Interrogating Music-Historical Narratives Through Ralph Vaughan Williams's Five Mystical Songs

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INTERROGATING MUSIC-HISTORICAL NARRATIVES
THROUGH RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS’S *FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS*

A Thesis

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the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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by

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ABSTRACT

Although Ralph Vaughan Williams has remained an influential and well-liked composer throughout most decades since his death, the amount and specificity of scholarly writing about his work has been meager, and only during recent decades has it increased. One reason that Vaughan Williams has consistently been ignored is his use of “Romantic” harmonies during the twentieth century. This style complicates periodization of his work. By exploring other facets of his work and using alternative methods -- such as studies of the music’s relationship to sociocultural movements, English music history, and history of genre -- for understanding his music, a greater comprehension of Vaughan Williams’s work can be created. Such methods are applied to *Five Mystical Songs* (1911).
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INTRODUCTION

The music of Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) has long been considered the epitome of the English musical renaissance during the early twentieth century. He was considered a leader of this renaissance, or rebirth, of interest in a distinctly English style. Today, both amateur and professional choirs frequently perform his works, and he is one of the best-known British composers in history. As Alain Frogley writes:

Vaughan Williams’s place in the repertory now appears secure, fixed by a number of the symphonies and smaller-scale orchestral works, and by vocal music, particularly for amateurs. . . . Tallies of performances, broadcasts and recordings [of Vaughan Williams’s pieces] have always remained healthy.¹

Yet, in spite of this abundance of performances and increasing interest in his compositions, only a small amount of writing and research about Vaughan Williams’s works exists. In many discussions of music composed during the first half of the twentieth century, his work is entirely ignored. In recent years, the amount of writing about Vaughan Williams’s compositions has increased exponentially, but most of these writings contain more generalizations and summaries than extensive musicological

consideration. For example, as Frogley and Aidan J. Thomson note in the recent 

*Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams:*

Richard Taruskin’s monumental *The Oxford History of Western Music* ignores most British twentieth-century music except Britten’s, [and] Alex Ross’s bestseller *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* likewise focuses on Britten and passes quickly over the rest of British music.2

This lack of detailed discussion of Ralph Vaughan Williams’s music leads to an emphasis on a few recurring themes in the scholarly writings that mention his work.

A cursory glance at scholarship about Vaughan Williams’s choral works will bring his use of English folk elements, his position as a nationalist composer, and his Romantic harmonic structures to the fore. Most writings do not proceed further than these general statements, though. They do not explore the complexity of the historical context of his works and their reception within that context. For instance, Nick Strimple hints at the limitations in conventional approaches to Vaughan Williams while describing some of the most-mentioned elements of Vaughan Williams’s work:

His art is a unique distillation of British folk elements, ancient compositional techniques, and twentieth-century sensibilities. . . . His works remained immensely popular with choruses all over the world, and late in the century, when unabashed tonality once again interested young composers, the innovative and original aspects of his music began to be more fully appreciated.3

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One of the reasons that there are relatively few scholarly writings that move beyond generalizations about Vaughan Williams’s works is that they do not fit neatly into any of the categories typically associated with scholarly writing about music. These works cannot be described as merely adhering to the stereotypes often associated with Romanticism or Modernism, and they cannot be described as purely “nationalistic” or “Continental European” without discussing unique English musical attributes. Like many musical works, Vaughan Williams’s compositions exhibit a greater complexity than box-like classifications will allow. For instance, Vaughan Williams’s music does not easily fit into typical German-centered musicological narratives, such as historical periodization, because of cultural and societal factors, as well as elements of genre. The emphasis that many discussions of periodization place on the early twentieth-century Viennese use of atonality, serialism, and increased dissonance does not account for works by composers such as Vaughan Williams, who did not follow those particular trends.

Narratives based on the characteristics of a few select pieces limit the ways in which music can be examined. Indeed, in recent years, the “organized” method of conventional periodization has begun to be questioned as scholars discuss the extensive body of music overlooked by much scholarship. Even the music of the most “progressive” composers, such as Schoenberg, is being reexamined because of such oversimplifications. For example, Joseph N. Straus begins his book on twentieth-century music by describing the influence of “traditional” musical practices on early twentieth-century composers:
Music composed in the first half of the twentieth century is permeated by the music of the past. Traditional sonorities, forms, and musical gestures pervade even works that seem stylistically most progressive. . . . Twentieth-century composers incorporate traditional elements not out of compositional laziness and lack of imagination, and not because those elements fit so seamlessly into their post-tonal musical syntax, but precisely as a way to grapple with their musical heritage. They invoke the past in order to reinterpret it.⁴

It is becoming clear that a Viennese atonal emphasis is only one of many methods for understanding early twentieth-century music. Music history is more complex and convoluted than can be reflected by one method for describing it.

The work of exploring alternative narratives to describe Vaughan Williams’s music is essential because the past decades have proven that, while the reception of his work has experienced changes, his influence and music have continued to be appreciated. As Frogley and Thomson write:

There can be few composers who have ridden such a reputational roller-coaster as Ralph Vaughan Williams. Lionized as a revered national figure, and across the English-speaking world in the latter part of his life, within a decade of his death in 1958 he seemed in danger of being consigned to little more than a historical footnote: a Spohr or Telemann, perhaps. . . . Vaughan Williams has, in fact, always been one of those rare beasts, a popular twentieth-century composer.⁵

The popularity of Vaughan Williams’s music and the position he held in twentieth-century English music history demand that his work be examined in greater depth than

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⁵ Frogley and Thomson, 1. Similarly, scholars have indeed expressed renewed interest in Spohr and in Telemann. As Clive Brown and Steven Zohn state in their respective entries in The New Grove, scholarly research and public opinion about these composers have increased in the past few decades. This interest demonstrates a larger trend of reexamining relatively forgotten composers, and exploring the quality of their music and their music-historical influence.
many “progressive” scholarly models allow. While they are useful, these models are more applicable to some composers and musical works than to others.

In this thesis I will demonstrate, through a study of the cultural and musical influences on and elements of Vaughan Williams’s *Five Mystical Songs* (1911), various alternatives to customary music-historical narratives. From the widest perspective to the most focused, I will discuss how studying subtle relationships to the musical trends of continental Europe, the cultural context of early twentieth-century England, and the various connections to English music history and to English choral music can give a better and clearer understanding of this work.
HISTORY AND EARLY REVIEWS OF *FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS*

*Five Mystical Songs* was composed at the beginning of the English musical renaissance, and, like many of Vaughan Williams’s works, was emblematic of its time. The composition occurred during a crucial time in English history, in music history, and in Vaughan Williams’s career. He was still a relatively new composer to English audiences, but his renown was quickly expanding. Upon the recent success of his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910), Vaughan Williams received a commission to compose a set of songs for the Worcester Three Choirs Festival in 1911. Initially, the work received mixed reviews. One of the most negative examples, published in the *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, was written thus:

Tonight the last of the present festival’s novelties was produced. Its title was “Five Mystical Songs.” The verses are by George Herbert, and the music has been written for baritone solo, chorus, and orchestra. The title “mystical” is rather a misnomer, for the poet seeks rather to make something gracious and sweet out of faith and religion than to penetrate into the recesses of the human soul. The songs, it may be said at once, are not among Dr. [Vaughan] Williams’s best works. The writing is often forced, and the melody rarely takes the ear with pleasure. The form and expression of the verses themselves is conventional, but the composer has not hesitated to use most modern methods.6

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Other opinions implied that *Five Mystical Songs* was merely mediocre. For example, a March 1914 letter to Vaughan Williams, in which the composer George Butterworth discusses a performance of Vaughan Williams’s *London Symphony*, states:

> Among all the debauch of last night’s congratulations and mutual pattings on the back, I really had nothing much to add, but should now like to tell you how frightfully glad I am that you have at last achieved something worthy of your gifts (I refer to the work & its performance jointly, for after all a work cannot be a fine one until it is finely played -- and it is still possible that the Sea Symphony and the Mystical Songs may turn out equally well -- but at present they are not in the same class).\(^7\)

Still, other writings praised the *Five Mystical Songs* and asserted that it demonstrated Vaughan Williams’s compositional individuality. One critic wrote the following enthusiastic review of the premiere:

> In [Vaughan Williams’s] music, there are two qualities which make for strength: its genuineness and its modernity. It has been said that the music shows French influences, and that is so to a certain extent; yet one never feels that any one composer has been taken as model. Dr. [Vaughan] Williams shows individuality: he wrote as he felt. Then as regards modernity, he keeps pace with the times, but there is no attempt at sensational writing, at daring effects which might provoke discussion. The first of the five is effective, but the second, third, and fourth are more fully inspired.\(^8\)

*Five Mystical Songs* later increased in popularity, becoming a standard part of the choral repertory. It soon became part of the canon of English music composed during the twentieth century, and, along with many other works by Vaughan Williams, it would help to foster greater interest in the music of British composers.

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For many decades, Vaughan Williams’s *Five Mystical Songs* has remained popular among performers and audiences, but very little scholarly work has been done to better understand this set of songs. For instance, referring to his dissertation about *Five Mystical Songs* and Vaughan Williams’s opera *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Mark William Spencer writes, “One reason for the study is that both works are infrequently mentioned in scholarly studies of the composer. *Five Mystical Songs*, although popular, is only briefly cited in books written about the composer.”⁹ As we begin to understand the significance of Vaughan Williams and his place in music history, it is important to expand our understanding of specific pieces, such as *Five Mystical Songs*.

⁹ Mark William Spencer, “A Performer’s Analysis of *Five Mystical Songs* and *Seven Songs from ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’*” (DMA diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), x.
Despite the prominence in the early twentieth century of an emphasis on creating an English cultural identity, England maintained a deeply rooted philosophy that emphasized the “supremacy” of continental European music. As Siân Nicholas writes, British high culture was regarded as European, but lagging behind continental Europe. In the first decades of the twentieth century this split between high society and high culture became more pronounced as the Modernist movement challenged the cultural establishment. This brought a new openness and a new cosmopolitanism to the notion of high culture, but also a new intellectual arrogance. Increasingly, high culture was characterized by its inaccessibility.\textsuperscript{10}

This sentiment also existed on the European continent. As Eduardo de la Fuente states:

A healthy number of composers [of the early twentieth century] continued to compose tonal or neo-Romantic music. But [as] ‘esoteric’ and ‘difficult’ came to be seen as valuable aesthetic and moral properties, they became central features of the Modernist myth of creativity and artistic renewal.\textsuperscript{11}

This concept of a division between “Romantic” and “Modernist” has influenced much of the writing about music of the early twentieth century. Because Vaughan Williams’s music was not radically Modernist, he has often been merely characterized as a Romantic


outside the Romantic period, or as a nationalist composer, but there is greater complexity in his music than these labels convey. As Julian Onderdonk writes, “Clearly, Vaughan Williams was not the narrow nationalist claimed by advocates and detractors alike, but neither was he the rootless internationalist valorized by twentieth-century theories of modern art.”

Indeed, throughout his career, Vaughan Williams incorporated musical elements from various sources and time periods. This inter-stylistic approach led to his inclusion of musical features from various countries, especially England and France. One example of this fusion is his inclusion of references to French musical trends, as he expanded the amount of chromaticism and harmonic experimentation heard in music by a British composer. Like Ravel, with whom he studied, and Debussy, he frequently used modal and pentatonic scales in short passages and as the harmonic basis for entire works. Aidan J. Thomson cites the various connotations that this use of modality in *Five Mystical Songs* evokes:

A work that attracted more attention than the [*Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*] was the *Five Mystical Songs*, written for the 1911 Worcester Festival. The generally positive reviews... indicate... some uncertainty as to whether the music was very old (the correspondent of *Musical News* claimed that the songs ‘all have rather a Gregorian character’) or very new (the writer in *Monthly Musical Record* noted the contemporary French influence in Vaughan Williams’s music, and stated that ‘he keeps pace with the times’ without any ‘attempt at sensational writing’). What bridged the divide between Gregorianism and modern French music was Vaughan Williams’s use of modality. . . . In these reviews, there is a growing awareness of a historicist paradox that would

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be at the heart of Vaughan Williams’s mature musical language: that modernity might be found as much in the past as in the present.\textsuperscript{13}

Modality permeates several parts of \textit{Five Mystical Songs}. For example, the second of the set, “I Got Me Flowers,” is in the E-flat Aeolian mode; the complete absence of the D-natural leading tone creates a modal sensation. The following song, “Love Bade Me Welcome,” also has a modal, often Dorian, sound. Because of the accidentals, a specific mode is not consistently clearly defined, but the song rarely has the sound of a truly functional major or minor key.

In addition, some passages hint at planing, familiar from the music of Debussy, a parallel progression of chords that maintain a static chord quality and inversion. An example of this technique occurs at the beginning of “Love Bade Me Welcome.” During several measures of the instrumental introduction and during the beginning of the vocal line, the harmonies in the orchestra frequently move in almost parallel motion, obscuring a sense of harmonic progression (see Example 1). References to parallel motion pervade this section, but they are most noticeable in measures 4 through 9. For instance, measure 6 contains six successive first-inversion triads; the first three are G Major, A Major, then G Major. Then, the quality briefly shifts to minor as E Minor and F-sharp Minor are played, before a movement to D Major. Although this example does not constitute parallelism in the truest sense, it references it through the use of nonfunctional chords that remain in the same inversion and that move in the same directions simultaneously.

The final song, “Antiphon,” contains many harmonic progressions that, while emphasizing the tonal center of D, do not serve a truly traditional common practice function. In the beginning measures, a continuous repetition of D Major, A Major, B Major can be heard (see Example 2). The added D-sharp that is used to create the B Major chord adds chromaticism without destabilizing the tonic of D, which is strengthened through the repetition of the tonic and dominant, which are, respectively, D Major and A Major. In the final measures (see Example 3), this D Major, A Major, B Major progression is heard in measures 128-133 before progressing through G Major, E Major, B-flat Major, G Major, and, finally, D Major. These chromatic chord progressions represent a combination of the Common Practice emphasis on tonality, a pentatonic
melodic motion from scale degree 6 to scale degree 8 (B to D) without a leading tone, and fin-de-siecle uses of harmonies for color instead of function.

Example 2. Measures 12-19 of “Antiphon.”

Through his use of references to modal scales and planing, Vaughan Williams demonstrates a connection to the work of his French contemporaries, as well as to other time periods. Furthermore, while English music has unique characteristics, it is not entirely foreign to music of continental Europe. Even the most idiosyncratically English music has more elements in common with “traditional European” music than with music of other continents.
TEXTUAL RELATIONSHIP TO ENGLISH CULTURAL ELEMENTS

The works of Vaughan Williams certainly contain elements that are particularly relevant to English society. His music is representative of a gradual shift in society’s views of the purpose of music in English culture, and this shift is apparent in cultural discussions during the decades before the composition of *Five Mystical Songs*. The idea that English people should focus on their national identity rather than waste time attempting to imitate foreign musical ideas began to pervade various cultural outlets, such as literature and art.

For instance, in his widely-read 1857 novel, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, Thomas Hughes writes that “farmers’ daughters [care] more to make bad foreign music than good English cheeses.”\(^{14}\) While this statement does not specifically refer to English music, it does emphasize the idea that the English people should focus on what they, themselves, could create instead of merely importing Continental art forms. The movement toward emphasizing an English identity and the individuality of English artists and the discussion of various ideals surrounding these concepts in cultural outlets can also be seen in discourses regarding the visual arts of the early twentieth century. For example, Peter Gay writes about the artist Sir John Everett Millais thus:

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Millais joined praise of contemporary English art to a solemn warning: ‘But while we look around and congratulate ourselves on the bright promise of worthily upholding the English school, we must not forget that only by insistence upon their individuality of conception and expression can they hope to advance to the first rank.’

As people in various spheres of the arts discussed and attempted to bring authentic “Englishness” to their work, the attempt to define “Englishness” became central to the cultural realm. Several ways of creating this definition emerged, generating a variety of explicitly and implicitly English techniques in various arts, including music.

Vaughan Williams is particularly known for using several cultural references to emphasize the “Englishness” of his music. For example, the texts he chose often reflected different periods of English history while remaining relevant to his twentieth-century audiences. As Julian Onderdonk writes, “‘Englishness’ could be culturally backward-looking and politically progressive at once.” By combining the “traditional” with the “progressive,” Vaughan Williams created a unique sense of “Englishness” in his works.

Many extramusical factors played roles in the increasing desire for “English” music. One key factor was the strength that England felt in its economic power. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the United Kingdom had a strong economy, and, throughout the preceding centuries, had gained great financial and societal independence from other countries. Referring to the pre-WWI British economy, Barry Supple writes that “even though there was some anxiety about industrial competition, especially from Germany and the United States, well before the First World War, manufacturing

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industries were still powerful and British trade and finance were still supreme.”\footnote{Barry Supple, “Economic Performance,” in \textit{Twentieth-Century Britain: An Encyclopedia}, rev. ed. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2002), 168-9.} This economic independence helped lead to great assurance in societal and cultural matters.

Other circumstances also influenced the growing interest in English music. The beginning of the twentieth century saw a sharp decline in the economic, political, and societal power of the aristocracy, and several political movements, such as calls for women’s suffrage and Irish demands for independence, were interconnected to societal changes that reflected an increasing interest in the individual. These elements demonstrate a strong correlation between changing sociopolitical elements and changing musical views. Through these various developments, English society began to crave more music which reflected their own musical and cultural heritage, as opposed to music that merely reflected “European” culture. It was in this rapidly changing environment that Vaughan Williams became a part of the English musical renaissance.

In addition to being a proponent of a “rebirth” and new assertiveness of English music, Vaughan Williams was concerned with the preservation of English musical and cultural traditions that had already been established. He fervently promoted the use of “traditional English” elements in the works of English composers. He also believed, however, that fostering a musical realm that admitted various viewpoints was important for English music. As Julian Onderdonk describes Vaughan Williams, “A sense of cultural stewardship may indeed have prompted strong views and a ‘crusading’ activism, but a counterbalancing defense of civil liberties and respect for independence of
thought . . . guaranteed an open mind towards alternative viewpoints.”\textsuperscript{18} Yet, in his own compositions, speaking engagements, and writing, he did bring his concern with England’s musical heritage to the fore. This concern with English historicism can be seen in many examples of his writing, including the following excerpt from a September 1943 letter in which he discusses his views on English Cathedral music:

It would be a terrible thing if the Cathedral tradition were to disappear . . . . These people [referring to those advocating changes in Cathedral music] do not seem to realise that music also has its nobilities and indecencies. I wonder what they would say if it was suggested that a chapter from a pornographic novel should be substituted for the first lesson? or that the Lord’s Prayer should be rewritten in the style of American journalists? And yet they permit, and even encourage, such indecencies in music for the sake of ‘bringing people to the church.’ . . . We must beat this ecclesiastical totalitarianism somehow, but we can only do so by confining ourselves to what is really noble in our cathedral repertory. . . . Many of our Canticles and Anthems are vicious, theatrical, mechanical or intolerably smug. Unless we can root those out of our services we shall give the enemy cause to blaspheme.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite his atheistic -- and later agnostic -- views, Vaughan Williams advocated the preservation of the musical traditions of the Anglican Church, because he believed that they were an integral part of the English musical tradition.

Besides focusing on the maintenance of Anglican Church music traditions, Vaughan Williams also composed in a manner that was pertinent to changes and trends occurring in the Anglican Church during his lifetime. Referring to the Anglican Church of the early 20th century, Peter J. Bowler argues:

\textsuperscript{19} Cobbe, ed., \textit{Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams}, 362-63.
The Modernists wanted to make Christianity compatible with the latest trends in philosophy and science, and they feared that unless some accommodation could be reached, the ongoing decline in church membership and influence would become precipitate and end with the de-Christianization of the country. They believed it was vital that the church not reject the overtures being made by the new nonmaterialistic trend in science. . . . Modernists were drawn to teleological evolutionism and holistic biology.²⁰

By setting texts that allowed relatively broad interpretations, Vaughan Williams ensured that his works would be relatable to a diverse audience within English society.

One way in which Vaughan Williams related his works to the cultural traditions of England was his selection of texts. Based on The Temple, a set of metaphysical poems by George Herbert (1593-1633), Five Mystical Songs is an example of this attention to the relevance of the texts that he set. The Oxford English Dictionary defines metaphysical poetry thus:

Designating certain 17th-cent. poets (esp. Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, Marvell, and Traherne) or their poetic style, characterized by wit, syntactic complexity, and the use of elaborate and intricate schemes of imagery to express abstract ideas and emotional states. In later use also applied more broadly to other poetry having similar concerns, or employing such techniques.²¹

While the poems used in Five Mystical Songs do not clearly fit parts of this definition, such as “style, characterized by wit, syntactic complexity,” they are still part of the metaphysical canon. Furthermore, they do fit other parts of the definition, especially “the use of elaborate and intricate schemes of imagery to express abstract ideas and emotional


Herbert’s fame and notoriety had waxed and waned throughout the past centuries, but during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the works of the metaphysical poets saw a resurgence in popularity. One reason for this renewed interest in the metaphysical poets may have been cultural and societal parallels between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. As Margaret Willy mentions in *The Metaphysical Poets*, both eras experienced rapid changes created by increasing intellectual curiosity, many scientific advances, and shifting ideas about religion.22

An avid reader, Vaughan Williams was familiar with the writings of Herbert and many other British authors, and Herbert’s work was immensely appropriate for a joining with the music of Vaughan Williams. It has been theorized that part of the reason for this connection is the parallel between historical events of the early twentieth century and early seventeenth century. There is also an implicit parallel in the title Vaughan Williams chose for the song set; the term “mystical” implies a specifically religious aspect of the metaphysical poetic language. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “mystical,"

Having a spiritual character or significance by virtue of a connection or union with God which transcends human understanding.

Relating to or designating a hidden, symbolic, or spiritual meaning (or some aspect of this) underlying the literal meaning of a passage of Scripture.

Spiritually allegorical or symbolic.

More generally: mysterious, enigmatic, obscure, esoteric; of hidden meaning or nature; having an unknown or mysterious origin or influence.

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Relating to or dealing with spiritual or transcendental matters, esp.
communion of the soul with God or some higher spiritual power;
concerned with spiritual mystery, religious awe, etc. Also: relating to or
characteristic of mystics or mysticism.23

Vaughan Williams’s reference to “mysticism” in the title emphasized the spiritual aspects
of these poems, which were relevant for the shifting religious views of the early twentieth
century. Nathaniel G. Lew gives further insight into the cultural perception of
“mysticism” in his essay “ ‘Words and Music that Are Forever England’: The Pilgrim’s
Progress and the Pitfalls of Nostalgia.” He writes:

I would argue . . . for a distinction, even in metaphorical use when
discussing music, between mysticism, the intuitive and personal
experience of the divine, usually apart from liturgy, and ritualism, the
experience of the divine through systemized action sanctioned by
tradition.24

This perspective of mysticism directly relates to Vaughan Williams’s decision to use this
word in the title of this song set. The term reflects the deeply personal tone of the poems
that Vaughan Williams selected for this work. O. Alan Weltzein describes these various
connections thus:

For neither artist [George Herbert and Ralph Vaughan Williams] does
mysticism represent anything shadowy or inchoate. Rather, it expresses a
state of inner excitement and connection, sharp in outline, with the
Beyond and the Eternal. Frequently in Vaughan Williams’ career as an
occasional lecturer and essayist, he discussed the symbiosis between
music and mysticism. He believed a composer ‘wishes to be in spiritual
communication with his hearers,’ who must bear vivid imaginations ‘to
see the glimpses of the heart of things which the composer has crystallized


24 Nathaniel G. Lew, “ ‘Words and Music That are Forever England’: The Pilgrim’s Progress and the
Pitfalls of Nostalgia,” in Vaughan Williams Essays, Byron Adams and Robin Wells, eds. (Aldershot,
into earthly sound.’ Music constitutes ‘the kingdom of God.’ In National Music he deems music both ‘a spiritual exercise’ and ‘a spiritual necessity.’

Weltzein also writes, “Just as Herbert was an Anglican visionary, Vaughan Williams was a visionary composer whose intuitive bent substantiated rather than undermined Christian doctrine such as the Book of Revelations [sic].” The connections between the compositional style of Vaughan Williams and the poetry of Herbert amplify the relevance that Herbert’s texts had at the time Vaughan Williams composed *Five Mystical Songs*.

Throughout the work, examples of the metaphysical and mystical nature of the texts abound. For instance, the first verse of the opening song, “Easter,” depicts a spiritual relationship between the resurrection of Christ and the redemption and renewal of the soul. It describes both the rising of Christ and the rising of a cleansed heart. Similarly, it describes a connection between the death of Christ and the reduction of the heart to dust, likely referring to the theological concept of the heart’s sin dying with Christ. The following quotation of the first verse illustrates these ideas: “Rise, heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise without delay, Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise with him may’st rise: That, as his death calcined thee to dust, His life may make thee gold, and much more, Just.” Another example of the metaphysical and mystical tendencies of the texts occurs in the third song, “Love Bade Me Welcome.” In this song, “Love” is described welcoming a stranger as a guest. When the guest protests because of his unworthiness, Love reminds him that Love created him and bore the blame for his

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wrongs. This song thus paints a vivid physical image of a spiritual conversation. (See Appendix A for the full text used in Five Mystical Songs.)

In addition to utilizing texts that were relevant to the early twentieth century, Vaughan Williams believed that the writings of poets such as George Herbert exhibited strong musicality and, therefore, lent themselves particularly well to a musical setting. According to Vaughan Williams:

It seems that music, not only in its vague aspect but in its very details, was an essential part of the spiritual life of the sixteenth century. It was not for nothing that both Shakespeare and Milton were skilled musicians, or that George Herbert could write [in “Easter,” the first of Five Mystical Songs]:

Or since all music is but three parts vied
And multiplied;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part
And make up our defects with his sweet art,
and make sure that he would be understood.26

Additionally, regarding the general connection between poetry and music, Vaughan Williams wrote in March 1931:

I . . . think that poetry together with music & one or two other things make up what is worth having in life (friendship is another) and of course I believe really that for people to speak good poetry aloud is often the only way to get at its beauty -- & even if sometimes they sound rather absurd to jaded prigs like me -- what do we matter (its [sic] just like the folk dancing or choral singing -- very often the result is nothing much to hear or see but it makes the soul of those who do it -- & that is what matters).27

Through the texts that he selected, Vaughan Williams created a piece that was culturally relevant to a wide audience. Yet, this relevance was not merely textual. It pervaded all

26 Vaughan Williams, as quoted in Weltzein, “Herbert’s Divine Music.”

27 Cobbe, ed., Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams, 190. Italics in the original.
aspects of *Five Mystical Songs*, and it drew upon multiple influences from English cultural history and from English music history.
FIVE MYSTICAL SONGS’ RELATIONSHIP TO ENGLISH MUSIC HISTORY

The very concept of English music is difficult to define. Much of it is implied through the combination of specific musical elements and the exclusion of others. It is particularly known for extensive usage of 3rds and 6ths, as evidenced in Stephen Banfield’s discussion in The New Grove, which mentions that “the English . . . liked to discant on 3rds and 6ths.”28 The use of a flatted seventh scale degree recalls the modal quality of English folksong. English music is also comprised of broader influences, such as an extensive repertory of Church music, especially choral music. “English” music also tends to be more conservative in harmonic language and ensemble size than German and French music of a similar time. For example, English music of the early twentieth century employed functional harmony much more pervasively than German music did, and even when English music involved non-functional harmonic progressions, it still consisted of sonorities familiar from tonal music, while Continental, especially Viennese, music was shifting toward atonal trends. While the above-mentioned musical ideas could potentially represent other nations as well as England, their use by a British composer and in conjunction with an English text helps create the contrast between “English” and “Continental.”

Vaughan Williams’s works are directly related to all of these facets of English music. His predilection for a national style stemmed from assorted influences, and it began several years before the composition of *Five Mystical Songs*. As Onderdonk states:

> Vaughan Williams’s embrace of ‘Englishness’ dates to the two decades before World War I, when the intense focus on the national past that later reached its climax in the culture of the interwar years actually began. From the late 1870s, a focus on the ‘eternal’ values of the English countryside and a vogue for the English past, notably the Tudor and Elizabethan periods, became an increasingly dominant strain in the national culture.²⁹

These ideals would coalesce to support the English musical renaissance that would occur with the works of Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries.

Moreover, Vaughan Williams helped bring British music to international attention, and he (along with Edward Elgar) was one of the first English composers since Purcell to achieve nationwide acclaim. *Cassell’s Companion to Twentieth-Century Britain* describes the stature of these two composers by stating that, “Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) succeeded Elgar as the leading English composer.”³⁰ Yet, Vaughan Williams’s and Elgar’s compositional styles were drastically different from one another. For instance, works such as Elgar’s *The Music Makers* did not display the same relationship to the English listeners for whom it was performed that Vaughan Williams’s music exhibited. *The Music Makers* employed more dissonance and provided less tonal centricity than Vaughan Williams’s works, and the text by British author Arthur O’Shaughnessy was less familiar to a typical audience. These musical and extramusical elements combined in *The Music Makers* and

other works by Elgar to create pieces that, while admirable, did not aspire to the sense of “Englishness” that Vaughan Williams championed. (See Example 4 for an excerpt from The Music Makers. This excerpt, which is representative of the entire piece, demonstrates Elgar’s use of a “continental” style of chromaticism.)

In contrast, Vaughan Williams strongly believed that creating a musical climate that was directly connected to the English people was important for the entire nation.

Around June 1930, he wrote:
If we are to do any good in England for music we must find out the kind & style of music which is best for us -- & not make our music a weak imitation of foreign models. Of course if your ambition in life is to write like Hindemith or Webern you must go to the source to find out how to do it -- But is that the best basis for one’s own self-expression? . . . After all nearly all the musicians of note in England have done most of their study at home -- the people who study abroad seem to come to nothing.\footnote{Cobbe, ed., \textit{Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams}, 181.}

Although he frequently expounded on these nationalist sentiments, and they can be heard in his music, Vaughan Williams did study in France with Maurice Ravel, as has already been noted, and some of Vaughan Williams’s compositional techniques, such as references to planing, can be compared with those of Debussy. Yet, these similarities are subtle, and, while they show a connection with the musicians who worked on the other side of the Channel, Vaughan Williams’s music is decidedly distinct from that of early twentieth-century French and German composers. \textit{Five Mystical Songs} provides an example of Vaughan Williams’s singular compositional style and its relationship to the music of England.

Through this merging of various elements from England’s musical past and present, Vaughan Williams sought to connect performers and audiences with an English musical heritage while promoting progress in English compositional practices. As Charles Edward McGuire writes:

\[\text{[Vaughan Williams composed] music that was at once didactic (introducing singers and audiences to folk traditions and techniques from older English church and concert music) and progressive (through his use of advanced harmony and dissonance control), while still maintaining a style that was both accessible and palatable to the amateur singer. For music that ‘befits an Englishman,’ Vaughan Williams sometimes challenged the status quo of Victorian festival genres such as oratorio and}\]
cantata, but he also composed music that quickly became just as important to the festivals, including pieces that served double duty as both festival works and music appropriate for Anglican rite and ritual.32

Vaughan Williams’s focus on these ideas was ideally timed, as the desire for greater “authenticity” in English compositions was growing.

English music, or, more specifically, music written by English composers, has a unique history that, while interconnected with the history of German, French, and Italian music, does not fit the stereotypes often associated with the music history of these nations. Much of the best-known “English” music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was imported from countries such as Germany and France, and most British audiences considered this music to be the epitome of excellence in Western art music. One of the rare exceptions to this ideal, however, was amateur choral music. While composers such as Handel and, later, Mendelssohn, composed grand oratorios for professional choruses and large, well-trained amateur choirs, lesser-known English composers wrote extensively for the amateur choir. This prominence of English composers in the choral genre would help create a foundation for the English musical renaissance that would later occur in the work of Vaughan Williams, William Walton, Gerald Finzi, George Butterworth, and others.

Attention to English composers and music was rooted in the nineteenth century. During the decades before Vaughan Williams’s compositional career began, several English composers achieved marked but mostly ephemeral reputations for their work.

This group included Samuel Sebastian Wesley and Thomas Attwood Walmisley. In most of their works, these composers shared a penchant for composing in a conservative Germanic style. Yet, their songs and choral anthems, typically sung in English and performed for British audiences, kept the spark of interest in English music from being extinguished. Within a few decades, this interest would greatly expand, and it was in this changing musical climate that Vaughan Williams began to compose and to promote his works.

The search for authenticity that occurred as England began to emphasize the creation of a national musical style led to a shift in how composers, musicians, and audiences wrote, performed, and thought about music. As Thomson states,

Vaughan Williams’s early works were written in a period when British music was at a crossroads. The success in Germany of Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius* meant that, for the first time in many decades, Britain could boast a composer of international standing who wrote in a more or less contemporary idiom. The Royal College of Music, founded in 1882 partly with the aim of improving British composition, had produced its first generation of composer graduates, Vaughan Williams among them, who were increasingly making their mark as professional musicians. . . . [Yet] critics expressed doubts as to whether Elgar’s music (notwithstanding patriotic potboilers like the *Pomp and Circumstance* Marches and the *Coronation Ode*) was quite English enough to be considered the basis for a national music.\(^{33}\)

The techniques and ideas that Vaughan Williams used were part of a national music history that would continue in different directions during the following decades in the works of composers such as Gerald Finzi, William Walton, and Benjamin Britten. These composers chose varying paths, in some cases composing in a manner similar to the ways

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in which Vaughan Williams composed, and in other cases taking a more oppositional, reactionary direction. For example, Benjamin Britten employed more elements typically associated with the twentieth century, such as increased dissonance and syncopation, and, while he set many English texts and had a significant influence on English music history, his compositions were not as strongly associated with specific efforts to revive a distinctly English musical tradition as Vaughan Williams’s compositions. (See Examples 6 through 10 for comparisons that give a hint of these compositional differences.)

In the following examples, the contrasts between Vaughan Williams and some of his predecessors and successors can be observed. For instance, in *Job* (1892) by Hubert Parry, Vaughan Williams’s predecessor and teacher, the music includes traditional functional harmonic progressions that use chromaticism primarily for color, regular, predictable rhythm and meter, and a lack of any immediately noticeable musical elements that could be considered uniquely “English.” This work thus demonstrates stronger ties to Germanic traditions than can be heard in Vaughan Williams’s works (see Example 5). Vaughan Williams’s *Five Mystical Songs*, though, combines regular and changing meters, functional and nonfunctional harmonies, and major, minor, and modal scales. For instance, while employing a very “conservative” harmonic language in “I Got Me Flowers,” Vaughan Williams lessens the seeming stability by adding frequent meter changes (see Example 6). “The Call” demonstrates Vaughan Williams’s willingness to write passages that are neo-tonal and that include rapidly changing tonal centers. Measure 22 begins by emphasizing E-flat Major as the tonal center, but by the middle of measure 23, the tonality has become constantly fluctuating and unstable. In measure 31, a return to
E-Flat Major is heard before a progression of F minor, B-flat minor, and, finally, E-flat Major. By using these particular chords, Vaughan Williams reestablishes a tonal center before the end of the song. With F minor and B-flat minor chords, he references functional secondary dominant-to-dominant harmonic progressions while creating a modal and less stable sensation through the minor chords and the lack of a leading tone (see Example 7). A somewhat different relationship to Vaughan Williams’s work can be found in “God Is Gone Up,” composed in 1939 by Gerald Finzi, one of Vaughan Williams’s younger contemporaries. It demonstrates the harmonically and rhythmically conservative path that some British composers took. While this work cannot be considered “experimental,” it demonstrates a level of chromaticism and orchestration typical of many English choral works composed at similar times (see Example 8). In contrast, Britten’s “Festival Te Deum” demonstrates through mixed meter and chromaticism the “progressive” paths that other composers took. This work is farther from common practice ideas than music by Vaughan Williams is. More “experimental” elements include greater non-functional chromaticism and greater rhythmic and metrical dissonance, as is audible in the separate meters of the vocal and instrumental lines (see Example 9).
Example 5. Measures 95 through 106 of Hubert Parry’s Job.
Example 6. Measures 27 through 38 of “I Got Me Flowers.”
Example 6 (Continued)
Example 7. Measures 22 through 34 of "The Call."

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart: Such a

Joy, as none can move: Such a Love, as none can

Such a Heart, as joys in love.
Example 8 (Continued)

out,... Un-to our King sing praise ser-

out,... Un-to our King sing praise ser-a-phio-wise!.......

King sing praise ser-a-phio-wise! Un-to our King sing

poco
allarg. A tempo

Lift up your

Lift up your Heads,

Lift up your Heads,

Lift up your Heads,

praise ser-a-phio-wise!

poco
allarg. A tempo

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Example 9. An excerpt from Benjamin Britten’s “Festival Te Deum.”
Because of the large range of opinions on how English music should sound, reactions to Vaughan Williams’s individual works varied. For example, Britten was severely critical of *Five Mystical Songs*; he complained of “artificial mysticism combined with … technical incompetence.”34 The negative reactions that some later composers had to Vaughan Williams’s work is well-documented, and it depicts the antipathy that some later, more “progressive” composers felt for his music. For instance, Thomson states:

> The relationship between Vaughan Williams and his British successors is sometimes rather tense. . . . The reception of Vaughan Williams’s later music was affected by the emergence of Benjamin Britten as Britain’s unofficial composer laureate; in turn, Britten’s own reception was affected by the emergence of the British avant-garde in the 1960s.35

Due to these trends in English music during the mid-twentieth century, the admiration for Vaughan Williams’s music temporarily weakened.

> Despite these criticisms, Vaughan Williams still became a symbol of the “rebirth” of distinctly British music. For example, W.H. Parry wrote in 1946:

> An increasing number of people are becoming aware that Britain is not, after all, a country without music. Many have vaguely heard, too, that England once had a ‘golden age’ of music when she was the leader of the art in Europe--as some claim her to be to-day. . . . Britain’s musical achievements have in fact been very considerable, and throughout our history we have been greatly indebted to the Church, which possesses a fine wealth of the most beautiful music: a heritage which is far less widely known than it deserves.36

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One of the conduits of the change toward a national musical identity was Vaughan Williams’s choral and vocal works. They were appealing to many listeners, and they were filled with an amalgamation of musical techniques to which Vaughan Williams’s primarily English audiences could relate.

Vaughan Williams’s experimentation with various musical styles and ideas that he believed were representative of the vernacular musical traditions of the British people included implementation of several elements from English music of the past, including folk tunes and thematic material from Anglican Church music of the Tudor period. He also employed elements from art music of the nineteenth century. According to Ottaway and Frogley, Vaughan Williams exhibited a “commitment to reinvent rather than reject the achievements of his 19th-century predecessors.”37 In *Five Mystical Songs*, for example, all the songs in the set have tonal centers that are easy to perceive, and the instrumentation does not reflect the extremely large or small ensembles typically associated with the second decade of the twentieth century. While a moderately-sized ensemble was not entirely unusual during this time, its usage helped emphasize its difference from Viennese works. (See Appendix B for the specific instrumentation.)

This combination of musical devices gave his music a simultaneously overt and subtle national and cultural identity. In addition to these unambiguous elements, Vaughan Williams’s mere reputation for focusing on the creation of an English national style created an implicit, abstract concept of his music as distinctly English. For instance, Sir

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Peter Maxwell Davies states, “I don’t know whether it’s a particularly British or English thing, but the metaphysical melancholy in some of his work has resonances that I haven’t had from anything else.”

Vaughan Williams’s thoughts on Englishness in music are worth quoting at length. He wrote:

What is good taste? Is it a quality ever ascribed to a really great artist? Do we ever say of Beethoven or Mozart that their music is in good taste? And why is this? Because good taste is a purely artificial restriction which a composer imposes on himself when he imagines—rightly or wrongly—that his inspiration is not enough to guide him. A genius has no time to consider the claims of good taste; he is hurried blindly forward by the power of his own invention, and it is only when that fails he feels the absence of that prop on which the weak-kneed habitually stay themselves. . . . The truth is that the young Englishman is too musicianly. The ‘musicianly’ composer has studied the whole anatomy of inspiration, and has found out all the mechanical means by which beautiful music is produced. Equipped with this knowledge, he proceeds to build up compositions with yard-measure and plumb-line, quite forgetting that no man can make a living body out of dead clay unless he has first stolen some of the heavenly fire. Many a young composer has stifled his natural impulses in the desire to musicianly. If he has elected to be ‘romantic’ he considers himself lost unless he crushes all his power of invention under an entanglement of trombones and bass tubas—and all because Wagner’s special inspiration required special expression. If he favours the ‘classical’ school, he thinks it only becoming to make a show of exercising Brahms’s self-restraint, without considering what a storehouse of invention Brahms possessed out of which to deny himself. . . . Away, then with good taste. Good taste is the heritage of critics, and a good critic is, proverbially, a bad composer. What we want in England is real music, even if it be only a music-hall song. Provided it possess real feeling and real life, it will be worth all the off-scourings of the classics in the world.”

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Vaughan Williams made these sentiments about perceived quality and authenticity in English music particularly clear throughout his life, and the various musical genres in which he composed reflect this dedication to the English musical renaissance.
It is essential to address the reasons for calling *Five Mystical Songs* a choral work at all, as opposed to describing it in relation to solo vocal literature or chamber orchestra literature. Besides the inclusion of a choir, which occurs in various genres, its original function was within a choral performance setting. Although much of the piece involves a solo baritone, it was premiered at the Worcester Three Choirs Festival, and it was presented as a part of the choral genre. Therefore, analyzing it within the context of the history of British choral singing is especially useful.

The genre of choral music is one that is often overlooked in musicological studies. Many music historians who write about music composed after 1600 primarily focus on instrumental music, and, often, those who study vocal music concentrate on opera or lieder, and do not discuss choral music in any depth. Yet, arguably, this genre has directly exerted influence over more people than most other genres of Western art music through the ubiquity of amateur choirs. Choirs have been employed to enrich worship services in almost every Christian denomination, have provided performance experience to students at various levels of education, have been an enjoyable leisure activity for amateur and professional musicians, and have performed on the finest concert stages in the world. The
lack of research on choral music of the past four hundred years, therefore, is a gap in the musicological writing currently available. A more thorough understanding of the history of this genre will lead to a better understanding of many works that, because they seem anachronistic, are currently either completely ignored or relegated to brief side notes in many music-historical writings.

Perhaps one reason for such exclusion or minimization of choral music is that, throughout the history of Western music, it has satisfied very specific and distinct roles. Many of the best-known and most frequently performed choral works are settings of religious texts, and these works were particularly important to the history of English music. Church music, especially choral works, had a prominent place in Renaissance England, and this emphasis on the genre continued during the Baroque era, as evidenced by Handel’s oratorios. These works, often performed during Lent, were extremely successful, and they have remained popular throughout the following centuries. The genre was less prominent in England during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and new compositions of choral music primarily consisted of simple, widely unknown compositions for community choral societies. The temporarily decreased performance of new choral works by professional or skillful amateur choirs did not signify the death of the choral tradition in England. Rather, it was a period of transition that laid the foundation for the works of early twentieth-century English composers. Richard Frank Goldman succinctly describes this period thus:

The century following the death of Handel cannot in all fairness be termed one of the richest or most interesting in the history of British choral music. Yet there was considerably more activity, and much more honest and
attractive music-making, than it has been the fashion to recognize in recent years. It must be remembered that the tradition of choral singing maintained itself at a fairly high level, and kept English singers and public receptive to new works and in readiness to welcome the so-called Renaissance of the later nineteenth century.

The many choral festivals organized in the eighteenth century created a demand for large-scale works, after the Handelian pattern, and provided a ready stimulus for composers. The famous Three Choirs Festival, combining the cathedral choirs of Gloucester, Worcester, and Hereford, had its inception in 1724. Other great festivals were instituted at Leeds (1767), Birmingham (1768), and Norwich (1770). Many other cities held festivals, the number being especially great in the early years of the nineteenth century.40

During the English musical renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century, choral music gained greater recognition for its use in various community and church settings and for its place in the English musical tradition. With the compositional work of composers such as Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries, English choral music experienced a resurgence in appreciation and admiration. It did, however, remain a genre primarily performed by amateurs. As Arthur Mees writes in his 1969 book Choirs and Choral Music, “Chorus singing is the sphere of public musical activity which now belongs legitimately to amateurs, and choral music the class of music for the performance of which the public is almost entirely dependent on amateurs.”41

Because of its amateur nature, choral music has not followed musical trends in the same manner as other genres. For example, because it would be virtually impossible for a choir to sing an atonal work, choral music did not follow many of the trends of atonality.

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and serialism. Additionally, because choral music has historically been used primarily for Church, community, and school functions, specific types of texts have been especially prominent and desirable for text-setting. For these reasons, many methods for describing early twentieth-century music cannot be thoroughly applied to choral music.

Despite the differences between choral music and other musical genres, there are ways in which choral music has followed music-historical trends, though perhaps at different times and in different ways. As the usage of instrumental music for concerts and other forms of entertainment increased during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its usage also increased in the world of choral music as more composers included instrumental accompaniments for their works. Additionally, the changes to musical elements in other genres was moderately reflected in choral music. For example, as opposed to the clear tonality and diatonicism of British music of earlier decades, the expanded use of chromaticism in early twentieth-century British choral music correlates with the increased use of chromaticism in other genres during the nineteenth century.

Because of these elements of choral music history, Five Mystical Songs is more clearly compatible with discussions of genre than with the entirety of music history as it is usually presented. Like most choral works of the early twentieth century, Five Mystical Songs includes some chromaticism and some elements of “progressive” twentieth-century music while remaining strongly fixed in tonal practices, and in the traditional religious texts of choral music.
USE OF RESEARCH METHODS
FOR OTHER VAUGHAN WILLIAMS CHORAL WORKS

I have demonstrated many ways in which methods such as history of genre, national music history, and cultural and societal history can be used to understand *Five Mystical Songs*. These methods can help create a better understanding of many musical works, and they can be applied to any of Vaughan Williams’s choral works. Two such examples are *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936) and *Three Shakespeare Songs* (1951).

*Dona Nobis Pacem* was premiered by the Huddersfield Choral Society for their centenary on October 2, 1936. Because the cultural and political environments changed drastically during the twenty-five years between the premier of *Five Mystical Songs* in 1911 and that of *Dona Nobis Pacem* in 1936, the musical and textual material of these works varied greatly. This work reached an audience for whom the text emanated great relevance, and the large number of performances during the decades following the premier demonstrates the lasting impact that this work had in England.

The most noticeable connection that this work has with English culture is the textual references to a desire for peace at a time when society had recent memories of World War I and was moving toward World War II. The Latin phrase “dona nobis pacem,” meaning “grant us peace” is sung in songs 1, 3, and 5 of the work. Vaughan
Williams also utilizes texts from various sources to emphasize the contrast between peace and war. The second song, “Beat! Beat! Drums!” depicts the numerous effects that war has on everyday life, and the third song, “Reconciliation,” verbalizes the possible feelings a person might have upon the death of his enemy. One line states, “For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead.” It also gives hope through the texts that imply that no war is eternal. The first lines, which follow, describe this hope: “Word over all, beautiful as the sky, Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost; That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly, softly, wash again and ever again this soiled world.” The final two songs include the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-1892), a speech by John Bright (1811-1889), and various passages from the Bible. These songs continue the theme of hope for peace in a time of war. (See Appendix C for the full text of *Dona Nobis Pacem*.)

*Three Shakespeare Songs* is an example of the continued relevance that Vaughan Williams’s music had in British society. This set of three songs was premiered at the Federation of Music Festivals on 23 June 1951. As in *Five Mystical Songs* and *Dona Nobis Pacem*, the text displays a great awareness of the culture of the time during which it was composed. For instance, the first half of the twentieth century saw a great resurgence in the English people’s interest in reading the works of Shakespeare. Additionally, unlike *Dona Nobis Pacem*, it has a comparatively light subject matter. (See Appendix D for the full text of *Three Shakespeare Songs*.) All three texts are from Shakespeare’s comedies; the first two are from *The Tempest*, and the last is from *A

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*Midsummer Night’s Dream.* These textual choices reflect the more optimistic outlook of
1950s England in comparison with the 1936 composition date of *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Even the first and most somber song of the set portrays a light-hearted outlook; the text
states, “Full fathom five thy father lies,” depicting the drowning death of the character
Alonso, but it also describes this event as primarily a change. Later in the song, the text
continues thus: “Nothing of him doth fade, But doth suffer a sea-change into something
rich and strange.” As the song set continues, the text treats the beauty of life and of
nature, and it remains lighthearted.

Additionally, musical aspects of these works are consistent with many musical
features of *Five Mystical Songs.* While the harmonic language is decidedly “Romantic,”
*Dona Nobis Pacem* and *Three Shakespeare Songs* are not anachronistic for twentieth-
century English choral music. They demonstrate a musical style that employs little
chromaticism compared with some twentieth-century music. Yet, the chromaticism that is
present creates an ethereal quality through the instability of the tonal center. It is
particularly easy to relate them to other English choral works of the same decades. They
follow some twentieth-century musical trends, such as a frequent lack of functional
harmony, but they do so in a manner that is conservative enough for reasonably facile
choral singing. Like *Five Mystical Songs,* these works exemplify the multitudinous
methods beyond conventional narratives that can be used for composers such as Vaughan
Williams.

The following examples demonstrate the combination of “traditional” musical
elements, such as a steady meter and tonal resolution, with Modernist elements, such as
nonfunctional harmony and extensive chromaticism. For instance, *Dona Nobis Pacem* incorporates more “traditional” and “Romantic” musical elements. It employs a regular hypermeter while exhibiting changes between duplets and triplets in the rhythm (see Example 10). Another example is “The Cloud-Capp’d Towers;” this song reflects an unstable quality, fitting the mention of clouds (see Example 11).
Example 10. Measures 22 through 27 of “Reconciliation” from *Dona Nobis Pacem*.
Example 11. Measures 1 through 4 of “The Cloud-Capp’d Towers” from *Three Shakespeare Songs*.
CONCLUSION

Through the implementation of various methods for understanding Vaughan Williams’s *Five Mystical Songs*, the procedures available for studying his choral works can expand, and by using these methods, the history of British music can be seen with greater clarity. As Thomson states:

> The history of twentieth-century British music is far from the seemingly inevitable, seamless narrative, running from Parry and Stanford, through Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Britten and Tippett, to the Manchester school, that it is sometimes made out to be.\(^{43}\)

Such a teleological narrative, while somewhat useful, does not account for many factors. Although much more could be said about Vaughan Williams’s work and how to understand it, this thesis has provided a summary of some of the ways in which to understand and interpret the compilation of cultural and musical influences in his music. By using many musical and extra-musical elements, Vaughan Williams composed works that were relevant for his time and location, and he subtly infused his works with the identity of the people for whom he was composing.

Exploring the musical elements Vaughan Williams employed, such as planing and modality, and the various cultural elements, such as the influence of the Anglican Church

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and the popularity of the metaphysical poets, creates a clearer picture of the place that such works as *Five Mystical Songs* have in English music history. This new perspective is one in which Ralph Vaughan Williams is not an anomaly but, rather, a figure whose influence helped shape the structure of British music during the twentieth century. The *Five Mystical Songs* exemplify the connection of Vaughan Williams’s compositional practices during the first half of the twentieth century to British culture and society.


------. *Five Mystical Songs for Baritone Solo, Chorus (ad lib), and Orchestra, Vocal Score*. Reigate, England: Stainer & Bell Ltd., 1911.


No. 1. “Easter”

Rise, heart; thy Lord is risen.
Sing his praise
    Without delay,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
    With him may’st rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more, Just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
    With all thy art.
The cross taught all wood to resound his name
    Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
    Pleasant and long:
Or since all music is but three parts vied,
    And multiplied;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.
No. 2. “I Got Me Flowers”

I got me flowers to strew thy way;
I got me boughs off many a tree:
But thou wast up by break of day,
And brought’st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sun arising in the East,
Though he give light, and the East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
Though many suns to shine endeavor?
We count three hundred, but we miss:
There is but one, and that one ever.
No. 3. “Love Bade Me Welcome”

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

‘A guest,’ I answered, ‘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.

No. 4. “The Call”

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
Such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a Light, as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such Heart, as joys in love.
No. 5. “Antiphon”

Let all the world in every corner sing.
   My God and King.

The heavens are not too high,
His praise may thither fly:
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.

Let all the world in every corner sing.
   My God and King.

The Church with Psalms must shout,
No door can keep them out:
But above all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.

Let all the world in every corner sing.
   My God and King.
APPENDIX B.

Instrumentation of *Five Mystical Songs*

2 flutes
2 oboes
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
2 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
harp
baritone solo
SATB choir
violins
violas
cellos
double basses
APPENDIX C.

Text of *Dona Nobis Pacem*

No. 1. “Agnus Dei”
(traditional)

*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*
  *dona nobis pacem, etc.*
*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*
  *dona nobis pacem, etc.*
*Dona nobis pacem.*

*(translation of Agnus Dei)*
*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,*
  *grant us peace, etc.*
*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,*
  *grant us peace, etc.*
*Grant us peace.*
No. 2 “Beat! Beat! Drums!”
(Walt Whitman)

Beat! beat! drums! blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows, through the doors, burst like a ruthless force.
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet, no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field, or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums! blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities, over the rumble of wheels in the streets,
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses?
No sleepers must sleep in those beds
No bargainers’ bargains by day, would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums, you bugles wilder blow!

Beat! beat! drums! blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley, stop for no expostulation.
Mind not the timid. Mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums, so loud you bugles blow.

No. 3 “Reconciliation”
(Walt Whitman)

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost;
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly, softly, wash again
and ever again this soiled world.
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin. I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

Dona nobis pacem, etc.
No. 4 “Dirge for Two Veterans”  
(Walt Whitman)

The last sunbeam  
Lightly falls from the finished Sabbath,  
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking  
Down a new-made double grave.

Lo, the moon ascending,  
Up from the East the silvery round moon,  
Beautiful over the house-tops,  
Ghastly, phantom moon,  
Immense and silent moon.

I see a sad procession,  
And I hear the sound of coming full-keyed bugles,  
All the channels of the city streets they’re flooding  
As with voices and with tears.

I hear the great drums pounding  
And the small drums steady whirring  
And every blow of the great convulsive drums  
Strikes me through and through.

For the son is brought with the father,  
In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,  
Two veterans son and father dropped together,  
And the double grave awaits them.

Now nearer blow the bugles  
And the drums strike more convulsive  
And the daylight o'er the pavement quite has faded  
And the strong dead-march enwraps me.

In the eastern sky up-buoying,  
The sorrowful vast phantom moves illumined,  
’Tis some mother's large transparent face,  
In heaven brighter growing.
O strong dead march you please me!
O moon immense with your silvery face you soothe me!
O my soldiers twain! O my veterans passing to burial!
What I have I also give you.

The moon gives you light,
And the bugles and the drums give you music,
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,
My heart gives you love.

No. 5 “The Angel of Death”

(John Bright)
The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land;
you may almost hear the beating of his wings,
There is no one as of old,
to sprinkle with blood the lintel
and the two side-posts of our doors,
that he may spare and pass on.

Dona nobis pacem, etc.

(Jeremiah 8:15-16, King James Version)
We looked for peace, but no good came,
and for a time of health, and behold trouble!
The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan;
the whole land trembled at the sound
of the neighing of his strong ones;
for they are come, and have devoured the land.
and those that dwell therein.

(Jeremiah 8:20, KJV)
The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.

(Jeremiah 8:22, KJV)
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?
(Daniel 10:19, KJV)
O man greatly beloved, fear not,
peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong.

(Haggai 2:9, KJV)
The glory of this latter house
shall be greater than the former,
And in this place will I give peace.

(Isaiah 2:4b, KJV)
Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

(Leviticus 26:6, KJV)
And none shall make them afraid,
neither shall the sword go through their land.

(Psalm 85:20-11, KJV)
Mercy and truth are met together,
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth shall spring out of the earth,
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

(Psalm 118:19a, KJV)
Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go into them.

(Jeremiah 43:9, KJV)
Let all the nations be gathered together.
And let the people be assembled;
And let them hear, and say, it is the truth;

(Isaiah 66:18-19, KJV)
And it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues.
And they shall come, and see my glory;
And I will set a sign among them,
And they shall declare my glory among the nations.

(Isaiah 66:22, KJV)
For as the new heavens, and the new earth,
which I will make shall remain before me,
so shall your seed and your name remain for ever.
(Luke 2:14, KJV)
Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,
Good will toward men.

Dona nobis pacem, etc.
APPENDIX D.

Text of *Three Shakespeare Songs*

No. 1 “Full Fathom Five”  
(From *The Tempest*, Act I, scene 2)

Ding dong, bell, ding dong, bell, etc.  
Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Ding dong, bell, ding dong, bell, etc.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:  
Hark! now I hear them.  
Ding dong, bell, ding dong, bell, etc.

No. 2 “The Cloud-Capp’d Towers”  
(From *The Tempest*, Act IV, scene 1)

The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind:  
We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on,  
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.
No. 3 “Over Hill, Over Dale”  
(From *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act II, scene 1)  

Over hill, over dale,  
  Thorough bush, thorough briar,  
Over park, over pale,  
  Thorough flood, thorough fire,  
I do wander everywhere.  

Swifter than the moon’s sphere;  
And I serve the fairy queen,  
To dew her orbs upon the green.  
The cowslips tall her pensioners be;  
In their gold coats spots you see;  
Those be rubies, fairy favours,  
In those freckles live their savours:  
I must go seek some dew-drops here,  
And hang a pearl in every cowslip’s ear.