A Critical Analysis of “On Wenlock Edge” by Ralph Vaughan Williams

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF "ON WENLOCK EDGE"

BY RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
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June, 1966
APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Several months ago this writer heard a recording of the song cycle, "On Wenlock Edge," by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The initial interest aroused by the haunting, almost mystic quality of this music has increased through the intensive rehearsal necessary for its performance, and research into the literary and musical background information available. "On Wenlock Edge" requires of the performer sustained commitment to the work, as its essentially English character and brooding nostalgia do not unfold until there is a grasp of the whole.

Detailed analysis of Vaughan Williams' score reveals more specifically to the performer the composer's intent and purpose and helps him achieve the unified mood called for. However, only the actual performance of the composition leads the singer to the heart of the work.

Statement of the Problem. The purpose of this study is to examine as thoroughly as possible, with the sources at hand, the song cycle, "On Wenlock Edge," by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The study will include a brief summary of the life of Vaughan Williams, pertinent statements about his music, a general analysis of the entire composition and a
detailed analysis of two songs from the cycle. The two songs receiving more detailed analysis were chosen for their contrast and variety of musical ideas.

**Importance of the Study.** Analytical study of a composition, especially a composition of some scope, should result in a more profound performance of the work. Analysis also develops musical judgment, which can be applied to other music encountered in the future. A performer who only views the surface of music, can fail to grasp and impart its deeper subtleties.

**Procedures to be Used.** The research was based upon pertinent source materials available and repeated hearings of the recording of the song cycle. The two songs found in the appendix are analyzed according to the figured bass system of musical analysis. Analysis of harmonic relationships, in the truest sense of the word, has not been attempted, due to the impressionistic nature of the composition. Instead, analysis of the chords has been made following Tovey's example and explanation:

>If, abandoning the polyphonic hypothesis, we use chords, simple or complex, as mere unanalysed [sic] tone-colours, we can start a new polyphony with moving chords instead of moving single parts. Our problem, then will be to keep the planes of tone distinct... Extremes meet, and we are
recovering a sense of the values of unharmonized melody; not melody which wants to be harmonized, but the austere achievement, far more difficult than any 'atonality,' of a melody that neither needs nor implies harmony. And so we return to nature (8:Vol. 11:211-212).

The final procedure was the many rehearsals necessary to bring the cycle to completion and performance of the work in recital.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN STUDY

Folk song. Literally meaning the song of the people, the folk song may be more accurately and completely defined:

... the unconscious expression in melody of the racial feelings, character and interests of a people. It is music created, without benefit of scientific training, by the common people or peasantry, which chronicles their lives in terms of design, melody, and rhythm, and has become traditional among them (3:559).

Song cycle. A song cycle is a series of songs relating to the same poetic subject and forming a single musical composition (13:Vol. 7:962).

Modes. All medieval music was based upon a system of eight modes which are octave scales differing in their series of intervals—"a generalized scale model as differentiated from a scale of particular pitch" (3:1156).
Tremolo. The term applies to the rapid repeating of a single note or chord without regard to measured time values. The effect is obtained on the piano by a "shake" in octaves or on two other notes or a chord, with the use of the sustaining pedal (13:Vol. 8:540).

Recitative. The recitative is the declamatory portion of a vocal composition as opposed to the lyrical. "Recitativo secco" denotes free rhythmic movement of vocal line over an accompaniment of the simplest form. "Recitativo stromentato," on the other hand, has a more definite rhythmic pattern and an elaborate accompaniment (3:1507).

Pentatonic. A pentatone is a scale of five notes in which the octave is reached on the sixth note. (This relates to the black keys on a piano.) It is "similar to the modern diatonic major scales, except that the fourth and seventh degrees are omitted" (3:1380).

Strophe. The verses of poetry or the stanzas of a vocal composition are termed strophes. In the Bar, described below, the first two stanzas are the strophes.

After-song. The last stanza of the Bar is called the after-song.
Bar. Originally the Bar was the form of the songs of the German Minnesingers or Meistersingers, consisting of three sections, the first two being the Stollen (strophes) and the last the Abgesang (after-song). The strophes consisted of phrases of equal length which were alike or closely similar; the after-song was of unspecified length and had different music (13:Vol. 1:422).

Plainsong. All early unison melody, which is without time-values, in the broadest sense of the word, may be called plainsong. It is the name now given to the style of unison ecclesiastical music which arose before harmony (3:1419).

Figured bass. The terms figured bass or thorough-bass, though technically not identical, are used synonymously to mean the system of musical shorthand in which a bass part is provided with numbers to indicate the harmony in the upper parts (13:Vol. 8:436). This system is employed today as a means of musical analysis, with Roman numerals indicating the chords and one or more numbers showing the proper inversion of the chords.

Ostinato. A melodic figure which occurs unchanged throughout a composition or a section thereof is technically called an ostinato. It usually appears in the bass part,
hence the term "ground bass" used by English composers such as Purcell (13:Vol. 6:458). This does not, however, rule out a treble ostinato.

**Pedal tone.** More accurately called pedal point, pedal tone is the sustaining of a note or notes in a musical passage while the other parts pass through harmonies which may or may not be related to the sustained part itself (3:1378).

**Tone cluster.** A complex of notes, generally seconds apart, played on the piano simultaneously, or separately if the sustaining pedal is depressed and held, is called a tone cluster.

**Augmentation.** An augmented motif, phrase, or theme is one which is lengthened or increased in time values when it reappears.

**DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED IN THE POETRY**

**Holt.** In modern usage, as in older times, the holt refers to a wooded hill, or just a wood (17:Vol. 5:345).

**Hanger.** Similar to a holt, a hanger is a wood on the side of a steep hill or bank (17:Vol. 5:74).
Yeoman. In the days of vassals, the yeoman was a freeholder next in rank under a gentleman. Loosely, a yeoman is a man of the common people. In later usage it came to mean a servant of superior grade ranked between a sergeant and a groom (17:Vol. 12:41).

Twelve-winded. There are "twelve quarters" from which the wind can be described as coming. In other words, twelve-winded refers to the twelve points of the compass (24:148).

Shires. In great Britain a shire is a territorial division or county. "... Both the shires ..." refers to Worcestershire and Gloucestershire (24:146).

Coloured counties. From atop Bredon Hill can be seen many counties: Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Warwickshire, and Oxfordshire (24:146). These counties were undoubtedly "coloured" by the patchwork appearance of the farmland.

Groom. Although technically a groom is a page or servitor, or else a dignitary in an English royal household under the Chamberlain (17:Vol. 4:442), the reference here is probably to a man-servant or other male attendant.
**Handselled.** In this instance, the reference is to a premonition or a "foretaste" of an event (24:151).

**Lief.** The term "lief" expresses how the lad would willingly, freely, or gladly set down his burden.

**DESCRIPTIONS OF LOCATIONS MENTIONED IN THE POETRY**

**Wenlock (wen'lok) Edge.** Carl J. Weber says simply that Wenlock Edge is a group of hills in southeastern Shropshire (24:148). More specifically it is a limestone ridge rising sharply to the southwest of Much Wenlock in County Shropshire.

**Wrekin (rek'ən).** Usually referred to as The Wrekin, it is an isolated wooded hill (1,385 ft.) north of Much Wenlock.

**Severn (sev'ərn).** The Severn, the longest river in Great Britain, is 180 miles long and crosses the plains of Shropshire. According to Thomas Herdman, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "... during the Ice Age the impounded waters cut a deep channel across Wenlock Edge ... ," (8:Vol. 20:396) and emptied into the Bristol Channel in southeastern England.

**Uricon (yoor'ik-on).** Originally spelled Viriconium, and known as Wroxeter today, Uricon was one of the chief

**Bredon** (bred'en). Sometimes called Bredon Hill, it is a high hill in Worcestershire, near the Gloucestershire border (24:146).

**Ony** (on'e). The River Onny, as it is properly spelled, is one of the many contributaries to the River Severn. It is located in Shropshire and extends into Wales.

**Teme** (tēm). The River Teme, located in Shropshire, is one of the contributaries of the River Severn.

**Clun** (klun). The River Clun is a small river which flows into the River Severn. It is located in northwestern Shropshire.

**Knighton** (nit'en). Knighton is a small town located on the River Teme.

**Shropshire** (shrop'shar). Bordering on Wales' eastern boundary, is the county of Shropshire or "Salop." The Upland is composed of a series of ridges including Wenlock Edge and Wrekin. A third mass of high ground, Clun forest, lies between the rivers Clun and Teme (8:Vol. 20:585-586).
CHAPTER II

A SUMMARY OF VAUGHAN WILLIAMS' LIFE

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, England, in 1872. His father, a clergyman, recognized that the boy was "endowed with unusual musical talent" (10:286). His schooling took place at Charterhouse in London, from 1887-1890, at the Royal College of Music from 1890-1892, and at Trinity College in Cambridge from 1892-1895.

After receiving his degree from Cambridge, Vaughan Williams returned to the Royal College, where he studied composition with Hubert Parry and Charles Stanford and, as a matter of necessity, studied organ and piano. "The piano-forte, indeed, had as little influence on his output as it is possible for that all-pervading instrument to have on a composer of today. The organ had a little more..." (13:Vol. 8:695). For three profitable years after leaving the Royal College, he was organist at South Lambeth Church in London, during which time he visited Berlin to study composition under Max Bruch at the Akadamie der Künste (3:1959).

Since he was receiving support from his family, Vaughan Williams did not have to earn a living. Whether
this retarded or furthered his musical development is a matter of conjecture. According to Howes:

He was not forced to equip himself quickly with a serviceable technique either as composer or performer. At the R. C. M. he belonged to a generation which included Coleridge-Taylor, William Hurlstone and Gustav Holst, and his compositions there certainly made less mark than those of these contemporaries. . . . He was profoundly dissatisfied with his own efforts as a composer, and most of his works of that time has [sic] been withdrawn or withheld from publication. He found that the music he had been taught, alike in England and in Germany, did not enable him to say what he wanted to say (13:Vol. 8:695).

After a trip in 1896 to Bayreuth, where he was greatly impressed with Wagner's music, he returned to Cambridge and received his doctorate in music in 1901. So, at age twenty-nine, Vaughan Williams ended his scholastic career. His only other study was with Maurice Ravel in Paris for eight months in 1908-09.

In 1901 Vaughan Williams discovered the beauty of the English folk song, particularly the folk songs of the Tudor period (1485-1603). Fascinated by this new interest, he delved more and more seriously into the folk music of his own country, particularly the songs heard in Norfolk, the shire which borders Cambridge. He became a member of the Folk-Song Society in 1904. Not content merely to publish his discoveries in their original form, he made "tasteful arrangements of, and apt modern harmonizations for, an
The entire library of folk music" (10:287).

His own songs written at about that time, of which "Linden Lea" is typical, show clearly the modal and rhythmic influences of folksong. But more than that, from the folksong sprang that style which Vaughan Williams evolved for himself, a style in which vocal melodies are woven in a polyphony which at times seems recklessly oblivious of harmonic consequences (13:Vol. 8: 695-696).

None of Vaughan Williams' works was performed until 1907 when "Toward the Unknown Region" was given at the Leeds Festival. Deciding that further study was necessary, Vaughan Williams set out for Paris in 1908 to study privately with Maurice Ravel. "After eight months he returned to England surer of himself as a craftsman" (9:282), and then composed his first major works, including "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis" and "A Sea Symphony." The following works, completed between 1909 and the beginning of World War I, revealed a full mastery of technique and a full maturity of style: "On Wenlock Edge," "Hugh the Drover," and "A London Symphony" (10:287).

In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Vaughan Williams was forty-two years old and exempt from military service. Determined to take an active part in the war, he enlisted in the Territorial Royal Army Military Corps, serving as orderly in French and Macedonian hospitals for three years. He was then recommended for a commission in
the Artillery and served in France throughout the campaign as Lieutenant.

After the war Vaughan Williams renewed his musical activities and returned to the Royal College of Music, this time as professor of composition. In 1920 he succeeded the conductor of the London Bach Choir, and in the same year his "London Symphony" was selected as the most significant native musical work produced by an Englishman (13:Vol. 8: 698).

In 1922 Vaughan Williams made his first visit to the United States. He would later make two more visits, in 1932 to lecture on "National Music," and in 1954 to lecture on "The Making of Music," both titles referring to books he had written.

For a period of ten years, starting in 1925, Vaughan Williams was interested in setting religious texts, which resulted in such works as "Sancta Civitas," "Flos Campi," a "Te Deum," and a "Magnificat." The period culminated in 1935 with his Symphony in F Minor, which, though not sacred in character, nevertheless reflects the depth of thought which prompted the other works.

This Symphony startled Vaughan Williams' admirers by its violence. He himself said of it: 'I do not know whether I like it, but this is what I meant.' Those who were accustomed to find their sustenance in his pastoral and mystical manners were disconcerted; those who disliked his
folksong manner said 'At last he has broken free';
the cynics said 'Now he has beaten the wild men
of Central Europe at their own game.' But Vaughan
Williams has always been capable of blunt utter­
ance and of taking his own line (13:Vol. 8:698).

In 1935 the Order of Merit was conferred upon Vaughan
Williams. This much-coveted British award, only granted to
twenty-four living individuals, honors eminent men and women
without conferring knighthood upon them. Essentially a
humble man, Vaughan Williams later turned down knighthood.

Actively continuing his musical endeavors, he also
took part in civilian work during World War II. By then
an old man, he produced, despite the stress and confusion of
war, his greatest creations, including the opera--or
"morality" as the composer preferred--"Pilgrim's Progress."
First introduced in 1951, it was regarded by Vaughan
Williams as the culminating point of his creative life
(13:Vol. 8:699).

At the age of 80, having been a widower for two
years, Vaughan Williams married his former secretary,
Ursula Wood. In the five years they shared together, she
proved to be a comfort and an inspiration to him. Suffering
from deafness in his last years, Vaughan Williams neverthe­
less completed his last major work, Symphony No. 9, in
November, 1957. "It was appropriate that he was working on
a setting of carols to be performed next Christmas when
death came to him" (2:4). Within a few days after his death
in his home in London on August 26, 1958, his ashes were
buried in Westminster Abbey.

Stephen Williams, writing for the New York Times, sketched the following personal portrait of Vaughan Williams:

He looks like a farmer. Indeed, one commentator has likened him to 'a large shaggy sheepdog, lovable, kindly, intelligent and untidy.' He is a man entirely without self-consciousness: a big, heavy, lumbering figure, usually dressed in rough tweeds, who looks as though he is on his way to judge the shorthorns of an agricultural show.

On state occasions he wears evening dress. No--this is a ridiculous understatement. He doesn't wear evening dress; he grudgingly allows it to cover his massive body. And while he sits, his head hunched down between his shoulders, the white tie gradually glides toward his left ear and the stiff shirt-front buckles and ruckles up against his chin. Occasionally he glances down at it as if to say, 'What the devil's all this?'

He speaks his mind, and it is a fine and richly stored mind, well worth speaking and hearing. He has a disarming honesty. Once, after listening to one of his own works, he exclaimed: 'Well, if that's modern music I don't like it.' And another time when an orchestral player questioned the accuracy of a note in his scores, he looked at him quizzically. 'Yes,' he said, 'it looks wrong, and it sounds wrong--but it's right.'

In a word, 'V. W.' is England. He typifies England just as solidly and ruggedly as did Chaucer or Samuel Johnson, or . . . Bunyan (24:9).
CHAPTER III

THE MUSIC OF VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Vaughan Williams was foremost among a small group of Englishmen who made the music of their native land bloom again after a barrenness of over two centuries. The musical genius which England produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries--Tallis, Byrd, Morley, Wilbye, Weelkes, Gibbons, Purcell, and many other lesser but gifted composers--seemed to end with Purcell's death in 1695. Handel's influence a short time later was devastating to the native English genius, for the German set patterns that made English composers mere imitators of the Teutonic art (13:Vol. 3:227-232).

The later "blooming" of English music resulted from the rise of Russian music in the nineteenth century, and the spread of nationalism which followed. The success of the Russian revolt against Germanic tradition created a "wave of nationalistic feeling" that swept every country in Europe. England was no exception (21:Ch. VI). The renaissance of the art of music in England--through men like Arnold Bax, Frederick Delius, Gustav Holst, and Ralph Vaughan Williams--has been one of the most striking developments in twentieth-century music.
Without making a comprehensive comparison of these men, it may be said that the one most typically English is Vaughan Williams, even though much of his work uses impressionistic techniques. His larger works are panoramas of the "vast English macrocosm" with many typical British aspects, which only a Briton could have produced (9:297–298). We find music nurtured in the rich soil of the English folk music, which all his life Vaughan Williams collected and studied. More than just a collector of folk tunes, in the words of Howes, he was also "an inveterate arranger and re-composer of folk material" (15:227). Not only did he employ these tunes skillfully, but many of his original melodies, though usually much freer rhythmically and structurally, are so closely patterned after the folk idiom that it is often difficult to tell the old from the new.

In The Book of Modern Composers, Blom compares imitation and creativity:

The musician who succeeds in imitating a folk idiom recognizably is merely like a good mimic who can hit off a well-known figure to the life on the stage; but he is not like a great actor capable of creating a character that has never existed, yet looks and talks and behaves for all the world as though it must have been done. Vaughan Williams is a creative artist of that sort. At his best he writes the kind of music which sets one wondering why it is that nobody had thought of it before, and from that it is only a step to asking oneself whether one really
has not heard it elsewhere, whether it is not actually an identifiable part of the heritage of English music (9:295).

English folk music, unlike the Russian with its rich and sensuous beauty, is refined and delicate, and springs from a more sober people. Vaughan Williams treated his musical heritage with equal sobriety and good taste, drawing from it the beauty, clarity, and simplicity which permeate his music. Typical are the free "rhapsodic" melodies he uses in nearly all of his larger works. These are frequently notated "senza misura" ("without measure") with bar lines omitted; are devoid of harmonic background, rhythmic regularity, and metrical symmetry; are held together by use of a pedal tone; and are used frequently and prominently (16:495-496).

Next to his interest in folk music, and not unrelated, the strongest impulse in Vaughan Williams' life has come from his love of nature, particularly of the beautiful English countryside, which has been the inspiration of some of his finest works: "The Lark Ascending," "On Wenlock Edge," "A Sea Symphony," and above all his "Pastoral Symphony"--considered to be his masterpiece. Love of nature and love of country, especially as identified with the English landscape and seascape, permeate all English artistic expression. Poetry has always influenced musical
composition; and English poets such as A. E. Housman have not only provided texts for vocal music, but have encouraged indigenous expression by writing so vividly of the English countryside, its winding rivers and seacoast.

Every listener will find something different in Vaughan Williams' music. Some may hear the folk music and some will see images of meadow, plain, river, or wide, wind-swept sky. Others may see none of these, enjoying, rather, the personal recital of the composer's inner emotions and confidences.

Folk song is not the only distinctive element in Vaughan Williams' music. His use of contrapuntal devices, the richness of the resultant harmonies, the straightforward tonalities—all place upon his music the "unmistakable stamp of his own personality" (14:269). When Vaughan Williams returned from Paris on 1909, everyone looked for a new "stamp" on his music—that of the Frenchman, Ravel; and many critics credit what was new in the cycle, "On Wenlock Edge," to Ravel.

Never was a critical shaft more ill-directed. Abroad and in Paris itself this was the work which first called attention to Vaughan Williams as a new voice and a very English one (13:Vol. 8:696).

Vaughan Williams' music is further characterized by his frequent use of triplet figures and their alternation with duplets and quadruplets, repetition of a melodic
fragment in varying rhythmic patterns, alternation of major and minor triads in quick succession, and a fondness for modulating to the key of the minor third above.

The diatonic feeling which was uppermost in Vaughan Williams' music at the beginning has persisted and has weathered the rough handling to which he subjected it ten years ago [1938]. Vaughan Williams has brought the simple directness . . . into contact with a tonal scheme of unflinching modernity and has fused them into one (14:274).

Vaughan Williams is a transition from the past to the present. He has revived the old and made it new again.

Howes comments:

His art, being rooted in tradition, has had the strength to be progressive. It has been singularly consistent in his development, perhaps because he found his artistic creed as soon as he had found his style, so that the instinctive and the rational sides of his mind have always worked in harmony. His music, though so personal in idiom that it can be recognized in the space of a few bars, has arisen out of the life of the community and the spirit of the time to which he belongs, and as is the way of art so begotten and so nourished, it reveals the abiding and the essential in the local and the temporary—which is the way of the prophets throughout history (13:Vol. 8:700).
CHAPTER IV

INFLUENCES APPARENT IN THE CYCLE, "ON WENLOCK EDGE"

On returning from Paris and his studies with Ravel in 1909, Vaughan Williams began work on a song cycle for tenor, piano, and string quartet. For his text he chose the simple yet evocative verses from A. E. Housman's A Shropshire Lad, published in 1896, and gave it the title, "On Wenlock Edge." This collection of poems, with its "nostalgic and vivid emotion" (4:82), provided a wealth of material for composers, and within the quarter-century following its publication, was often set to music. It was well-known that Housman did not like having his poems set, and when sought, permission was "reluctantly and rudely given" (18:34).

At the first performance of "On Wenlock Edge," the public generally and critics particularly were eager to discover a French influence in this first composition published after Vaughan Williams' study with Ravel. Though Vaughan Williams' critics were able to hear what they desired to hear, his advocates deny that there is any such influence perceptible. The composer himself, however, admits:
I came home with a bad attack of French fever and wrote a string quartet which caused a friend to say that I must have been having tea with Debussy, and a song cycle with several atmospheric effects, but I did not succumb to the temptation of writing a piece about a cemetery, and Ravel paid me the compliment of telling me that I was the only pupil who 'did not write my music' (4:82). [Translated from French.]

Ravel's influence was a "crystallizing force" but no composer has ever been "more constitutionally unable to write anything but his own music, no matter how many influences he absorbs into his own style" (18:35).

"On Wenlock Edge" was Vaughan Williams' first song cycle. He had written several individual songs and collected others for the English Hymnal, but he had not previously attempted to compose a series of songs linked by a common bond, the text. The composer chose Ncs. 31, 32, 27, 18, 21, and 50 from A Shropshire Lad—"all songs of mortal extinction" (15:214)—and selected Ncs. 1, 3, and 5 of the cycle for the main material. These three are linked with slighter pieces, then, almost as an afterthought, No. 6 was "tacked on" to complete the cycle (7:155). In writing her husband's biography, Ursula Vaughan Williams states:

It is not given to many great composers who excel in large-scale works to achieve success as song-writers also, and Vaughan Williams was not a great song-writer. His melodic gift was fertile and original, and his ability to set words aptly and simply was undoubted, but his songs rarely
rise above competence, and only very few of them are complete, rounded, successful works of art. Despite this many of them are attractive, and most of them serve the purpose for which they were written. More than any other works of his they cover the whole span of his long creative life, for the first extant song by him was written in 1891, and the last not long before his death. . . . The total of compositions in this genre exceeds 150, not counting "On Wenlock Edge" and the three roundels "Merciles Beauty," which are chamber works on account of their instrumental accompaniment (22:87).

Of the three song cycles of Vaughan Williams' early period--"On Wenlock Edge" (1909), "Five Mystical Songs" (1911), and "Four Hymns" (1914)--the first is most familiar to the public, partly because of its romantic connection with Gervase Elwes, who gave the premier performance on November 15, 1909, at Aeolian Hall. This performance, says Day, "satisfied Ralph and realized all his intentions as few first performances do" (4:87).

Fox-Strangways, who attended that first performance, made the following comment in Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music:

When one reads this cycle one always hears Gervase Elwes singing it. That was one of the most glorious experiences the musical world has had in our day. There was in it an elevation of tone and a beauty of thought that better voices and more obviously striking personalities have missed. He seemed to bring to it a whole lifetime of gentle manners and kindly sympathies, a conviction that good music was worth any effort he could make and that this was indeed good music (12:586).
In his writings on twentieth century English song, Henry Raynor mentions "On Wenlock Edge." He refers to the work as a "marriage" of the modality of a style to an advanced contemporary harmonic idiom. The first thing we should notice, according to Raynor, is its "eloquent" freedom from declamation and its power of "assimilating rhetorical poetry that neither a German nor a French composer . . . would ever need to acquire in the same way or to the same extent" (19:68). This "marriage" is evident immediately in the opening song (after which the cycle was titled) in the use of the chord built in fourths, of which the composer makes frequent use later in the cycle. The essentially modal character of his melodic writing must be attributed to the strict parallelism and bare, consecutive fourths and fifths.

Folk song style is most effective when expressing the escapist, or backward-looking nostalgia, which is the pervasive mood of these songs.

'On Wenlock Edge' contains more of the questing and adventurous essence of the composer; it demonstrated, as the songs of his immediate predecessors could not, a satisfactory style of English poetry; for this reason, its seminal value is possibly greater than its intrinsic worth—beautiful as several of the songs are (19:69).
CHAPTER V

GENERAL ANALYSIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL SONGS

"On Wenlock Edge." The song cycle opens with an upward rushing of strings—an "atmospheric effect" depicting wind—as the singer declaims against a stormy background. The stage is set by the agitation of the accompanying piano and tremolo strings, beneath which the bass repeats the singer's first melodic phrase, set to the words, "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble."

In songs 1 and 5, the most developed pieces, the fertile imagery is still placed on a strophical basis. In song 1, with fresh declamation for verses 3-5, the pianist's left hand supplies a returning strophe (7:155).

Vaughan Williams permitted declamation of certain passages, such as verse 3, with a natural forcefulness of stress and diction. An earlier composer, more restricted by continental models, probably would have attempted a lyrical stanza-setting or recitative based on classical precedents which would not have allowed the English text to make its point in its own way.

Essentially the piece is tonally based around the G-Mixolydian mode, but it also makes use of the Dorian mode and pentatonic scale. For the start, Vaughan Williams uses the Dorian mode, with the voice rising through a
pentatonic scale in the second phrase. By the end of verse 1, it appears that the tonic might be moving toward A-flat, thus making ready for the second verse in which there is a firm sense of transition and suspense. In verses 3 and 4 there is a contrasting of the past and the present in plain antiphony. Finally, the original feeling of G is restored in the fifth verse as the memory of past events fades. It becomes the responsibility of the piano to restore the pentatonic feeling of the first strophe.

Concerning Vaughan Williams' use of variety of material, Dickinson writes:

Whether the listener responds intuitively or by a close comparison of phrases, he can hardly miss the composer's mastery of his material at this crucial point . . . harnessing modes a semi-tone apart, and developing as primary chords what had been previously considered as discords. . . . (7:159).

"From Far, from Eve and Morning." The first verse of this elusive little poem is hushed over a simple piano accompaniment of wide-spread chords. The strings creep in and take over for the second verse in an almost magical effect. In this manner we see contrasted the impersonality of the first verse with the human cry of the next six lines. This contrast is then reversed, and the composer then returns to the opening progression for the remaining two lines. Dickinson refers to this song as a "persuasive
illustration of a haunting, elusive figure" (7:156). And Pakenham says: "In its restrained urgency the singer's melody is one of the loveliest and saddest Vaughan Williams ever wrote" (18:35-36). This song, like the first, is reasonably settled in Mixolydian mode, in this instance with a variable second and third degree. It also makes frequent use of common chords fitted into new contexts.

"Is My Team Ploughing?" Vaughan Williams combines chromaticism with the Dorian mode to make this song "personal instead of merely primitive" (5:29). To the poet's outrage, the composer omitted two of Housman's verses from his setting of the poem. Having obtained permission to set the poem to music, Vaughan Williams felt at liberty to use as little or as much of the text as he liked. "Moreover," he said, "I should have thought that anyone would have been grateful to me for refraining from perpetuating such a line as: 'The goal stands up, the keeper stands up to keep the goal'" (18:36).

In the paired verses, the spirit of a dead youth asks his living friend plaintive questions in quasi-recitative over a tonic chord in the strings. The answer is given to the accompaniment of agitated triplets from the piano, in what has been termed a "chromatic wail." The arrangement of the paired verses into three strophes
makes up a truly masterful expansion of the "Bar" (two strophes and an after-song). When Vaughan Williams decided to eliminate the football and goal-keeper verses, he was faced with either a third confirming strophe or two climactic ones, both creating an equally ruinous pull against the song's momentum of passion. So he chose the present form and the three strophes "make an upstanding Bar, unfaltering and yet trenchant to the end" (7:157).

The contrast between the two lads, the ghostly and the living, is very dramatic, "and its climax," says Pakenham, "is almost unbearable" (18:36). This climax is accomplished through a technique, or more accurately, a fondness for modulating to the key of the minor third above. Dickinson and Hawthorne both explain Vaughan Williams' use of this device in reference to the third strophe of this song. He raises the pitch location quasi-antiphonally and then lifts the tonic three semitones to achieve a more dramatic effect (7:156). The tension increases up to the unaccompanied melodramatic climax: "Never ask me whose." He has reached the point beyond which the folk song cannot go, and his effort to go further has "created a song that is exciting and moving not because of its expression of the text but through the stylistic battle he fights with his material" (19:69).
"Oh, When I Was in Love with You." This light, satirical song is a plainer and more attractive example of Vaughan Williams' modal-chromatic writing. A new twist is given to the Aeolian mode at the end of the first verse at the half cadence on the sharpened third degree, and in the second verse at the point of "atonal descent" in whole tones. The former marks the onset of virtue, the latter marks the passing of virtuous fancy (7:156).

Vaughan Williams has placed between two dramatic songs this pleasant, almost inconsequential setting of a poem little more than an epigram in Housman's lighter vein. He does so with an agility suitable to the song's light, cynical humor. The lively symmetry of the two phrases and the use of quick, frequent skips of a fourth, upward and downward, eliminates the possibility of folk song origin. "These binding elements accentuate the mutable features in this witty portrait of Mr. Insouciant Mode" (7:156).

"Bredon Hill." The longest and most elaborate song of the cycle, "Bredon Hill" is quite subtle compared to most other settings of the familiar poem. Of the sixty-three poems in Housman's A Shropshire Lad, it has most often found favor with composers. In reference to her husband's setting of the text, Ursula Vaughan Williams writes:
One cannot help feeling that the composer transcends Housman's texts in his setting, just as Schubert transcends the maudlin cliches of many of the Winterreise poems. The work seems to act on so many different planes at once; the vocal line is firm yet free, while the essentially indoor combination of piano and string quartet evokes an atmosphere that is in part outdoor and pictorial . . . and yet in part symbolic of an inner restlessness in the soul of the singer (22:177).

As in song No. 3, "Bredon Hill" makes use of the Bar form. Verses 1 and 2 form the two strophes and verses 3 and 4 the after-song. In the second half, verses 5 and 6 are the strophes and verse 7 is the after-song. Vaughan Williams develops the poem by having the piano represent church bells in varying moods, using chords made up primarily of minor thirds. The chords among the strings are more open, and fifths are prominent to suggest the bell harmonics. These bell-like figures propel the first pair of rather "straight-forward" strophes in near-speech rhythm into the declamation of joy in verses 3 and 4. The second Bar section uses near-plainsong melodies for verses 5 and 6; and the final strophe, being disturbed and disturbing, "melts into open sonorities" (7:159). In this manner the "stoicism is carried to the limit of endurance of the 'noisy bells' and then makes way for a romantic gesture of devotion, almost admonishing Housman's independence, and transfiguring the bell-echoes with resolute speech" (6:6).
Vaughan Williams said that he refused to give in to the temptation of writing about a cemetery, but one can almost hear the tread of mourners' feet above the tolling bells. The temptation, doubtless, was a reference to his "French fever," but close scrutiny of "Bredon Hill" reveals that he at least put "one foot on this favorite territory of Ravel's and Debussy's" (18:36).

The use of "word-painting" is not common in Vaughan Williams' song accompaniments. However, "Bredon Hill" clearly shows various ways of rendering church bells: "sonorous, tuneful, persistent, dissonant, monotonous, tuneful in the wrong key, sonorous again, and significantly vocal" (7:159).

For tonal variety, this song excels all others of the cycle. The first two verses employ initially a strophe in G-Mixolydian, which later expands to a Dorian minor third (B-flat). Verses 3 and 4 become explorers in key variations with the introduction of frequent A-flats. The rarely-used Locrian mode is interjected for the funeral verses 5 and 6, making use of the A-flats from the previous section. With the sombre funereal verses passed, the music is once again free to return to the G major strophe, this time completing the Bar as an after-song, whereas it opened in verse 1. In Dickinson's scholarly work, he writes:
In this deepening miasma the song might have ended, faithful to its text. But from another point of view the last word has not been said. 'I will come' may spell, not a meek conformity but forty days of resistance to despair, or at least a desperate gamble on finding peace of mind. With entire simplicity, the phrase is re-affirmed, free from any ritual gesture, yet a decisive Credo, answering the call to church. The accomplished strophic rhetoric is caught up in a new train of thought, and the song translated, for one moment, from a common tale of deprivation to a stroke of affirmation. . . . For Housman, the bells prevail. For Vaughan Williams, the last word is a man's response to them at the difficult minute (7:161).

"Clun." In the last song the optimistic Vaughan Williams tends to overpower the more sombre Housman. In the hands of the composer, Housman's verses create a picture of the sleepy West Country villages mentioned in the poem's prologue. His peaceful melody, weaving over a lazy triplet background in the strings, rises for a moment's declamation and then sinks dreamily into sleep. The rippling figure in the piano accompaniment adds to the dreamy quality by suggesting the slow movement of the river. Along with the second song in the cycle, according to Pakenham, "It is one of the composer's most beautiful tunes" (18:37).

Not all critics have agreed on Vaughan Williams' choice for the last number of the cycle. Dickinson feels that the song is out of place and that it opens doors that Housman merely names in his poem. The song is described
by Dickinson as a move from a "strophical start in a wayward mood" to an after-song (the third song in the cycle to use the Bar form). He goes on to say that it assumes the nature of a broad, fading epilogue. Beside the convergence of Roman soldier, ploughman, and forgotten lovers and sufferers, "there is little else to make 'Clun' more than the last number of a rich cycle of vignettes" (7:161).

The ending is the most artistic touch in the song. It achieves the stillness of death by distant chords oscillating a major second apart which spread out slowly and softly to the extremes of the piano keyboard. It foreshadows the "peace that passeth all understanding." This spreading is a simple suggestion of the infinite distance which separates man from the end of life (7:155-161).
CHAPTER VI

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF TWO SONGS

I. "ON WENLOCK EDGE"

The key signature for the first song of the cycle suggests G minor, but the use of whole tone, pentatonic, and modal scales through ostinato patterns keeps the key uncertain, while allowing G to remain a tonal center.

**Measures 1-3:** The first three introductory measures seem to center on an $E_b^6$ chord and consist of a pattern of parallel chords in first inversion, suggesting the whole tone scale.

**Measures 3-14:** Use of the pentatonic scale is prominent throughout measures 3-11. An ostinato calling attention to G as a tonal center, which appears first in the right hand of the piano (measure 3, third beat), is used, with some slight variation, through measure 13. The C, sustained in the strings, acts as a pedal tone. The vocal melody is doubled in the bass (measures 7-10), and at measure 11 the voice goes its own way, while the ostinato continues against the bass theme now centered on $A^b$, suggesting bitonality.
Measures 14-15: The upward chromatic ascent in the bass meets with a chromatic descent in the voice, the piano right hand, and other strings.

Measures 16-31: Repeat of the first fifteen measures with new text.

Measures 31-38: The section is tonally unsettled, but retains a feeling of $E^b$, this time with the flat-seventh in the bass. The "arpeggiated" tone clusters (measures 31 and 32) are also built around the same chord. The accompaniment figure in measures 35-36 anticipates the "word-painting" for the "heaving hills" theme in the voice (measures 37-38) by a series of parallel sixths moving up and down chromatically over the $D^b$ sustained in the bass.

Measures 39-43: The voice and the accompaniment make four chromatic descents of chords in first inversions, each one measure in length, and moving down each time in three semitones.

Measures 43-55: Repeat of measures 31-43 with new text. The descent in measures 53-55 extends to five semitones ending on $E^b$, which brings back the opening pattern heard in the introduction.

Measures 55-57: Repeat of measures 1-3.
Measures 57-61: One last flurry of agitation is heard in the tremolo strings and piano built on a strong $Db$ ninth chord, while the voice repeats, with slight variation and at a higher pitch, the phrase heard in measures 11-12, "The gale, it plies the saplings double." In measures 60-61 the tonal center of $G$ is restored.

Measures 62-64: As the voice becomes more tranquil, and the pentatonic feeling returns, the piano left hand repeats its pattern of measures 7-10, with a rhythmic augmentation in the strings and piano right hand of the "chordal" pattern first heard in measure 4.

Measures 65-77: Augmentation of the accompaniment pattern of measures 7-10 continues, and the piano leads the accompaniment quickly through several chord changes and finally into $G$ by contrary motion in chromatic half-steps (measures 66-71).

II. "BREDON HILL"

The tonal center of this number is $G$, though heard in many contexts, sometimes modal, sometimes pentatonic. The accompaniment exists to provide a background of tolling bells against which the singer tells his poignant story.
Measures 1-24: The introduction represents the tolling of church bells in tonal blocks of seventh chords, moving sometimes in parallel and sometimes in contrary motion. These blocks of sounds may be analyzed as eleventh chords, but when played they sound more like seventh chords moving against each other, suggesting the diffused overtones of bells. In measure 16 movement is introduced with an oscillating figure of parallel pure fourths. Seventh chords are introduced in measure 20 as pedal chords.

Measures 24-32: The pedal chords in strings and piano continue while the voice enters with a rather cheery melody which for five measures is built on the pentatonic scale, then moves into the G-Mixolydian mode in measure 29.

Measures 32-35: The shift into the natural form of the G minor scale (Aeolian mode) seems ironic for the phrase, "a happy noise to hear."

Measures 35-38: An instrumental interlude repeats the same chords heard in measures 5-8 of the introduction, alternating between strings and piano.


Measures 48-51: Except for the last chord, this interlude is a repetition of measures 5-8 and 35-38.
**Measures 52-78:** The accompaniment in the piano right hand is an ostinato triplet figure built of open fourths and fifths while the left hand moves through a series of sustained chords to an uneasy rest (measures 64-70) on a D major chord. Only the piano accompanies the voice in this section. The triplet figure continues through measure 78, though there are several variations of the ostinato.

**Measures 79-84:** The piano ends this section with material borrowed from the introduction (measures 20-23).

**Measures 85-91:** In preparation for the Locrian mode in the next section, a brief bitonal passage is heard, with sustained pedal in piano right hand and strings, and the Ab-C third in the left hand. A suggestion of the whole tone scale appears in measure 88 reminiscent of similar motifs in songs in the cycle.

**Measures 92-99:** Throughout verses 5 and 6 the rarely-used Locrian mode is employed, setting the stage for the bleak sadness of the text. In measure 96 the texture of open fifths at the top and the thirds below adds to the poignancy of the Locrian mode.
Measures 100-114: A new ostinato growing out of the pedal chord of measures 84-94 is taken in the piano right hand; and strings and piano left hand alternate between an octave G pedal and an Ab7 chord. Another bass ostinato in octaves in measures 105-110 adds to the dirge-like heaviness of this section.

Measures 115-121: The pedal chord, first taken by the strings in measure 84, is held while a broken chord ostinato in the piano on the A minor seventh chord adds motion. The pentatonic melody with which the voice entered at the start of the song is heard again over the broken chord accompaniment.

Measures 121-126: A sense of agitation is created by the piano triplets (measures 121-122) which have been heard before, and a tremolo in the piano left hand, taken at an increased tempo. A staccato ostinato in the strings in open fourths (measures 123-126), supported by a pattern of fourths in the piano, all over a bass pedal, accompanies the vocal melody which is reminiscent of measures 28-30. The tonal center is now D, and the mode is Dorian (measures 123-126).

Measures 127-135: The climax, reached on the words, "Oh, noisy bells, be dumb" (measures 128-129), is further
heightened by a right hand ostinato of sixteenth notes in the piano against a pounding triplet pattern in octaves in the piano left hand and middle strings, again with the inevitable pedal chord. Against this accompaniment, essentially in E\textsubscript{b} major, the voice shouts its final command to the bells, ending with the G minor descending scale in the Aeolian mode (measures 130-132). The accompaniment gradually diminishes and dies away.

Measures 136-146: Strings and piano return to the alternating seventh chords of the introduction, which unify the number and set the stage for the final, unaccompanied answer of the voice. The quiet drama of the sotto voce statement, "I will come," resolves so simply the imperious clamor of the bells.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Vaughan Williams' first song cycle, "On Wenlock Edge," was written when the composer had arrived at a full mastery of technique and a full maturity of style. The composer's intent and the means by which he reveals his intent to the performer become clearer through analysis and study of the score, leading ultimately to a more expressive performance.

Although the cycle is divided into six sections, which could be sung separately, the composer intended that it be performed in its entirety. Only through uninterrupted performance of the entire work can singer and listener grasp the perfect "marriage" of poetry and music and experience the pervasive, sustained mood which is the real impact of the work.

The value of a composition is judged not only by its beauty and vitality, but, more importantly, by its lasting quality. Since its first performance, "On Wenlock Edge" has maintained its freshness and grown in stature. It has become part of the repertoire of many of our greatest tenors.

In this song cycle Vaughan Williams has used the techniques of impressionism to capture the essence of England
itself. Through the felicitous union of Housman's poetry and Vaughan Williams' music, listener and performer not only come to terms with a significant work of art, but they also find themselves vividly transported to the beautiful countryside of Housman's Shropshire. Thus, "On Wenlock Edge" is both an aesthetic experience and a journey.


Graduate Recital

GARY LAWLER, Tenor
MARY ELIZABETH WHITNER, Piano

PROGRAM

I

Aria: Vieni, vieni ..................................................Antonio Vivaldi
"Come, come, oh my delight. How my heart once hoped
for all your love and waited always to call to you."

Aria: Se fulgida per te ..................................................Antonio Vivaldi
"Shining through the heavens, the torch burns to
guide thy sweet soul to holy peace divine."

Alma del core ..................................................Antonio Caldara
"Fairest adored, Spirit of beauty! Thy faithful
lover I'll ever be."

Danza, danza ..................................................Francesco Durante
"Dance, O dance, maiden gay, to the song that I sing."

II

Recitative: Comfort Ye, My People ..................................G. F. Handel
Aria: Every Valley Shall Be Exalted ..................................G. F. Handel

III

Wer hat ein Liedlein erdacht? ..................................Gustav Mahler
"Who has thought up this little song? Three Geese
brought it over the water. And whoever can't sing
the little song, they will whistle it for me."

Ich atmet' einen linden Duft ..................................Gustav Mahler
"I breathed a gentle scent. How lovely was the scent
of linden. I breath softly amid the scent of linden
love's gentle scent."

Das verlassene Magdlein (Moericke) ................................Hugo Wolf
"Out of my bed I get, long before daybreak. Thou
faithless lover, the dream of thee is over."

Nachtzauber (Eichendorff) ......................................Hugo Wolf
"Ah! fond memory loves to rove where love lies bleeding.
0 come to silent grove! Come! Come!"

Heimweh (Eichendorff) ......................................Hugo Wolf
"I rise with the sun to roam; from the hills, my heart,
filled with sadness, longs to greet thee, my distant
home."

--- INTERMISSION ---

IV

On Wenlock Edge (A. E. Housman) ..............Ralph Vaughan Williams
On Wenlock Edge
From Far, From Eve and Morning
Is My Team Ploughing?
Oh, When I Was in Love with You
Bredon Hill
Clun

HERTZ RECITAL HALL
May 8, 1966
4:00 p.m.
ON WENLOCK EDGE.

A. E. Housman

Allegro moderato.

Violin I.

Pizz.

Violin II.

Whole tones

Viola.

Whole tones

Violoncello.

Whole tones

PIANO.

Whole tones

Pedal tones in strings

PENTATONIC

OSTINATO
Pedal tones in strings

Verse 1. Agilito

Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;

Pedal tones in strings

PENTATONIC
His forest fleece the Wrek in heaves.

Pedal tones in strings

The gale, it plies the saplings double.

Pedal tones in strings

Ab in bass

Ab in piano left hand
VERSE 2

'Twould blow like this through holt and
PENTATONIC

Pedal tones in strings

PENTATONIC

Pedal tones in strings

han - ger

When Ur - l - con the
cl - ty stood: "Tis the old wind

Pedal tones in strings

\( A^b \) in bass

\( A^b \) in piano left hand

In the old an - ger, But then

Pedal tones in strings

\( A^b \) in bass

\( A^b \) in piano left hand
Ab suggests bitonality

Pedal tones in strings

TONIC CLUSTER TONE CLUSTER

PENTATONIC

Another
Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman...

ANTICIPATION OF "WORD-PAINTING"

Pedal tones in accompaniment

At yonder heaving hill would stare: The blood that warms an
English yeoman, The thoughts that hurt him.

they were there.

Pedal tones in strings
There, like the wind through woods in riot,

Through him the gale of life blew high;

The tree of man was
never quiet.

Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.

colla voce
The gale, it plies the saplings double,

It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:

Today the
II. BREDON HILL.

Moderato tranquillo.

Violino I.

Violino II.

Viola.

Violoncello.

Moderato tranquillo.  

PIANO.

Pedal chord.
In summer-time on Bre'don The bells they sound so clear; Round both the

PENTATONIC

Pedal chords in accompaniment

a tempo
shires they ring—them in steeeples far and near. A hap-
py

Verse 2

Here of a Sun-day morn-ing My

Pedal chords in accompaniment

PPP

OSTINATO

PPP
would love and lie,
And see the coloured counties, And hear the larks so 
low and the thunder. Let me the 
汉堡船歌 And hear the larks so 
low and the thunder. Let me the 
汉堡船歌
In the bells would ring to call her in valleys miles away:

Poco animato.

'Come all to church, good people; Good people, come and pray!"

But here my love would stay. And

I would turn and answer among the springing thyme, 'Oh, peal upon our
wedding, And we will hear the chime, And come to

church In time.

Pedal chords in accompaniment

Più lento.
But when the snows at Christmas on Brecon top were

Pedal chords in accompaniment

strown, My love rose up so early And stole out unknown And went to church

largamente

rit.
Largamente

Verse 6

They tolled the one bell only; Groom there was none to

G-LOCRIAN

OST/NATO

Pedal chords in left hand

* The whole of the passages between asterisks to be pp, with the exception of the notes especially marked.

The mourners followed after, And so to church went

OST/NATO
Bre· don, And still the ste· ples hum.

Pedal chords

PENTATONIC

molto cresc.

Piu mosso.

'Come all to church, good peo· ple,'
127 Più lento. 128

Oh, nois'y bells, be dumb.

Pedal chords in accompaniment

Più lento. 128, semiquaver rather quicker than quarter of previous bar, in strict time regardless of the voice part.

130 I hear you, I will come.

G-aeolian