merit, or because it conveniently existed at the right place and time with an appealing and popular text. Edwin Evans rushed to On Wenlock Edge’s defense not because of the work’s aesthetic appeal, but because it seemed a matter of national pride to preserve such a work’s reputation from Ernest Newman’s critical hostility. To defend On Wenlock Edge was to defend all of modern English music.
In his study *The English Musical Renaissance*, Frank Howes depicts his subject tellingly in a chapter entitled “Holst and Vaughan Williams: Emancipation.” Ravel is never mentioned. Any whiff of French harmony is quickly justified and sanitized as “Delius-like.” The masque-opera *Job* is elevated as Vaughan Williams’s most characteristic piece because of its assimilation of “English language, English theatre, English pictoral art, English music and English dancing.” The only stylistic influence mentioned, other than folksong, was that of hymnody. Vaughan Williams achieves an aesthetic validity only because he “dug in English soil to thrust his roots to the live-giving waters of nationalism.”

*On Wenlock Edge*, aside from being a beautiful and aesthetically satisfying work, captivates because of its pronounced and irresolvable contradictions. It is consummately English because of its subject matter, language, and imagery, but it fails to fulfill the composer’s broad definition of pure “Englishness” because of the strongly discernable and lasting French influence. Vaughan Williams constructs a national sound image around an idealized vision of Englishness clearly divorced from reality. Folk songs, collected from aging members of a quickly vanishing class and way of life, become a

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sonic marker intended to suggest a specific place. Vaughan Williams’s Englishness is not founded upon the power of monarchy, empire, or divine favor, but rather his accidental coexistence with the landscape.

Vaughan Williams developed a national identity through a depiction of place and mode of life that bore no resemblance to the industrialized, heterogeneous reality of Britain in the early twentieth century. To create an English sound world, Vaughan Williams required French tools and techniques that he failed to disguise or disregard. The influence is readily apparent to any casual listener and hardly disputable, but the English anxiety of influence and the irrational impulse to deny any external inspiration is certainly the source of interest.

English music of the early twentieth century is not as simple as it sounds, though it has long been disregarded as light or regressive because it is not violently dissonant or assertively modernist. But beneath the serene façade of rolling hills and ascending larks roiled a strong undercurrent of anxiety and contradictory impulses that created a musical vision England at once beautiful and impossible.
APPENDIX

XXXI. On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble

On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale, it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves

‘Twould blow like this through holt and hanger
When Uricon the city stood:
‘Tis the old wind in the old anger,
But then it threshed another wood.

Then, ‘twas before my time, Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare:
The blood the warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt hime, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
The ‘twas the Roman, now ‘tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, ‘twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.
XXXII. From far, from eve and morning

From far, from eve and morning,
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

Now—for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind’s twelve quarters
I take my endless way.

XXVII. Is my team ploughing

“Is my team ploughing,
That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?”

Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingles now;
No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.

“Is football playing
Along the river shore,
With lads to chase the leather,
Now I stand up no more?”

Ay, the ball is flying,
The lads play heart and soul;
The goal stands up, the keeper
Stands up to keep the goal.

“Is my girl happy,
That I though hard to leave,
And has she tired of weeping
As she lies down at eve?"

Ay, she lies down lightly,
She lies not down to weep:
Your girl is well contented.
Be still, my lad, and sleep.

"Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thin and pine,
And has he found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?"

Yes, lad, I lie easy,
I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.

XVII. Oh, when I was in love with you

Oh, when I was in love with you,
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well did I behave.

And how the fancy passes by,
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they'll say that I
Am quite myself again.

XXI. In summertime on Bredon

In summertime on Bredon
The bells they sound so clear;
Round both the shires they ring them
In steeples far and near,
A happy noise to hear.

Here of a Sunday morning
My love and I would lie,
And see the coloured counties,
And hear the larks so high
About us in the sky.

The bells would ring to call her
In valleys miles away:
"Come all to church, good people;
Good people, come and pray."
But here my love would stay.

And I would turn and answer
Among the springing thyme,
"Oh, peal upon our wedding,
And we will hear the chime,
And come to church in time."

But when the snows at Christmas
On Bredon top were strown,
My love rose up so early
And stole out unbeknown
And went to church alone.

They tolled the one bell only,
Groom there was none to see,
The mourners followed after,
And so to church went she,
And would not wait for me.

The bells they sound on Bredon,
And still the steeples hum.
"Come all to church, good people,"—
Oh, noisy bells, be dumb;
I hear you, I will come.

L. In valleys of springs of rivers

In valleys of springs of rivers,
By Ony and Teme and Clun,
The country for easy livers,
The quietest under the sun,

We still had sorrows to lighten,
One could not be always glad,
And lads knew trouble at Knighton
When I was a Knightone lad.
By bridges that Thames runs under,
In London, the town built ill,
‘Tis sure small matter for wonder
If sorrow is with one still.
And if as a lad grows older
The trouble he bears are more,
He caries his griefs on his shoulder
That handseled them long before.

Where shall one halt to deliver
This luggage I’d lief set down?
Not Thames, not Teme is the river,
Nor London nor Knighton the town:

‘Tis a long way further than Knighton,
A quieter place than Clun
Where doomsday may thunder and lighten
And little ‘twill matter to one.
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