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Songs of Travel: An analytical study of Ralph Williams' compositional styles

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Jonathan Lawton

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Mark Greenawalt, D.M.A., Chair of Applied Music Studies, Committee Advisor

Dr. Leon Neto, D.M.A., Committee Reader

Dr. Sean Beavers, D.M., Dean of the Online School of Music

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Abstract

Ralph Vaughan Williams is perhaps one of the most prolific and diverse composers from the British Isles to grace the world with his compositions. He was born in the middle of the English Musical Renaissance, a time of musical rejuvenation of the British Art Song that embraced the principles of the Romantic period and placed significance on the importance of national identity. Ralph Vaughan Williams was the embodiment of musical citizenship – a musical philosophy that leans heavily on national identity for inspiration of word and song. In 1901, a young Ralph Vaughan Williams began writing music for *Songs of Travel*. *Songs of Travel and Other Verses* was written as a series of poems by Robert Louis Stevenson, a famous author known for writing well-known works such as *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. During World War I, Ralph Vaughan Williams served his country in the war effort. After his time traveling across Europe as a musician for the British Army, his post-war composition style and focus changed greatly. This change in style stunned his contemporaries because the music he created was vastly different. How did the structure and style of his compositions change after serving in World War I? What other influences contributed to these changes? Through comparison of post-war works with *Songs of Travel*, what aspects of harmony, melody and instrumentation demonstrate these developments?

Keywords: English Musical Renaissance, Song Cycle, Text Painting

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Chapter I: Preliminary Information

Background

Before the birth of Ralph Vaughan Williams, there was a desire for British Music to have a unique “British” sound that was not tainted by the influence of other European music. This desire was brought by the seeds of nationalistic ideology that sprouted all over Europe. The British Empire was deemed the greatest world power at the start of the Industrial Revolution empirically, but not culturally. They were the major colonizers around the world, they were able to import and export goods from their colonies, and they were arguably the most technologically advanced people during the Industrial Revolution. England even produced wonderful literature at this time through authors George Eliot, Charles Dickens, William Wordsworth, and many others. The British society lacked a unique musical presence that was not influenced by other sounds of western Europe. British musicians from main cultural centers were sent to France, Germany, and Italy to study music. The issue that arose from studying abroad is that most people that lived in the British Isles at that time could not financially afford the expense required to study music. Not only was music being imported from other countries, but only those who came from wealth had the opportunity to study music.¹ By the turn of the 19th Century, the ideas of nationalism and equal opportunities were spreading throughout all of Europe, and Great Britain was no exception. To make music accessible and impactful for the British people, the focus of music creation turned inward rather than looking toward other countries for musical direction.² British

¹ Norman Long., “The Power of Music: Issues of Agency and Social Practice.” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 57, no. 2 (2013): 21–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42705143>.

² Ibid.

composers realized they had neglected a cultural goldmine that distinguished British music from the sounds of other countries. This “English sound” reflected the experiences, the heritage, the history, and the legacy of the British people. They finally had a proper musical identity.³ This period of discovery came to be known as the English Musical Renaissance. The once neglected sound of the English countryside became the main point of inspiration for famous composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams, George Butterworth, Benjamin Britten, and many others that worked during and after the English Musical Renaissance.⁴ This age of musical development spanned decades from the mid-1800s and into the early 1900s.

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in Gloucester, England in 1872. Coming from a devout Christian family with wealth and good standing in British society, Williams was very much pushed to music at a young age – through the tutelage of his aunt who instructed the young Ralph Vaughan Williams in piano and chord structure.⁵ After establishing this foundation in music, he discovered that what he wanted to do in life was compose. He continued his training in music at Trinity College and the Royal College of Music. As Williams grew, he would renounce his Christian upbringing in exchange for his nascent atheism.⁶ Even while accepting different positions involving Church music and even helping to remodel the Anglican Hymnal, he

³ Leanne Langley, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 35, no. 3 (2003): 521–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4054110>.

⁴ Britta, Sweets. *The World of Music* 44, no. 2 (2002): 200–203, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41699434>.

⁵ Hugh Ottoway, and Alain Frogley, "Vaughan Williams, Ralph" *Grove Music Online*. 2001, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000042507>.

⁶ Elizabeth-Jane Pavlick McGuire, “Such Harmony is in Immortal Souls: The Spirituality of Music Explored through the Life and Work of Ralph Vaughan Williams”, The Catholic University of America, 2011.

maintained his atheistic views. He replaced his need to love God with his love for his country. This nationalistic devotion would be the strongest motivator of his compositions.

The Gloucestershire native is arguably the most significant composer of his generation, as his contributions to British Music led to a rebirth of the British Art Song.⁷ The inspiration Williams found in traditional music from the British Isles enabled him to become a revitalizing essence of the British Art song during the 20th Century. Ralph Vaughan Williams firmly believed that this notion of “musical citizenship” was the backbone of every musician and that musicians use their background as their inspiration as well.⁸

Songs of Travel was authored by famous novelist Robert Louis Stevenson (1850 – 1894). Stevenson drew inspiration from not only where he grew up, but also from his travels in the Pacific Ocean.⁹ It is no surprise that *Songs of Travel and Other Verses*, one of his last literary works, tells the story of a young man who seeks out a life of excitement through traveling as if he is recapitulating his life story based on his own experiences. These poems resonated with the young Ralph Vaughan Williams. He began writing music for these poems around 1901 and published the finished product in 1904.¹⁰ At this point, Williams was just beginning his career as a composer and was highly influenced by the nationalist ideas that permeated much of Europe.

⁷ Elizabeth-Jane Pavlick McGuire, “Such Harmony is in Immortal Souls: The Spirituality of Music Explored through the Life and Work of Ralph Vaughan Williams”, The Catholic University of America, 2011.

⁸ Mario Antonia Garcia Jr., “There's no Place Like Home: How Love of Country and Longing for Home Influenced the Song Literature of George Butterworth, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten”, University of Kentucky, 2011.

⁹ Glenda Norquay. “Introduction: Stevenson and Early Photography in the Pacific Islands.” Essay, In Robert Louis Stevenson, *Literary Networks and Transatlantic Publishing in the 1890s: The Author Incorporated*, Anthem Press, 2020.

In 1914, “the war to end all wars” began with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. Shortly after this assassination, war broke out across most of Europe. Country after country began declaring war against their opposing side. A military conflict on this scale had never occurred. This war involved more nations than ever recorded. The style of fighting evolved as well. Technological advances had shifted fighting styles from traditional rifleman warfare to land mines, chemical weapons, tanks, armored vehicles, grenades, and other weapons capable of mass destruction.

Ralph Vaughan Williams’ experiences as a part of the British army affected the cultural undertones of his works post war. Not only was he influenced by the music of his travels, but his themes became more serious, the harmonic structure of his works became more somber, and the sound of his compositions more surprising than when he was a young, aspiring composer. Ralph Vaughan Williams became someone who had experienced war, death, and what it meant to put it all on the line to protect and stand up for their country. The strong contrast between pre- and post- war works show how greatly Ralph Vaughan Williams was affected by the cruelty that he witnessed with his own eyes as a soldier. Certain pieces from the inter-war era¹¹ will be analyzed for the sake of comparison to Ralph Vaughan William’s *Songs of Travel* to evaluate the differences in cultural undertones, shift to more fluid tonality, and more serious themes on which his works were based.

¹¹ The Inter-War period is time between the end of World War I and Britain’s involvement in World War II.

Statement of Purpose

This project covers how the political environment of the early 20th century and national identity influenced the creation of *Songs of Travel* by Ralph Vaughan Williams and how serving time as a soldier during the First World War affected his post-war compositions. One of the primary focal points of this research project is to document my findings and learning processes while studying the *Songs of Travel* for lecture performance and to identify unique compositional features to his post-war period. For this purpose, I will compare this early song cycle to Ralph Vaughan Williams' later works coming out of post-war Britain. The first portion of this document will outline the musical aspects and compositional features of Vaughan Williams' early works displayed in *Songs of Travel*, followed by comparison of his later works to display the changes and expansions to his composition style. The comparison portion to later works will also express the changes of the prevailing harmonic patterns, tonic fluidity, expansion of chosen instrumentation and prevailing social themes surrounding Great Britain between the great wars. This research project attempts to answer: 1) How did the structure and style of Vaughan Williams' compositions change after serving in World War I?, 2) What other influences contributed to these changes?, and 3) Through comparison of post-war works with *Songs of Travel*, what aspects of harmony, melody and instrumentation demonstrate these developments?

Significance of the Study

Ralph Vaughan Williams is revered for his works and providing a sense of sound to the English countryside that had been neglected by former generations of English musicians. Throughout his musical development as a composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams went through major life changing events that are reflected in his varying compositions. While he maintained his focus of creating music based on his homeland, Ralph Vaughan Williams was greatly

impacted by his time serving in World War I, the changes of attitudes in society in post-war Britain, and the eventual loss of his composer friends as he grew older.

Ralph Vaughan Williams created many notable works; however, *Songs of Travel* is the most impactful from his pre-war compositions. During this period in English Musical Renaissance, there was an extreme focus on national identity and the creation of music influenced by the British Isles. Ralph Vaughan Williams very much believed in the idea of “musical citizenship,” a concept of creating art and drawing inspiration from those who also live in the same region so selecting a work from a British writer, Stevenson, was on par with his compositional ideology.

The song cycle was musical genre developed by composers like Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and other great composers of the Romantic period. These composers would find poetic narratives that were widely popular and put them to music to bring the story to life in a different manner. Ralph Vaughan Williams sought to take this idea and put the sound of the English countryside to it. *Songs of Travel* will be compared with post war pieces through musical, theoretical and contextual analysis.

Chapter II: Setting the Stage

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in the middle of two major cultural periods of English History: Victorian Era England and the English Musical Renaissance. Growing up in Victorian England meant that young Ralph Vaughan Williams experienced the height of the British Empire and was surrounded by aspects of nationalism that pervaded European cultures for decades. Great Britain had proved to be the strongest naval force in the world. Their supremacy of the sea during the mid-19th century was unrivaled. This unmatched presence in the seas allowed the British to expand their influence globally and create colonies around the world.¹² They also remained the leading technological force in the world at that time. In the early part of Queen Victoria's reign, railroads were established across the British Isles for traveling convenience and efficient transportation of products.¹³ Essentially, Williams was born into a family of wealth in the most powerful and influential country at the time. With Great Britain at the height of influence around the world socially and economically, it was simply a matter of time before the British created their own national identity musically. Thus, the English Musical Renaissance came to be.

The English Musical Renaissance is a period in English Music History that developed from the lack of an innate British sound. Musicians from the British Isles traveled to other parts of Europe to study opera, composition, arranging and performance. Naturally, British compositions prior to the English Musical Renaissance were nothing more than elements from other musical influences combined. It was a musical tapestry made up of highlights from other

¹² Dana Huntley, "In search of the EMPIRE: Why the sun never set on Britain's dominions" British Heritage Travel, May-June 2019, 32+. Gale In Context: Biography (accessed July 19, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A585718667/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=summon&xid=544af394.

¹³ Ibid.

countries in terms of musical styles and sounds. Nothing relating to the music that was being performed in England at this time was native or colored by the sounds of the British Isles. The sounds of central Europe dominated the stages in London. In the 19th century, ideas of nationalism sprouted across the western world. Nationalism is defined as a devotion to one's country or people that exalts one group over all others. With the growth of nationalistic ideology, this lack of unique musical content was a sore issue to those heavily devoted to the British Empire. Every person was to take pride in the cultural aspects of their home country. While British literature was thriving during this period, British music was a dim feature in that society. There was nothing musically for people to be proud of during this period. This feeling of musical inadequacy was felt even at the royal level. In 1882, the Prince of Wales even raised the famous question, "Why is it that England has no music that is recognized as national... nothing indicative of national life or feeling?"¹⁴

To create this desired sense of musical identity for Great Britain, composers had to look toward the parts of the British Isles that were unaffected and uninfluenced by the sound of other countries. This would lead British musicians to embrace the style of the British countryside, expand on the folk sound that dwelled in those parts and create new music based on the English folk song. Moving forward, the sound of Britain would no longer be a musical melting pot of unoriginal, non-British ideas taken from other countries. Instead, musical inspiration would be taken from all parts of the British Isles and would give a musical presence to the neglected parts of the region.

¹⁴ Richard Carlton, "Folk-Song, Chant, and the English Symphonic Renaissance. A Case Study of Ethnic Musical Identity" *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 24, no. 2 (1993): 129–42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836973>.

As a young composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams helped answer the call for creating this sense of British musical identity. Ralph Vaughan Williams took inspiration from British writers, pre-existing folk music, creations from his contemporaries like George Butterworth and Gustav Holst, and his personal experiences to create a unique sphere of the English sounds. Prior to World War I, the idea of the “English sound” was primarily focused on vocal pieces and featuring vocal solos. In fact, in the early 20th Century, there was a musical philosophy that British music was naturally vocal and that British musicians were more equipped to be vocalists than instrumentalists. This idea goes back to the heavy presence of folk songs and sea shanties that lived in the heart of Britain. In the early 20th century, musicologist Edward Dent published in a magazine article:

We English are by natural temperament singers rather than instrumentalists . . . If there is an English style in music it is founded firmly on vocal principles, and, indeed, I have heard Continental observers remark that our whole system of training composers is conspicuously vocal as compared with that of other countries. The man who was born with a fiddle under his chin, so conspicuous in the music of Central and Eastern Europe, hardly exists for us. Our instinct, like that of the Italians, is to sing.¹⁵

Ralph Vaughan Williams created music that reflected the idea of a single vocal line with homophonic accompaniment underneath that reflected the thought that the English sound was vocal. Such is the case with his most famous work from this time-period, *Songs of Travel* and why he was chosen at the beginning of the 20th century to reconstruct the Anglican hymnal despite his atheistic viewpoint. However, his sphere for the English sound did not stop with vocal music. Ralph Vaughan Williams would go on to create famous chamber pieces,

¹⁵ E. J. Dent, ‘On the Composition of English Songs’, *Music & Letters*, 6/3 (1925), Ceri Owen, “Making an English Voice: Performing National Identity during the English Musical Renaissance” *Twentieth-Century Music* 13, no. 1 (03, 2016): 77-107, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fmaking-english-voice-performing-national-identity%2Fdocview%2F1772694673%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>.

symphonies and instrumental works that also reflected his sense of British musical identity. This portion of his English Sound would not blossom until after he was exposed to another sense of music by serving in the British Army Band. Prior to his time serving in World War I, Ralph Vaughan Williams dabbled in writing orchestral music but remained primarily a vocal composer. After the war ended, he took interest in creating music with more diverse instrumentation for his compositions. This created many different layers to the budding British musical identity rather than leaving it one-dimensional which had been primarily singing folk music. A good example of this change in Ralph Vaughan William's compositional style would be his English Folk Song Suite written in 1923 for the military band. Even his vocal works became less homophonic and more complex harmonically.

This shift in Ralph Vaughan Williams' compositional style was needed and healthy for the English sound. When he started creating music that came outside of the standard English sound that existed prior to the First World War, he added a new layer of musical depth to the English song. Pieces like *Sancta Civatis* and *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and his *English Folk Song Suite* are good examples of this change. Arguably, the influences from his time serving as a World War I musician set the stage for him to become the greatest British composer of the 20th century.

Chapter Three: The Research Method

This project employs qualitative research methods, specifically a qualitative analysis, to answer how the structure and style of Ralph Vaughan Williams's compositions change after serving as an army musician in World War I, how other influences may have contributed to these changes, and what aspects of harmony, melody and instrumentation demonstrate these developments through comparison of post-war works with *Songs of Travel*. In-depth research into the life of composer Ralph Vaughan Williams by consulting scholarly sources allowed the researcher to recognize how he was inspired by the nationalistic ideology that sparked the English Musical Renaissance and became a solution for the lack of a proper British musical identity. The researcher was able to identify how Vaughan Williams used the sights and sounds of the British Isles in works like *Songs of Travel* to promote the "English" sound that he believed had been neglected.

Songs of Travel was studied for lecture-recital performance to research the nuances unique to music from Vaughan Williams' early years. Scholarly articles, dissertations and theses were studied for research purposes to further support the claims portrayed in this document. In additions to studying *Songs of Travel*, later works were also analyzed for comparison to the wayfarer's song cycle. By using later works such as *Sancta Civatis* and *English Folk Song Suite* for comparison, the researcher was able to identify trends of composition as well as track compositional development from a hindsight point of view. Further research of other pieces could be employed to track other compositional trends not discovered in this research project.

Proper research conducted through lecture-performance of *Songs of Travel* required the researcher to be familiar with the entire narrative illustrated in the song cycle. The story of *Songs*

of Travel is broken into three mini-sagas that highlight different phases in the protagonist's life: The start of his journey as a young man with an aspiration to live a life of travel, an episode of choice where he must make the difficult decision whether or not to settle with the woman he loves and abandon his previous aspirations, and looking at the end of his life from hindsight where he reflects on various fond memories from his youth and the understanding the world is about to pass him by as he embraces the unwavering kiss of death. Detailed knowledge of the story line allowed the researcher to enhance their performance of *Songs of Travel* musically and artistically by creating appropriate moods for each piece based on the story.

Chapter Four: Comparing *Songs of Travel* with Famous Post-War Works

Songs of Travel

Songs of Travel was written at the earliest point of Ralph Vaughan Williams' career. It is his second attempt on the song cycle, a composite form of vocal music consisting of a group of individually complete songs for solo or ensemble voices, with or without instrumental accompaniment. It may relate a series of events, or a series of impressions, or may simply be a group of songs unified by mood.¹⁶ This subgenre of vocal music was made famous by German composer Franz Schubert through works like *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*.¹⁷ This cycle would become the most famous song cycle of Ralph Vaughan Williams' career and helped establish a compositional presence in pre-war England. This cycle follows the ideal pre-war sound for a British work: solo featured vocal part with supporting keyboard accompaniment. What makes this cycle unique is the masterful use of text painting to set the scene for every song and the harmonic structure to back up the presumed emotions felt by the character "the vagabond." Each piece of the cycle has unique musical qualities from the other pieces and distinct differences from his later works.

"The Vagabond"

The story of *Songs of Travel* is the life story of a vagabond. A vagabond is a person who wanders from place to place without fixed settlement or stable employment. "The Vagabond"

¹⁶ "Song Cycles." Yale University Library, Accessed July 14, 2022. <https://web.library.yale.edu/cataloging/music/song-cycles>.

¹⁷ Maurice Brown, J.E., Eric Sams, and Robert Winter. "Schubert, Franz." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; <https://www.oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000025109>.

begins the wayfarer's song cycle by introducing the listener to the main character – a young lad who seeks to go out and challenge the world in an endless pursuit of a nomadic lifestyle. The entire cycle is set in the first-person perspective of the protagonist who makes declarative statements to the forces of Fate to grant him the lifestyle he wants and how he can survive whatever conditions they throw at him.¹⁸

Ralph Vaughan Williams starts "The Vagabond" off with beautiful usage of text paint- a common technique employed throughout the song cycle - by outlining the c minor melodic motif in the right hand and a i-v staccato ostinato in the left hand in the accompaniment acting as the footsteps of the protagonist drawing near to the listener. The piano in the beginning functions as a musical camera panning on the vagabond and waiting patiently for him to begin singing. The vocal line primarily hovers in the c minor tonality, but there are several instances where Ralph Vaughn Williams uses E \flat minor to highlight some of these declamatory statements. Usually, when composers use the chord in a piece, they use it for a sense of tonal stability and provide harmonic resolution; however, Ralph Vaughan Williams tactfully uses an E \flat minor chord to foretell the unstable life the vagabond will have if he pursues a nomadic lifestyle. This use of harmonic text painting is very common throughout the cycle to reflect the instability throughout the traveler's life.

"Let Beauty Awake"

"Let Beauty Awake" is a series of poetic metaphors by the young protagonist about the beauty of nature which he compares to a beautiful woman. This personification is evident

¹⁸ William Mark Adams, "Ralph Vaughan Williams' Songs of Travel: An Historical, Theoretical, and Performance Practice Investigation and Analysis", The University of Texas at Austin, 1999, Dissertations & Theses Global.

through Stevenson's use of the pronouns she/ her. The vagabond is so touched that he sees nothing else but the beauty of nature around him. The beginning of the piece is imbued with beautiful 32nd note arpeggios that set the mood of the song; however, the melody is syncopated with quarter and eighth notes. The piece is in 9/8 time. Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote the melody to begin on the third sub-beat of the first beat in the second measure. This use of rhythmic text painting is a wonderful representation of the complex beauty in nature. This idea is reflected through the consistent use of seemingly contradictory rhythms between the two parts. The complexity among the multiple parts causes the melody and the underlying accompaniment appear to contradict each other; however, when these parts are played together, they create a sense of fitting together like a jigsaw puzzle. This concept of rhythmic complexity with tender sound is very similar to other popular traditional English folk songs like Salley Gardens and The Ash Grove. Between verses, the piano accompaniment keeps the listener active by imitating the melodic line. This is a featured technique in this cycle, but even more so as he developed as a composer.

“The Roadside Fire”

“The Roadside Fire” is a stark contrast to both “Let Beauty Awake” and “The Vagabond.” From the very beginning of the piece, the accompanying piano lays out a series of soft staccato eighth notes that outline the tonic chord of D \flat Major. In the third measure, the vocal part enters with a smooth and lyrical melody line that floats above the continued staccato ostinato. This dichotomy proved to be quite challenging as the vocal line is conveyed smoothly over this staccato accompaniment, which seems to paint a picture of lightness and delight while maintaining a legato feel in the lyrics. The codependence between parts is evidence of complex layering that would be featured in later pieces like *The English Folk Song Suite* and *Sancta*

Civatis. In these pieces, the layering and the instrumentation is much more extensive than in *Songs of Travel*.

The wayfaring protagonist has been introduced to a young woman of romantic interest. The text in this piece centers around the vagabond's feelings for an unnamed maiden who plays an enormous role in the fate of the protagonist. They have mutual feelings of love for each other. Being smitten, the protagonist sings "The Roadside Fire" to this young woman expressing all the things that he will do for her.

"Youth and Love"

The fourth song in the cycle tells of the difficult decision the wayfaring protagonist must make. It is very evident that the vagabond loves this young woman immensely, but the weight of having to settle down and forget his life of travel is too much for him to bear. This is emulated in the unsettling chord progression of alternating I to ii in the accompaniment. The entirety of this piece is the traveler wrestling with this decision but coming to the hard choice of leaving the young maiden in pursuit of a life of travel – the life the protagonist has desired since the first song.¹⁹

The accompaniment of "Youth and Love" begins by outlining the chord progression of I⁶₄ (G Major) and ii⁷ (A Minor) with a D₅ ostinato in the right hand. The rhythm goes back and forth between grounded, staccato eighth notes on the I⁶₄ chord and fleeting eighth note triplets on the ii⁷ chord of create a sense of yearning for the singer to communicate. Above this rhythmic pattern in measure 6, the vocal line enters a legato melody line in a strict 3/4 Time Signature that

¹⁹ William Mark Adams, "Ralph Vaughan Williams' Songs of Travel: An Historical, Theoretical, and Performance Practice Investigation and Analysis", The University of Texas at Austin, 1999, Dissertations & Theses Global.

counters the alternating eighth note and eighth note triplet rhythm in the accompaniment. Similar to “The Roadside Fire,” I spent a fair amount of time and effort in mentally crafting the proper tone color to this piece. The beginning of the A section is soft and gentle with hints of a love ballad between the young vagabond who wants to experience the world and his lover.

Subsequently, the B section features a faster moving melodic line with poetic text about the vagabond leaving the maiden for his one true love – seeing the world. This is evident through Stevenson’s writing through phrases like “He to nobler fate fares, and but waves a hand as he passes on, cries but a wayside word to her at the garden gate...” This “nobler fate” refers to living a life of travels rather than settling down. “Waves a hand ...” refers to the physical action of the vagabond leaving his maiden. The most interesting verb in this text is the use of “cries.” When someone cries, they are expressing pure joy or pure pain. In this case, the vagabond is experiencing the pain of leaving someone he loves and never seeing them again. The “wayside word” is not explicitly presented in the text. Perhaps Stevenson meant to leave this thought open ended and allow each different reader to come to their own conclusion about what the vagabond may have said to his maiden for the last time.

“In Dreams”

“In Dreams” is the finale of the three-part mini saga about the vagabond and the young maiden. At this point in the story, the wayfarer has already made his choice to leave the young maiden behind but now is filled with regret for leaving her. This regret is now personified in the protagonist’s dreams.²⁰ This grief is represented in the music by the lack of a stable tonic. Most of the song hovers over a c minor tonic, but Ralph Vaughan Williams deviates from the c minor

²⁰ William Mark Adams, “Ralph Vaughan Williams' Songs of Travel: An Historical, Theoretical, and Performance Practice Investigation and Analysis”, The University of Texas at Austin, 1999, Dissertations & Theses Global.

tonal center with purposeful chromaticism that shares the vagabond's grief with the listener. This reflects the uncertainty that the vagabond made the right decision and the perceived heartache that he left with his former love.

The mood of the piece is fairly evident based on the context of the story, the harmonic progression, and the text; however, the execution of creating the proper tone color is more difficult than it seems. The piece is about the vagabond coping with his decision to leave the young maiden behind and continue his life of travels. This is the hardest decision of his life and affects everything else he will ever do. If he stayed, he might have created a sense of purpose by starting a family; however, he would have given up on his desire to travel. The choice he made in leaving the maiden also comes with massive repercussions. According to the story, the listener may assume this maiden is the only person since his youth that gave him true joy as well. The entirety of the song is full of words and metaphors that reflect the sheer grief that the vagabond has over his decision. The most visible example of this from the text includes "... No more the morning glow, no more the grace enshrines, endears. Cold beats the light of time on your face and shows your tears." These lines reveal that the vagabond is being haunted by the maiden in his dreams. He is not seeing her as she was when they were together. Instead, this manifestation of his lover shows the presumed grief of his decision changing her beauty outwardly and inwardly. He is burdened with visions of his lover crying in pain that his choice to leave caused. Because he loved this maiden immensely, these nightmares are causing him even more emotional toil while he is sleeping. Williams takes this pain and translates the feeling into music. He uses descending chromatic patterns to express the pain and loss the vagabond has over leaving his lover. This creates a sense of emotional instability through a lack of tonal center. This chromaticism also shows that his grief is manifesting in his dreams, haunting him while he rests.

The use of descending chromatic intervals to reflect pain and suffering is a technique used in his later works like *Sancta Civatis* to create the same agony.

“The Infinite Shining Heavens”

“The Infinite Shining Heavens” is a reflection on all the decisions the vagabond has made thus far as it comes immediately after “In Dreams.” The protagonist is full of loneliness and regret but looks up into the heavens to find some form of consolation. The text of this piece is full of seeming paradoxes that represent his doubt that he made the correct decision.

“...Showering sorrow and light” and “dumb, and shining, and dead.” These lyrics connect the lines of the grieving process. The line “...stars showering with sorrow and light” reveals that the vagabond is still in the grieving process. The stars light up the night as painful reminders that he is alone. This concept is continued in the text “...I saw them distant as heaven. Dumb and shining and dead.” The beauty of nature does not fulfill the traveler like it did previously. These stars are bright, but not alive. The vagabond is referring to the relationship with the young maiden, and how these beautiful stars cannot replace the relationship he had because they are inanimate. The wayfarer appears to be in this dilemma where it is too far to turn back on his lifestyle but worries if all the sacrifices, he made for his travels were worth it. By the end of this piece, the vagabond has finally come to terms with the life he chose after dealing with the ramifications of his decisions and finds confirmation in the night sky he has spent years following: “Till lo! I looked in the dusk and a star had come down to me.”

With this piece being a solemn reflection of the main character’s loneliness and grief over what could have been, the tone color for the piece was very evidently somber and hushed. It is not a proclamation of any kind but rather a fleeting thought of what if and why. This idea is expressed in the music by shifting tonal centers from I (F Major) to vi (D Minor.) In the story

when the wayfarer eventually comes to terms with living the life he chose, a star falls from the heavens. Ralph Vaughan Williams brilliantly created a beautiful chromatic progression to lead us to the end of the piece. As the star gets closer to the earth, the chord structures move up and down chromatically until the star lands and the accompaniment outlines a D Major chord. Williams' use of the Picardy 3rd tells the listener that the vagabond has learned to accept his fate after wrestling with it in D minor.

“Whither Must I Wander”

The seventh piece of the cycle begins the last episode of the story right before the traveler embraces the sweet kiss of death. This piece comes from the perspective of a much older, wiser traveler who reflects on the positive memories of his childhood and how everything has changed with time. This is a sobering, yet sweet moment of recollection for the protagonist which is reflected in the text and the harmonic progression of this piece. The use of the three tenses allows the listener to understand that the vagabond is not speaking metaphorically. Instead, he is reflecting of the moment he is in, the dear memories of a time long ago before he ever decided to pursue a life of travels and imagining a time after he has left this world. The environment surrounding the vagabond is anything but ideal. He travels to find food, he is left without a place to call home, and he is constantly fighting the forces of nature; however, the vagabond clings to the memories of his youth to get him through the hardships of his chosen lifestyle. These times as a young lad meant so much to the vagabond that he cannot help but be happy as he reflects on those times. The melodic line resides mostly in E^b major as the vagabond reflects on his childhood home and family until the ending of the verse that bring the performer and the listeners to the reality of the protagonist's present – an old, rugged traveler who has nothing to cling to but sheer memories of a time long past.

This attitude is substantially different to the tone of the vagabond in the first piece where he pridefully exclaimed, “Give to me the life I love. Let what will be over me.” There is no arrogance or hubris in the vagabond currently – only sobering thoughts and humble reflections. The beautiful imagery laid out by Stevenson and then brought to life through the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams created the most beautiful artistic reminder of human mortality. There was a time before the vagabond, there is a present with him, and there will be a time where he has departed from this world. In this piece, the vagabond represents every human that has ever lived. A bittersweet theme requires bittersweet music to accompany it. The verses start out a gentle Eb major tonality in the vocal line, in stark contrast to the C minor tonality the piano lays out in the beginning of the pieces. This creates a harmonic dichotomy that reflects the lyrical paradox of the text.

“Bright is the Ring of Words”

This piece is the penultimate song to the wayfarer’s song cycle and shares the same grandiose sound the vagabond had at the beginning of the story. This piece is full of wonderful word imagery complimented by Ralph Vaughan Williams’ use of text painting. The song begins with the word “Bright” with this triumphant C Major chord supporting the bright timbre. The accompaniment continues to support the vocal line homophonically while the vocal line continues with “Fair the fall of songs...” There is a major tonal change from the neutral key of C to the warm tonal center of Db on “Still they are caroled and said....” This shift in tonality shifts the mood of the piece from the robust attitude the vagabond had in life to the bittersweet mood of knowing his time is almost up. The poet uses the metaphor of a song in this poem to describe the life of the main character and how his noble life is about to end. Ralph Vaughan William uses

this harmonic shift from C to D \flat major to represent the coming release of the traveler from this weary life. If the traveler's life is metaphorically in the key of C Major, then using the D \flat tonality allows the listener to hear the tonal ascent into the afterlife. This instance of musical foreshadowing is the only time in the cycle that Ralph Vaughan Williams used chromaticism in a positive manner. When he used it in "In Dreams", the chromatic movement was always downward, never moving upward to relay the anguish the vagabond was feeling after leaving his love. This chromatic ascent offers a sense of peace but does not stay in D \flat . Ralph Vaughan Williams brings the listener back down to the present moment in the Vagabond's life where he is describing a world without him. The tonal center is brought back to key of C at the end of each verse.

"I have Trod the Upward and the Downward Slope"

The ninth and final piece, the grand finale to the vagabond's story, is a short but enriched song where the protagonist recalls the ups and downs of his life and how he has nothing more to do or anywhere else to go but to the afterlife. It is a short, yet bold recollection of the vagabond's life – as if his life is flashing before his eyes for the last time before he departs from this world. This piece features many of the recurring motifs found in the previous eight selections as musical reminders of the vagabond's journey recounted from the previous selections. The piano begins with main motif of "The Vagabond" before the singer begins. The passage of "and I have lived and loved..." is identical to "...in the eventide" from "Youth and Love." The ending of this piece is almost identical to the ending of "The Roadside Fire." Both share the same rhythmic V to I resolution at the end of the piece. The satisfying distinction is that the end of "The Roadside

Fire” moves to D \flat Major, and the end of this piece is in D Major. This creates a more satisfying conclusion to the whole work as it concludes.

English Folk Song Suite

When comparing the *English Folk Song Suite* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, there are distinct differences from *Songs of Travel*. The instrumentation is vastly different in these pieces. *Songs of Travel* is a vocal song cycle with homophonic keyboard accompaniment while the *English Folk Song Suite* was written for an army band – much like the one he served in during the first World War. This was a landmark change for Ralph Vaughan Williams. Pre-war works involved mostly choral or vocal works rather than instrumental pieces. Serving in an army band inspired Ralph Vaughan Williams to expand his compositional horizons by writing for more diverse instrumentations rather than keeping to small orchestras or vocalists.²¹ This piece was his first attempt at branching out into writing for the band setting and it was well-received.

The English Folk Song Suite stays true to the Ralph Vaughan William philosophy of finding inspiration from where you live. This piece is a three-movement arrangement of well-known folk songs from the English countryside. Some of the folk songs featured in the suite include “Seventeen Come Sunday”, “My Bonny Boy”, and various songs from Somerset. When listening to this piece, there are distinct qualities of the piece when compared to *Songs of Travel*. Call and response between instrumental parts is a major pattern in this suite. Ralph Vaughan Williams’ use of imitation techniques like call and response are much more prevalent in this

²¹ Piper “List of Works” Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, February 28, 2022, <https://rvwsociety.com/list-of-works/>.

piece than in *Songs of Travel*. In *Songs of Travel*, this strategy is present, but not featured as heavily throughout the whole work.

Writing this piece allowed Ralph Vaughan Williams to experiment with musical layers that do not exist in the realm of vocal or orchestral music. As someone who is familiar with compositions written for band, I see striking similarities in this piece with Gustav Holst's *Second Suite in F*. Gustav Holst was a friend and contemporary of Vaughan Williams who studied at the Royal Academy of Music while Williams was there. Holst's *Second Suite in F* was first performed in 1922, a year before Williams published his folk song suite. Gustav Holst is renowned for his compositions for military band so there is merit in believing that Holst influenced some decisions Ralph Vaughan Williams made when writing the *English Folk Song Suite*. The setup of the *English Folk Song Suite* is identical to Holst's suite: the two faster pieces at the beginning and the end with the slower parts placed in the middle of the work. The "Seventeen Come Sunday" portion shares similar form to the first movement in the Holst suite: A Section, softer B section with an instrumental solo part, vastly different C Section, D.C. al Coda repeating the A Section until the Coda and then the piece concludes. The "My Bonny Boy" sections of this piece share similar qualities to the "Song without Words" section of the *Second Suite in F*. Both pieces have very slow, melancholy attitudes set up with minor triads in the low brass and having one moving part at a time between various instruments. There is some presence of countermelody in the lower horns in the middle of the piece, but mostly when the woodwinds are sustaining a note or ending a phrase.

Gustav Holst seems to have been a major influence on Vaughan Williams's instrumental compositions. The similarities of their works are testament to that; however, without exposure to working with an army band during World War I, there is little evidence that indicates that Ralph

Vaughan Williams would have pursued writing any band music. After returning from the war, Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote various works for orchestra and chamber groups and even published his first Opera in 1921.

Sancta Civatis

Sancta Civatis is an oratorio from Ralph Vaughan Williams inter-war period. It is a ten-part work featuring text from the Taverner Bible and English translation of the Old and New Testament dating back to roughly 1539. *Sancta Civatis* draws from the Book of Revelation and tells the story of Christ's Second Coming and the dawn of the New Heaven and the New Earth. This piece is excellent for comparison to *Songs of Travel*. The development as a composer for vocal works in this are noticeable when analyzing the wayfarer song cycle alongside it. Ralph Vaughan Williams, though he was a staunch atheist, understood how important the Bible and the Church were to English culture. Therefore, he was not afraid to draw inspiration from parts of his environment that he did not agree with fully. This is what makes him such a hallmark composer. He maintained his belief that inspiration comes from one's own country's culture even though it may not be a major part of their personal experience. From this mindset, *Sancta Civatis* was created.

One of the striking features of both *Songs of Travel* and *Sancta Civatis* are important phrases being sung on repeated notes with the stress of the accents creating an almost spoken declaration. Examples of this phenomenon would be the phrase, "...and I saw a new Heaven coming down," from his oratorio or "...deep in the garden golden pavilions hide," from "Youth and Love" in *Songs of Travel*. Another expanded compositional technique used in *Sancta Civitas* that is briefly reiterated in *Songs of Travel* is call and response. In *Sancta Civatis*, different iconic phrases to Christianity are sung in a back-and-forth manner between different

vocal sections. Phrases like “alleluia,” “alas,” “forever and ever” are started by individual sections that call on the other sections to repeat these words in response. This call and response technique occurs occasionally in *Songs of Travel* between the voice and piano. An example of this would be in the first piece of *Songs of Travel*, “The Vagabond,” where the accompaniment outlines the melodic idea in the right hand just before the singer enters in and continues the melodic thought in response to the piano. Another fascinating parallel between these two works is the featuring of the baritone voice in solo parts to layout the story of each work. The narrative of *Songs of Travel* was originally written to share the story of the vagabond by a baritone. In *Sancta Civatis*, a featured baritone sings in the first-person view of the Apostle John who expresses what he sees in the famous vision of the Isle of Patmos that inspired the Book of Revelation.

With there being 20 years of compositional growth between the two works and the influence on modernism invading British society, harmonically, these pieces are very different. Nearly every part of *Sancta Civatis* features tonal fluidity and variation on the whole-tone scale. In *Songs of Travel*, there was presence of chromaticism especially in parts of songs that reflect negative emotions. In this oratorio, this 12-tone sound is used to create an ethereal atmosphere and purposefully sound unnatural to the human ear. These two works also have much different instrumentation. *Songs of Travel* was created for one voice and one accompaniment and reflected the aforementioned idea that the desired British sound was vocal and that British people were not instrumentalists by nature. *Sancta Civatis* does not share the same sentiment. While there is a heavy focus on vocal parts with there being a choir and a semi-chorus, there is also a significant instrumental presence that lays the supporting foundation for the voices. There are even instrumental solos featuring a violin, an oboe, and a trumpet throughout the oratorio.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Studying *Songs of Travel* is quite a privilege for any vocal performer who enjoys English repertoire. This project has allowed me to see how *Songs of Travel* and other pieces like it corrected the lack of a unique British style, and how the impact of these works inspired other composers with like-minded devotion to their country to create music based on the sounds of the British Isles.

The research process was enlightening while studying *Songs of Travel* for lecture performance. Comparing *Songs of Travel* to Ralph Vaughan Williams' later works allowed for a deeper connection to the music as well as to the composer himself. Many of the artistic decisions in the music and the text painting in the texts were much clearer from a hindsight point of view. Aspects for creating proper vocal line, musical expression, and lyrical intensity stem from the comprehension of who Vaughan Williams was writing for and why he was writing to this selection of text. A prime example of this would be the symbolic usage of the word "heather" in several pieces of the cycle. Heather is a plant native to the northern part of the British Isles that blooms in summertime and maintains a beautiful purple hue. In British Literature, heather is used to symbolize good fortune and fond memories. These are concepts that encourage the vagabond as he ventures into his life of travels. He maintains that he wants good fortune in finding sustenance and shelter.²² When he does not find what he needs, then he clings onto his memories for the strength to persevere. This plant is a pleasant staple of the British countryside. When these fields come up in the text, Ralph Vaughan Williams does an amazing

²² Manuel Pardo de Santayana, Andrea Pieroni, and Rajindra K. Puri, "Plants as Symbols in Scotland Today" Essay, In *Ethnobotany in the New Europe: People, Health and Wild Plant Resources*, 239–41, New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.

job of creating the warmth and comfort in the music that reflects what a native Brit would more than likely feel about this scenery. This famous text painting would be a feature in many of his works later in life. *Sancta Civatis* is an excellent example to compare *Songs of Travel* because they are in essence the same thing: A large, narrative piece of literature that was put to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams. In the setting of Heaven, the angelic voices are responding to each other in an other-worldly fashion. The whole tonal melodic motifs that are shared between parts cannot be defined by a metaphorically “worldly” tonic. When Babylon is being judged in the story, Vaughan Williams does a masterful job of creating this sense of uneasy harmony that foretells of impending retribution. *Songs of Travel* has these elements of text painting and harmonic layering to set a mood, but the complexity of the approach is far greater in Ralph Vaughan Williams’ later works.

It is intriguing to observe the similarities as well as the different directions that he took with *Songs of Travel* than with his later works. *Songs of Travel* is a beautiful song cycle that helped change the face of British music in the early 20th century. This composition, along with many others, helped establish the foundations for the British musical identity that exists today. Analyzing *Songs of Travel* for lecture performance allows any researcher studying the life of Ralph Vaughan Williams to see that this work reflects many compositional traits shared by his later works. Researching works like *Sancti Civatis* and *English Folk Song Suite* for comparison to *Songs of Travel* yielded results that suggest major developments in harmonic layering, melodic complexity, and expanded instrumentation connected with Williams’s service in World War I. Some of these traits include similar use of virtuosic text painting found in *Songs of Travel* and some of his post-war works, the expanded use of techniques like call and response in later pieces with far more diverse instrumentation, and the consistent use of chromaticism to

create negative moods. The purpose for his works also began to change. He took to writing music in response to various events later in his life rather than writing purely for the foundation of the “English sound.” Another influence in Ralph Vaughan Williams’s works seems to be his relationship with famous band composer Gustav Holst. Holst’s influence is best seen when comparing *English Folk Song Suite* (1923) to *Second Suite in F* first performed the year prior. These two pieces share similar form structure, instrumentations, and compositional styles. The results from this project suggest that his exposure to different styles of music in his travels as a soldier influenced Vaughan Williams to use different approaches for composing while maintaining his idea for musical citizenship. Further research of other pieces may be undertaken to present different developmental aspects of Vaughan Williams’s compositions as he matured as a composer that could not be delineated in this project. Further research into the influence of Gustav Holst on Vaughan Williams’ later works may also yield unique results.

The driving force of his compositional development seems to be focused on the exposure to different styles and instrumentation while he served during World War I. During his life, these developments in composition may have appeared to occur unexpectedly to those around him. After looking at the whole timeline of his life, it is clear to see his experiences with the Royal Army Band and his budding friendships created from a shared passion for music were a critical influence in his works. These influences inspired Vaughan Williams to forge a new style of British music and broaden the sounds of the perceived British musical identity. In his early years, the British sound was thought to be vocal, light and simple that stemmed from the beautiful folk songs of the region. Vaughan Williams not only assisted in laying the foundation in his early works but also widened the definition of the “English sound” in his later works. Vaughan Williams contributions to the English musical identity allowed later composers to expand on the

foundations he laid. The music of Ralph Vaughan Williams still connects listeners to the British Isles like no other and remains a driving force in British Music that impacts the world of music today.

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