THE TEXT AND MELODY CHOICE AND INFLUENCE OF NATIONALISM IN
RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS’S FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS

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Introduction

A conductor of Ralph Vaughan Williams’s vocal music must analyze the composer’s life and his intentions toward the text and melody. With that knowledge, the conductor can begin to prepare a rehearsal. Only then can a conductor perform and relay the composer’s intentions. Vaughan Williams’s biographers state that he was interested in mysticism and was a nationalistic composer. In my creative project, I will discuss how his music expresses these characteristics by score analysis. I will briefly discuss his early life, a time during which he became interested in nationalism, and then Vaughan Williams’s choice of text and melody in the Five Mystical Songs. Through these examples, I will examine the influences of nationalism and mysticism in this work. For example, in song number 3, Vaughan Williams borrowed a chant melody that he then used to highlight the moment during communion when Jesus connected with humans. In song number 4, he used modal melody similar to those used in English folk music.

Having called Vaughan Williams a “nationalist composer,” how do we define nationalism in art? The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines it like this:

Traditionally has denoted the use in art music of materials that suggest a national or regional character. These may include actual folk music, melodies or rhythms that merely recall folk music, or religious music associated with a particular nationality.¹


Brief Biography
Vaughan Williams himself mentions that music should be nationalistic in his essay, *National Music and Other Essays*.\(^2\) I want to introduce his early life because when I researched his early biography, I learned why he became a composer who was interested in orchestration and nationalism. Vaughan Williams was born in Gloucestershire. The youngest of three children, he grew up at his mother’s family home, Leith Hill Place, Surrey, and most of his life was spent in the Dorking and Leith Hill area and in London. The family moved from Down Ampney in 1875, upon the death of his father, the Rev. Arthur Vaughan Williams. The family was not very musical. The Vaughan Williams were a family of eminent lawyers: his grandfather, Sir Edward Vaughan Williams, was the first Judge of Common Pleas. Alain Frogley and Hugh Ottaway discuss Vaughan Williams’s early life in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

The young boy received his first lessons from a Wedgwood aunt, who taught him the piano. By the time he went to preparatory school, at Rottingdean, Sussex, he had some acquaintance with the violin as well as with the piano and organ. During three years at Charterhouse (1887–1890) he played in the school orchestra and, but for family misgivings, would possibly have decided on an orchestral career.\(^3\)

After he went to Cambridge, he tried to compose various kinds of music for movies, plays, and orchestra. His cousin said, “His composition was deep dissatisfaction with the English musical scene and an inability to see his own path. Vaughan Williams knew that he must strive for the highest professional standards.”\(^4\) He returned to the Royal College


\(^4\) Ibid.
of Music and subsequently studied with Max Karl August Bruch in Berlin (1897) and
Maurice Ravel in Paris (1908). At the same time, he started to think about nationalism.

Alain Frogley and Hugh Ottaway mention this beginning of Vaughan Williams’s
nationalism in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

Creatively, salvation would be found, not in imitating foreign models, but in a
regenerative use of native resources. This led him to English folksong, to
Elizabethan and Jacobean music, and to a philosophy of musical citizenship,
which he both practiced and preached. It is a part of Ralph’s strength and
importance that he cannot be adequately discussed in narrowly musical terms.
His main thought of the creation of music was human and social. He never
forgot that music was for people. He was interested in every situation,
however humble, for which music was needed, and his feeling for genuinely
popular traditions amounted to a reverence that was almost religious.⁵

Nationalism in His Vocal Music

An article by William Kimmel reveals Vaughan Williams’s love of the country, folk
music, and folk subjects.

There is a larger group of songs and choral works that are actual folksongs or
imitations. His interest in early periods of English literature and history made him
a nationalistic composer in vocal music. We especially find his nationalistic
character in his vocal music. Much of his vocal music, including “Bushes and
Bariars,” “Ca the Yowes,” and the “Wassail song” are well known, while some of
the others, which are the products of his own research in Essex, Norfolk, Sussex
and other counties, are more obscure. The ballad opera *Hugh the Drove*,
composed between 1911-1924, is a final testimony to his deep affection for
folksongs and for folk subjects. The story deals with a simple peasant story with
fresh and spontaneous music that is a much more congenial form of dramatic
music and a more characteristically English form of dramatic music. However,
according to conventional views, it is not as significant an art form.⁶

⁵ Ibid.
The most important sources of his music are the English folk song. One evidence is that his music includes diatonic and pentatonic scales. Kimmel said that “Vaughan Williams also used Aeolian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes. There is frequent modulation from one mode to another. In Three songs from Shakespeare, the tonality moves between the Dorian and Aeolian modes. In the more extended works, the individual modal melodic fragments are only incidental elements of a broader tonality in which modality is but a single factor.” The Five Mystical Songs also has a mixolydian mode. The fourth song, “The Call,” starts in Eb mixolydian and modulates to Gb mixolydian at the third stanza and then back to Eb mixolydian again in measure 26. See Example 1.

7 Ibid.

Text Choice of his Vocal Music

One can assume that his childhood influenced his composition. His wife, Ursula Vaughan Williams, wrote an article about Vaughan Williams’s text choice. She approached the issue of text choice according to the biography on the article of Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association. In this article, she proved his choice of text linked with Vaughan Williams’s childhood and later life. She stated Vaughan Williams liked to read books aloud when he was a child, and he was accustomed to hearing the words of literature—the varied cadences in the English language were familiar and poetry was as normal an experience as prose. Ralph Vaughan Williams also said, “When I once heard a sermon at an open-air service in the Isle of Skye, as the preacher spoke in Gaelic which I do not understand, I was able to devote my attention to the actual tones of his voice.” From this evidence, one can assume that he might significantly employ a person’s reading tone when he composed a song.

There are many works sung by baritone solo in his choir music. He used a pastoral baritone solo in his religious vocal music of which Five Mystical Songs is an example. The baritone solo is the most important part of the whole cycle. The baritone plays the role of narrator and also quotes Jesus’s word in three songs of the Five Mystical Songs.

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For instance, the entrance of the first song, “Easter,” makes an impression of listening to an enthusiastic preacher. As we see in Example 2, there are Bb notes on the right and left hands in triple rhythm on the first two measures and then, while the interval is expanded, he creates exciting moods. The baritone’s “shouting” is presented in the next measure. One can assume that the young Vaughan Williams wanted to depict a Sunday morning church service. When the baritone sings, “Rise heart….” one can imagine the moment that begins a preacher’s sermon toward the crowd of people. When the baritone solo starts to sing, “Rise heart thy lord risen,” the entire orchestra and choir respond with a loud dynamic. During the first measure the accompanied triplets make for exciting moments toward the good news about Jesus’s resurrection.


The Influence of Mysticism in his Music
Ursula Vaughan Williams mentions in her article that his mysticism came from understanding the mysterious way through human life. She said:

As it is, most of his Biblical texts come from the Old Testament, including a very weird passage from Ezekiel, which he called A Vision of Aeroplanes—though it seems more like a vision of Unidentified Flying Objects. As to Pilgrim's Progress—and this is a digression because there is no time to discuss his operas—he loved the direct prose Bunyan wrote, and for which one of us is not the allegory of the journey the most understandable and the most widely known manner of trying to understand the mysterious way through human life?10

The poems of *Five Mystical Songs* were written by George Herbert (1593-1633) an English priest. In 1630, his duties were in Bemerton, a rural parish in Wiltshire, about 75 miles southwest of London. Among his poems, four poems were selected as the text of *Five Mystical Songs*. Vaughan Williams and Herbert’s connection started from Vaughan Williams’s father. Ursula Vaughan Williams said the text of *Five Mystical Songs* was already familiar to Vaughan Williams, because his father was at Bemerton where was George Herbert’s own parish.11 When Vaughan Williams was young, he listened to George Herbert’s poems. Ursula Vaughan Williams assumed that this connection encouraged him to insert Herbert’s poems into his music.

**His Melody Choice**

Vaughan Williams’s melody choice also had a wide range. He borrowed a number of Gregorian chant melodies. The borrowed melody’s modality is also significant evidence

11 Ibid.
of the influence of plainsong. A good example of this is the third song, “Love Bade Me Welcome,” from *Five Mystical Songs*. At the end of this song, the choir sings a melody in unison. That melody called “O sacrum Convivium,” came from a Gregorian chant. See Example 3.

This chant melody was used as an antiphon at Communion during the Middle Ages. Instead of singing the melody with text, Vaughan Williams arranged that the choir sing ‘ah’ in unison with a dynamic of ‘pppp.’ This slow, step-wide motion within a dynamic of ‘pppp’ makes for a very holy moment. Meanwhile the choir creates a very a holy moment of communion, the baritone solo is describing the moments like he was there. This song is the most mystic moment within this song cycle. The entire choir sings ‘ah’ with ‘pppp’ dynamic and instruments play the undulating streams of chords. As we have seen in Example 3, even before the chorus sings the melody of “O Sacrum Convivium,” the orchestra plays these undulating streams of chords. The strings consistently play E and F# from the beginning of “O Sacrum Convivium,” to the end. These parts are very dreamlike. Then Jesus says, “sit and taste my meat.” Vaughan Williams made the most mystical expression with the mixture of this mystical harmonic progression. Mark Spencer also confirms this in his dissertation. Describing the moment as “undulating streams of chords in parallel motion and an occasional false relation.”

Other Features of Five Mystical Songs

I believe that George Herbert’s poems in Five Mystical Songs describe a deeply private moment connecting between Jesus and a person, even though these poems are not Christian. The conversation is a person-to-person dialogue, especially, the third songs’

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text of *Five Mystical Songs* which describes the deep expression with Jesus and George Herbert himself. In this poem, Jesus directly meets with a person and smiles at a person. In his poem, Jesus is no longer the God. Jesus is just the being who can get in touch with people.

For Vaughan Williams, this personal approach is mysticism. This is the lyric:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Moreover the *Five Mystical Songs* have frequent meter changes. Most of these moments emotionally defuse tension and sometimes create tension. For instance, there are two times the meter changes from 4/4 to 3/4 at measure 14-16 (see Example 4) and measure 59-60 of the first song, “Easter.” In both of these moments, the narrative part makes a dramatic and emotional change with the meter change. There are five meter changes between 3/4 and 4/4 in “Easter.” All of these meter changes have the same function, which is change of emotion of narrator. In this song cycle, there are a number of
meter changes like these.


There is yet another way to change mood. He frequently changed triplets and arpeggios in the accompaniment part. The first song, “Easter,” has some accompaniment textural change. Between measure 24 and measure 27, the text is “That, as his death calcined thee to dust. His life may make thee gold, and much more.” The style of the accompaniment part of the measures is an arpeggio. However, after measure 27, the texture of the accompaniment shifts to triplet rhythm again. As we see in the text, when the texts are talking about Jesus’s death, the accompanist plays the arpeggio style. See Example 5.
Example 5. “Easter” measures 20-27

Then after measure 26, in order to depict the exciting text, “Rise heart.. ,” a triplet style of accompaniment is again used. See Example 6.

In conclusion, I think that when Vaughan Williams started to compose a religious vocal piece, first of all, he chose a text that is suitable to his mysticism. This is because, through all the books and articles that I researched, I was able to understand that Vaughan Williams’s choice of text and melody is deeply rooted in his mystic characters. His choice of text and melody from Middle Ages to twentieth century shows his special affection toward British folk music and text. That is why he has been called a nationalistic composer. When I performed this with the concert choir, I tried to find an appropriate resource for the *Five Mystical Songs*. I was surprised about the little information that exists about this song cycle. I believe that my research will help future conductors who have a plan to perform the *Five Mystical Songs* to be better prepared.
Bibliography


