

**“Thro Albions Pleasant Land”: The 20<sup>th</sup>—Century English Musical Renaissance,  
J.R.R. Tolkien, and Reassessing Englishness**

A Lecture Recital

by Gregory Martin

"It is no use harrowing people with farewell letters; it is not as if we were prodigal sons. Those who survive can write all that is necessary."<sup>1</sup> So wrote Lieutenant Robert Quilter Gilson of the Cambridgeshire Battalion just days before his death at the Somme in August 1916, and he certainly intended to include among those who would write on his behalf his band of brothers, a group of friends from Birmingham with literary aspirations which called itself the Tea Club and Barrovian Society. But only two members of this fellowship would outlive the Great War, and years later when critics were contending that *The Lord of the Rings* was an allegory for World War II, one of them, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, snapped back, "To be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 ... by 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead."<sup>2</sup> A month after Gilson's death (Aug. 5), a young composer named George Butterworth was killed in the same battle. Not long before departing for the Western Front, Butterworth had made his exit from a soiree by remarking to his friend Ralph Vaughan Williams in a "characteristically abrupt way, 'You know. You ought to write a symphony'."<sup>3</sup> VW's second symphonic effort — the *London* Symphony — is thus dedicated to Butterworth.

Gilson and Butterworth shared more than just their fate at the biggest battle the world had yet known,<sup>4</sup> and Tolkien and Vaughan Williams, who both survived their wartime mobilization, had more in common than the artistic missions bequeathed upon them. All four were part of an ethos — a distinctly English ethos — that had been decidedly and permanently altered. The idyllic/

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Quilter Gilson, quoted in John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle Earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 151.

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, foreword to the second edition.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 245.

<sup>4</sup> Garth, 147.

Arcadian beauty of Edwardian England had met the chaos of World War I and been sublimated into a bolder, if more desolate, vision of Pastoral England. Again it was held true that men were left to “rise on stepping-stones/Of their dead selves to higher things”, and history’s cycle at this turn gave us Tolkien’s Middle-Earth and Vaughan Williams’s *Pastoral Symphony*.

It is, I think, no coincidence that the composers devoted to giving a distinctive national voice to the ‘Land Without Music,’ as England had come to be known, and the philologist determined to “restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own”<sup>5</sup> should come from the same roots and be nurtured by the same experiences. To each, the Great War served as a threshold for an artistic reappraisal of what it meant to be English, and in the following years, as England saw its destiny shift from the greatest empire in human history to a nation increasingly dependent on foreign powers to retain its sovereignty, it became even more apparent that to maintain a sense of identity it would be necessary not only to recognize the inheritance of an extraordinary national history, but also to keep hold of the threads that interlaced and bound that history, the threads that, in essence, *continue* to define our notions of Englishness. And so these artists resolved to re-enforce national identity at this critical juncture in English history by re-engaging with those qualities that have so long stood as symbols of England herself. I hope in the next hour to elaborate a bit on how shared intellectual concerns, artistic objectives, and aesthetic preferences served to illuminate what it meant to be English to this extraordinary group of individuals, and how their vision has continued to affect the way we perceive Englishness.

### **Language, Landscape, and Climate**

Four hundred years ago, Juliet first asked Romeo “What’s in a name?” Shakespeare, that supreme wordsmith who elsewhere crafted such nomenclature as ‘Bottom’ and ‘Sir John Falstaff,’ no doubt knew he was fitting his young heroine with an appropriately innocent question. Shakespeare’s ghost may well have been whispering into Schlegel’s ear when the latter wrote,

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<sup>5</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), Letter 180.

“Isn’t every appellation already a personification?”<sup>6</sup> When we look on a map, for instance, we find a collage of names that hint at geography, history, and the character of the local populations.

So what’s in the name ‘England’? It almost too readily invokes a network of associations that have been so endorsed and reiterated over time that we may not be able to avoid falling into cliché: a pastoral and cottage-studded landscape, the foggy and dangerous piers and wharfs of London, a snowy Christmas and the sound of Dickensian carollers in the frosty air, the dreamy spires and towers of cathedrals and university towns. The name ‘England’ can’t help but resonate with its *genius loci* — that is, the spirit of the place. The painter John Constable acknowledged that “all that lies on the banks of the [River] Stour...made me a painter”<sup>7</sup>; and the poet and composer Ivor Gurney said of the hills of Gloucestershire, “unless that influences you for the whole of your life in tune-making, it is failing in one of its chief essentials.”<sup>8</sup> He later endured the trials of the Somme by recalling “images of beauty in the mind [that] were always of Gloucester, county of Cotswold and Severn, and a plain rich, blossomy, and sweet of airs”, and by sending home letters and poems replete with his haunts of old: Framilode, Minsterworth, Cranham, Crickley, and

May Hill that Gloster dwellers  
'Gainst every sunset see;  
And the wide Severn river  
Homing again to the sea.<sup>9</sup>

The writer Ford Madox Ford, in his ‘analysis of the English mind,’ confessed that England “is not ... a matter of race, but one, quite simply, of place — of place and of spirit, the spirit being born of the environment.”<sup>10</sup> And so Edward Elgar was able to say “If ever after I’m dead you hear

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<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* trans. by Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ivor Gurney, quoted in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1998), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ivor Gurney, preface to *Severn and Somme* and “The Fire Kindles”, quoted in Michael Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 114 and 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *The Spirit of the People: An Analysis of the English Mind*, in *England and the English* (New York: McClure, Phillips, & Co., 1907), 263.

someone whistling this tune [from the cello concerto] on the Malvern Hills, don't be alarmed. It's only me," and elsewhere, "the trees are singing my music, or have I sung theirs?"

Peter Ackroyd has written that "English art and English literature are formed out of inspired adaptation... they represent the apotheosis of the mixed style."<sup>11</sup> England is watercolour; England is the perpendicular style, and alliterative verse. And England is, above all, malleable. We find this manifest in her geography, as the land twists from the mountains of Cumbria in the north to the farmland of East Anglia to the cliffs of Dover and Cornwall; from the rolling hills of Cotswold and Malvern in the West to the fen country of Norfolk in the East. The River Thames subtly shifts its personality from an idyllic and passive countenance in Oxfordshire (the stretch that inspired Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*) to become the industrial vein that powers all the energies of London. This adaptability is a trait of England over time, as well, and the land surrounding Stonehenge has swung from forest to farmland, from Tess of the d'Urberville's last refuge to new-age hotspot and tourist trap, all-the-while maintaining a sense of spiritual significance for thousands of years. And from this most flexible of landscapes has arisen the most flexible language the world has ever known.

\*May replace above paragraph:

[England is, above all, malleable. We find this in her geography, from mountain to fen; in the shifting countenance of the River Thames, idyllic and passive in Oxfordshire, while simultaneously the industrial vein of London; in the adaptability of the land surrounding Stonehenge over thousands of years. And out of such a flexible landscape has arisen the most flexible language the world has ever known.]

There are those who contend that language is a series of arbitrary words which bear no relation to the things to which they refer. This is the argument of Ferdinand de Saussure or Noam Chomsky, and I must say that I think this argument is absurd. Surely, it must be more than coincidence that *glisten*, *glimmer*, *glitter*, and *gleam* all refer to light, as do *glow*, *glint*, and *glare*.

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<sup>11</sup> Ackroyd, xxix.

Tolkien certainly felt this to be no accident, and was convinced of a link between sound and sense; he wrote “I am personally more interested... in word-form in relation to meaning (so-called phonetic fitness) than in any other department... The very word-form itself, of course, even unassociated with notions, is capable of giving pleasure – a perception of beauty, which if of a minor sort is not more foolish and irrational than being sensitive to the line of a hill, light and shade, or colour...”<sup>12</sup> adding that *The Lord of the Rings* is “largely an essay in linguistic aesthetic.”<sup>13</sup> In his ground-breaking book *Poetic Diction*, Tolkien’s friend Owen Barfield elaborated on the evolution of language and thought, noting that “if we trace the meanings of a great many words — or those of the elements of which they are composed — about as far back as etymology can take us, we are at once made to realize that an overwhelming proportion, if not all, of them referred in earlier days to one of these two things — a solid, sensible object, or some animal (probably human) activity.”<sup>14</sup> The meaning of a word originates, then, in sensual perception and interaction, not in an arbitrary affiliation or pairing; a word is a “fossil of meaning,”<sup>15</sup> and language is fossilized experience.

And what greater sensory interaction exists than that between one’s self and one’s environment or landscape? In *The Lord of the Rings*, the elf Legolas hears a strange tongue and responds: “That, I guess, is the language of [these people] the Rohirrim... for it is like to this land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains.”<sup>16</sup> And the ents, Tolkien’s species of walking, talking trees, are more than just a conflation of the Anglo-Saxon word for ‘giant’ and what Tolkien called “the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of ‘Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill’”<sup>17</sup> — they are the mythologizing of the interaction between man and his environment, a relationship which language catalogues and out of which language grows. And words beget words. As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard says: “words love each other.

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<sup>12</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “A Secret Vice”, in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 211.

<sup>13</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 165.

<sup>14</sup> Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 63-4.

<sup>15</sup> Bachelard, 18.

<sup>16</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, footnote to Letter 163.

Like everything that lives, they were 'created man and woman.'"<sup>18</sup> The ent called Treebeard says, "My name is growing all the time... Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language"<sup>19</sup>; not surprisingly, Tolkien made his students at Oxford study surveys investigating the place and river names of England.

Yes, place names are powerful. And so when Vaughan Williams wrote the music to "Come Down, O Love Divine" and needed a title for his new hymn tune, he named it after the Cotswold village where he was born, Down Ampney (other original tunes included in the *English Hymnal* bear the names of villages neighbouring Leith Hill, his childhood home — Monks Gate, Forest Green). And when Herbert Howells wrote a tune for his wedding day, he called it "The 'Chosen' Tune," naming it after Chosen Hill in Gloucester, which meant so much to him (and Gurney and Finzi); he wrote "and of course outlines of hills, and things, are tremendously important especially if you are born in Gloucestershire, God bless it!"

\* The following paragraph may be omitted:

[He also notes that "Vaughan Williams's tunes...will often give you a shape akin to such an outline as the Malvern Hills present when viewed from afar."<sup>20</sup> Here, Howells — though somewhat metaphorically — is arguing that environment affects musical language as much as it does spoken language, and not just in terms of mood, but structurally as well. And who would argue that Bach's music was not written with the cathedral space of St. Thomas in mind, or that the slow harmonic rhythm in so much Sibelius is not the product of the vast reaches of Finland?]

## **PLAY:**

### **Howells: The 'Chosen' Tune**

### **Vaughan Williams: Down Ampney**

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<sup>18</sup> Bachelard, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Howells, quoted in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Celebration* (London: Thames, 1996), 335.

## Christmas and Winter

An honest look at language and landscape must include some mention of climate, as well. With regard to England, it is particularly instructive to note that in Old English the word for ‘sky’ and ‘cloud’ are the same (*wolcen*), as if they were synonyms. As one commentator has noted: “In the writing of the Anglo-Saxons it is always winter... Winter, and darkness, were the prevailing conditions in a land of frost and snow falling... the persistence of the words for snow and storm through time [is] a true emblem of imaginative continuity.”<sup>21</sup> The landscape of the English winter is also notable for its unique mix of Christian and pagan imagery, as seen, for example, in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tolkien had no difficulty in picking up this tradition, whether it be the desolate Nordic scenes in his legendarium or the letters he wrote to his children every year which he had delivered by post as coming from Father Christmas. In his landmark essay on *Beowulf*, Tolkien argues that the Anglo-Saxon author of the poem was able to instill in this work the tension of his unique historical perspective, thus allowing access to the noble futility of the pagan past, all-the-while being saved from its despair through his Christian faith. Winter more than any other season seems to have bound this tension in the English imagination, and it may have been this quality that, at least in part, attracted the so-called ‘Christian agnostics’ like Howells, Finzi, and Vaughan Williams, while simultaneously sanctifying the idea of North for the devoutly Catholic Tolkien.

In Old English Biblical translations, we find heathen wind coming from north and south, east and west; dark clouds looming; hail, rain, and frost. “Adam is awakened from his dream of bliss to find himself, fallen, in England.”<sup>22</sup> This tradition of transplanting scenes from scripture to the English landscape is at least as old as the 7<sup>th</sup>-century poet-saint Cædmon, and is also a practice used with some regularity in the Christmas music of the composers under consideration — prime examples are Vaughan Williams’s cantata *Hodie* and Finzi’s Christmas scene *In terra pax*. In each work, the composer appropriates various texts to effectively construct a narrative in which the Nativity is relocated to the English countryside. This is representative of a particular approach — perhaps rooted in the even longer-standing tradition that Christ visited Britain during his youth

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<sup>21</sup> Ackroyd, 78-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

and after the Resurrection, a belief stated baldly by William Blake when he wrote

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the holy lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

Less specific examples of the Yuletide impulse include contributions from Bax, Holst, Howells, Butterworth, Milford, Britten, Warlock, and Ireland, not to mention the host of new Christmas carols offered "in these years." The English carol tradition is, of course, centuries old, and it is instructive to note that so many of the carols collected by Vaughan Williams and his colleagues are called not only by the first line of their text, but by the place where they grew up (or at least were found). Such is the case with the Sussex carol. In its music and text and atmosphere, it is the *genius loci* of England in the bleak midwinter, posed to celebrate the fireside warmth of an English Christmas.

**PLAY:**

**Vaughan Williams: The Sussex Carol**

**Elgar/Martin: Snow**

### **The Past**

Given the new-found horrors which technology introduced with the Great War, it is of little surprise that so many artists of this generation turned to the past. Interestingly, it was in the years immediately following the war that the word 'nostalgia,' which had previously meant "homesickness," took on its prevalent modern meaning of "longing for an idealized past." But antiquarianism has been a centuries-old trademark of the English, and, as Ackroyd observes, "It is always wisest to look for evidence of continuity rather than of violent change, because in persistence and permanence lie the true strengths of human nature." Both Vaughan Williams and Tolkien took immense inspiration from history — VW from as far back as the Tudors in his music, and Tolkien from an even earlier time — and their work exhibits the full scope of their learning. A philologist showing interest in the past comes as no surprise: changes in language are among the



most important emblems of the evolving imagination. The structural parallels between *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit* have often been noted, and many of Tolkien's dwarf names — and even the name 'Gandalf' — were culled from the Icelandic eddas. Likewise, in Vaughan Williams's music we hear the structural similarities between his Christmas cantata *Hodie* and the passions of J.S. Bach, and the influence of Tallis and Byrd is evident in the musical language and form of works like the *Tallis Phantasy*, the *Five Mystical Songs*, and the G minor mass. VW and Tolkien intersect at their mutual love of Chaucer.

The next two pieces offer a concise illustration of what Vaughan Williams gained from his study of both Bach and the Tudor composers. The first is a transcription — or rather, free adaptation — for piano of the organ chorale-prelude *Ach, bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ* by J.S. Bach: after 14 bars of introductory material, the chorale enters in the top voice, with each phrase separated by a continuation of the opening music; the last statement is followed by a literal repeat of the introduction. In his hymn-prelude on *Song 13* by Orlando Gibbons, Vaughan Williams follows this model almost literally: the separation of phrases follows its Baroque forerunner, as does the literal restatement of the opening music at the end. But VW now places the hymn statements in an inner voice (more appropriate to the tenor *cantus firmus* of Renaissance practice), and appropriates Tudor voice-leading into his own idiom. There is not a single accidental in the whole work, unlike Bach's example which stresses various key areas (most notably the subdominant), and the harmonic freedom which results from such pan-diatonic polyphony was a major lesson which the composers of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century English Renaissance learned from both Bach and his predecessors.

**PLAY:**

**Bach/Vaughan Williams: Chorale Prelude on *Ach, bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ***

**Vaughan Williams: Hymn-tune Prelude on Song 13 of Orlando Gibbons**

**The Celtic Element and the Sea**

...you stand above  
memory that could hurt you or assail;  
Down smashed familiar streets and haunted shore

All

Long may the suffering winds of Ireland wail

Though this may sound like the work of Irish poet W.B. Yeats, it is in fact by a relatively unknown exponent of the Celtic Twilight movement named Dermot O'Byrne. But while he may be unknown as O'Byrne, he is rather better known by his given name: Arnold Bax. As a young man, Bax fell in love with the mythology, history, and poetry of Ireland, especially the works of Yeats, and under his assumed name relocated to Dublin for a spell, eventually moving in the same circles as his hero and other luminaries like George Russell and Fiona MacLeod. The role of the mystic Celt was to penetrate his music greater than it would any of his fellow Englishmen, and we can only imagine the effect which Yeats's hypnotic, chant-like recitations must have had on the romantic young composer:

**PLAY: Yeats reading 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'**

Yeats's reading may act as an exemplar of Vaughan Williams's theory that music arose from emotionally-charged speech. At an outdoor sermon on the Isle of Skye, Vaughan Williams, ignorant of the Gaelic with which the preacher spoke, began to focus on the increasingly musical utterances with which he demonstrated, eventually discerning individual pitches. "The increased emotional excitement had produced two results, definition [of pitch] and the desire for a decorative pattern."<sup>23</sup> In his essay "Some Tentative Ideas on the Origins of Music," he attempts to investigate how the pitch patterns of excited speech infuse a people's sense of melody, and identifies several folksongs which begin with those same melodic fingerprints he heard at Skye.<sup>24</sup>

Similar pitch patterns are found in the melodic structure of Bax's *What the Minstrel Told Us*, as is a bardic impulse which plays especially strong at the beginning, where the melody is introduced without accompaniment and with a melodic compass redolent of Yeats's oratorical manner. The work reflects the Romantic equation of variation form with the strophes of a folksong, and the material that separates each strophe is presented in the opening bars as strums on a harp.

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<sup>23</sup> Vaughan Williams, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

Tolkien assures us that the word 'harp' is "common in all the northern Germanic tongues: of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, North Germany, England: and when the name appears elsewhere (or with Romance languages) it is borrowed, from the North southwards, not the reverse."<sup>25</sup> While the Nordic element is often recognized in his work, less acknowledged is the influence of the Celtic. But a man dedicated to a mythology for England could hardly ignore or help being affected by the native race and tongues of the Isles (remember, 'Celtic' is a linguistic term), and Great Britain has, after all, held a unique position in the blending of the Norse with the Celtic.

In addition to many aspects of Tolkien's elves or the way he uses water and rivers in his stories, a specific example of Celticism in his work is the poem "Imram," or "The Voyage of St. Brendan." Imram (literal "rowing") is a genre of Old Irish tales dealing with a hero's seaward journey to the Otherworld. St. Brendan, like so many other Dark Age Irish monks, picked up the hermit-mantle from the fathers of the Church, but chose the sea rather than the desert as the vehicle for spiritual exploration. These monks sailed West through the skerries to the open Atlantic towards communion with God — and in Brendan's case, as legend holds, all the way to America. Now, Brendan's "faith has faded, the New World has grown familiar..., men still raise their eyes to the guiding stars,"<sup>26</sup> and, we might add with Tolkien, "many...hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen."<sup>27</sup>

It is of little surprise, really, that in his notes for "The Book of Lost Tales", Tolkien chose to express how the inhabitants of Middle-Earth understood the geography of their world by sketching it in the likeness of a ship. The pastoral image of Britain has surely been promoted by the portrayal of the

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<sup>25</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, unpublished lecture to the Lincoln Musical Society, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>26</sup> W.R.J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess, *The Voyage of St. Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation with Indexes of Themes and Motives from the Stories* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2005), intro.

<sup>27</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, second edition, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 6-7.

isle as a haven from the wiles of the depths, and Turner, the great English painter of the sea, once tied himself to a mast so that his breath might marry that of the ocean.<sup>28</sup>

This concern with the open waters is, of course, another English preoccupation, and Tolkien had what he called an “Atlantis complex,” a recurrent dream in which a towering wave invaded “ineluctably over the trees and green fields” — he did not know until he was in his sixties that his second son Michael had inherited it.<sup>29</sup> Tolkien the Elder claimed to have exorcised the spectacle from his sleep by writing his story of the drowned land of Númenor,<sup>30</sup> which he equated with Atlantis, thus intending to bring his fictional mythology into the real world using this shared tale as the bridge. It is worth mentioning that new studies have cogently suggested that the land mass which once connected Great Britain with continental Europe was not submerged gradually over hundreds of years, but rather was cataclysmically inundated in less than 24 hours. This ties in intimately with the Celtic myths of drowned lands, most notably the Arthurian realm of Lyonesse; as will be heard in the second strophe of *What the Minstrel Told Us*, the seascapes of Cornwall had a profound impact on Bax, as they did on Tolkien, alluring each further in their search of the “fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic.”<sup>31</sup>

**PLAY:**

**Bax: *What the Minstrel Told Us***

### **Folksong & Storytelling**

More than any other aspect of his creative life, it is folksong that most people associate with Vaughan Williams. It should be noted, however, that some of his most ‘folky’ pieces were written before he collected his first tune, “Brushes and Briars,” in 1903. Indeed, he might as well have been speaking of himself when he wrote of George Butterworth: “he could no more help

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<sup>28</sup> Ackroyd, 274-5.

<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 163.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter 131.

composing in his own national idiom than he could help speak his own mother tongue.”<sup>32</sup> For our discussion, it is especially germane that he compares folksong with language, and likewise, that in one of his essays he parallels the *development* of folksong with that of the English language specifically, citing G.M. Trevelyan’s *History of England*:

As a result of Hastings, the Anglo-Saxon tongue, the speech of Alfred and Bede, was exiled from hall and bower, from court and cloister, and was despised as a peasants’ jargon, the talk of ignorant serfs. It ceased almost, though not quite, to be a written language. The learned and the pedantic lost all interest in its forms, for the clergy talked Latin and the gentry talked French. Now when a language is seldom written and is not an object of interest to scholars, it quickly adapts itself in the mouths of plain people to the needs and uses of life. This may be either good or evil, according to circumstances. If the grammar is clumsy and ungraceful, it can be altered much more easily when there are no grammarians to protest. And so it fell out in England. During the three centuries when our native language was a peasants’ dialect, it lost its clumsy inflections and elaborate genders, and acquired the grace, suppleness and adaptability which are among its chief merits. At the same time it was enriched by many French words and ideas. ... Thus improved, our native tongue re-entered polite and learned society as the English of Chaucer’s *Tales* and Wycliffe’s Bible, to be still further enriched into the English of Shakespeare and of Milton. There is no more romantic episode in the history of man than this underground growth and unconscious self-preparation of the despised island patois, destined ere long to ‘burst forth into sudden blaze,’ to be spoken in every quarter of the globe, and to produce a literature with which only that of ancient Hellas is comparable.<sup>33</sup>

[Owen Barfield adds:

“the English language had at last become ‘self-conscious.’ In former times the struggle between different ways of saying the same thing... had generally worked itself out under the surface, amid the half-conscious preferences of the mass of the people.”<sup>34</sup>]

“Could not this fable be told also of our music?” Vaughan Williams asked. And so he took the folk music he collected, evolved during its centuries of “underground growth,” and “enriched” it with aspects of English musical practice from the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as his own harmonic ingenuity, firmly rooted in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. In the next group of pieces, note how he fuses his study of folksong with investigations into Tudor music. The melodic designs are replete with the contours of the folk idiom, and the way the melodies unfold are informed by the spinning-out of folksong, something new growing out of the old; but the voice-leading, polyphonic structure, and approach to metric freedom are lessons from the England of Elizabeth I.

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<sup>32</sup> Vaughan Williams, 247.

<sup>33</sup> G.M. Trevelyan, quoted in Vaughan Williams, 241.

<sup>34</sup> Owen Barfield, *History in English Words* (Herndon, VA: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 65.

In his writings, Vaughan Williams alludes several times to the remarkable memory capacity of the illiterate folksingers he interviewed, noting “the fact that folk-music is entirely oral and is independent of writing or print has important and far-reaching results ... reading and writing have destroyed memory. ... as a matter of fact corruptions are much more likely to creep in in the written word than in the spoken.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he writes:

The German words *sagen* and *singen* were in early times interchangeable and to this day a country singer will speak of ‘telling’ you a song, not of singing it. Indeed the folk-singer (of course I am speaking of England only, the only place of which I have personal knowledge), the English folk-singer, seems unable to dissociate words and tune: if he has forgotten the words of a song he is very seldom able to hum you the tune and if you in your turn were to sing the words he knew to a different tune he would be satisfied that you knew the song, and I believe the same is true of dance tunes. A country musician, so Cecil Sharp relates, took it for granted that when his hearers had got the tune of a dance they would be able to perform the dance as well.<sup>36</sup>

This hints at a more unified, if more primitive, consciousness.

Such observations have been echoed by most researchers in the field of oral transmission, including Tolkien. He was acutely aware of the incredible ability to remember which the illiterate storytellers of epic possess, and this was a major reason why he bemoaned the loss of whatever English mythology had existed: because he recognized the degree to which a mythology acts as a cultural record of a people — without myth a people’s memory of itself begins to fade. Memory is the “epic faculty *par excellence*”<sup>37</sup>, and a nation’s heritage is born in that epic distance between an impossibly distant ‘then’ and the ‘now’.

Walter Benjamin wrote that, “If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.” Tolkien felt the same, and much of his grievance with *Beowulf* criticism was that the poem “has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art. ... it is as an historical document that it has mainly been examined and dissected.”<sup>38</sup> But he felt “myth is alive at once

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<sup>35</sup> VW, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. In the preface to *Eight Traditional English Carols*, Vaughan Williams notes that in some instances, “the text as sung was very corrupt owing to the singer being a gipsy [sic] and pronouncing the words phonetically without fully understanding their meaning.”

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 97.

<sup>38</sup> Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics”, in *The Monsters and the Critics*, 5-6.

and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected”<sup>39</sup>; he understood myth and fairytale to be reflections of one another, and was very much influenced by the fairy-stories of his childhood — those of William Morris, Henry Haggard, and George MacDonald.<sup>40</sup>

When discussing this special flowering of fairy-stories in Edwardian England and putting them in the context of the fate to which European politics was conspiring, it seems difficult to avoid the ominous glare of J.M. Barrie’s extraordinary story *Peter Pan*, and hard to ignore the poignant fact that the first generation to have its imaginations nurtured on the tale of the boy who would never grow up would find the same doom, and would unwittingly fulfill Peter’s own musing: “to die will be an awfully big adventure.”

York Bowen did not die while serving in the Great War, but he, like Tolkien, was invalided back to England. And, also like Tolkien, he has been dismissed by some as being too romantic for his time. His style is strongly rooted in the music of Rachmaninoff, Delius, and perhaps most notably Medtner; Saint-Saëns esteemed him as ‘the most remarkable of the young British composers.’ In his *A minor Ballade*, he tries his hand at one of the most overtly narrative of genres, and his story sings of the adaptability of the English manner, wedding Russian and French qualities with aspects of native folksong.

Bowen did not do field work, trekking into the English countryside to take dictation from the “thousand little poets” of English song. But we can be grateful his colleagues did, and that they catalogued and preserved for future generations the work of the minds and hands of England.

## **PLAY:**

### **Vaughan Williams: ‘Greensleeves’**

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>40</sup> In *The Phantastes*, MacDonald writes of faery song, akin to Vaughan Williams’s observation (FN 37): “the words and tones coming together, and inseparably connected, as if word and tone formed one thing; or, as if each word could be uttered only in that tone, and was incapable of distinction from it, except in idea, by an acute analysis.”

## Vaughan Williams/Martin: 'Angel's Song'

## Vaughan Williams: Quick Dance and Slow Air from *The Charterhouse Suite*

## Bowen: Ballade no. 2 in A Minor, Op. 87

### Conclusion

Vaughan Williams, Elgar, Holst, Butterworth, Gurney, Finzi, Howells, Rubbra, Milford, Browne, and Tolkien.

They were the inheritors of Albion. Their's was the legacy of England's songwriters, myth-builders, map-makers, poets, storytellers, and artists. They all believed, with Tolkien, that their country was "even yet a holy land, and a magic that is not otherwise lingers still in many places of that isle."<sup>41</sup> It was nationalism at its inspiring best, taking in all from that poignant balance from where they watched their idyllic vision of Edwardian England plunge into the catastrophe of war and a world that had changed forever, a world in which holding onto national tradition became an essential aspect of national identity. To them, the most relevant reflectors of a society, of a people, were the musicians and poets and sculptors and painters. Finzi wrote that the creative artist was "like the coral reef insect, building his reef out of the transitory world around him and making a solid structure to last long after his own fragile and uncertain life." In a beautiful symmetry, these artists took pieces of the England they knew and loved, an England becoming more and more evanescent, and built, through the permanency of artistic endeavor, an everlasting England, one that remained tinged with melancholy to be sure, but one that would continue to stand as the landscape of their imagination. It was an England big enough and brave enough to hold both King Alfred's Wessex and Thomas Hardy's Wessex; both Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde" and Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida"; it was the land of hope and dreams that Blake had dared to called 'Jerusalem.' It was their "nurse", their "teeming womb of royal kings," and to them it remained always, with John of Gaunt,

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,

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<sup>41</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 313.



This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England

**PLAY:**

**Elgar: 'Nimrod' from *The Enigma Variations***

**Biography:**

Pianist Gregory Martin's playing has been called "filled with imagination, fire, and lyricism...a virtuoso performance" and praised for its "mature and subtle understanding, all the while handling formidable technical difficulties with ease and fluency." He has performed throughout the United States and Europe as both a soloist and chamber musician and placed in various competitions. After studies with Marcella Branagan at the preparatory department of the Eastman School of Music, Martin attended the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, where he studied with William Black and earned his BM, graduating Valedictorian. He received an MM from Indiana University, where he is currently a doctoral candidate; primary teachers at IU have included Edmund Battersby, Leonard Hokanson, and Karen

Shaw. He served as Associate Instructor of piano at Indiana University for five years, as well as acting as the School of Music's accompanying coordinator. In 2001, he organized Indiana University's celebration of Gerald Finzi's centenary, which presented a series of recitals on the music of Finzi and his friends and brought the composer's son to lecture. Collaboration with Håkan Hagegård on a staged version of Dominick Argento's song cycle *The Andrée Expedition* led to an invitation from the composer to perform at the Schubert Club of St. Paul, which commissioned the work. Essays on generic translation in Vaughan Williams's cantata *Hodie* and temporality and discourse in his opera *Riders to the Sea* have been published by the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, and articles on Finzi, Grieg, and Vaughan Williams are forthcoming. As a composer, Martin's works have been performed in England, Canada, and the United States, and he is particularly noted for his text-setting; his choral writing has been called "deeply moving," and his instrumental writing has been applauded for its "natural flow." Most recently, Martin has been active as a post-graduate student at the University of Oxford, researching the intersection of language, music, and national identity in 20<sup>th</sup>-century England. His presentation on the Grieg Ballade during centenary festivities at the composer's home in Bergen, Norway was immediately hailed as the "most important work on Grieg in years," and led to recital engagements and lectures in Scotland, Germany, Norway, and Holland. He has been awarded grants from the Finzi Trust and the Grieg Society. A regular performer, he has upcoming engagements in Europe and the United States as both a soloist and chamber musician.