Aspects of national identity in the art songs of Ralph Vaughan Williams before the Great War

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Files</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>application/pdf</td>
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<td>PDF</td>
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Description

Title: Aspects of national identity in the art songs of Ralph Vaughan Williams before the Great War

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Abstract: This dissertation explores how the art songs of English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) composed before the Great War expressed the composer’s vision of “Englishness” or “English national identity”. These terms can be defined as the popular national consciousness of the English people. It is something that demands continual reassessment because it is constantly changing. Thus, this study takes into account two key areas of investigation. The first comprises the poets and texts set by the composer during the time in question. The second consists of an exploration of the cultural history of British and specifically English ideas surrounding pastoralism, ruralism, the trope of wandering in the countryside, and the rural landscape as an escape from the city. This dissertation unfolds as follows. The Introduction surveys the literature on Vaughan Williams and his songs in particular on the one hand, and on the other it surveys a necessarily selective portion of the vast literature of English national identity. The introduction also explains the methodology applied in the following chapters in analyzing the music as readings of texts. The remaining chapters progress in the chronological order of Vaughan Williams’s career as a composer. Chapter Two considers the three Barnes songs composed between 1901 and 1903 and published in The Vocalist. The chapter argues that these songs, in pitting the rural against the urban as seen in salient aspects of their music, epitomize Vaughan Williams’s engagement with the contemporary “Back-to-the-Land” movement. Chapter Three examines the Songs of Travel (text by Robert Louis Stevenson). This chapter argues is that Vaughan Williams’s 1904 song cycle displays the composer’s fascination with the figure of the gypsy, and the life of the wanderer-- preoccupations that were characteristic of the gypsophilia of the day—represented in his music by such figures as a tramping motive and a rhythmic fingerprint. Chapter Four is dedicated to the 1909 cycle On Wenlock Edge (text by A. E. Housman). Once again, this cycle pits country against city. It also confronts modern with Roman Britain and introduces other icons of Englishness, in particular the church. All this marks a new development in Vaughan Williams’s progress as a song composer, namely the introduction of ideas associated with pastoralism and the difficulties of the rural life. Chapter Five discusses the critical change in the composer’s work caused by the Great War. Despite continuities in Vaughan Williams’s composition that would persist throughout his career, these years saw a shift in focus towards themes of mortality and spirituality, and new musical techniques.

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The music of British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams often leaves listeners with memorable melodies and rich harmonies that create a feeling of expansiveness and mysticism. He is considered one of England’s greatest composers, equally successful writing music for sacred or secular, choral or instrumental, chamber or full orchestra. This influence of a national sound would become an important factor in the music of Vaughan Williams. He received both his music degree in 1894 and history degree in 1895 from Trinity College, Cambridge. Vaughan Williams’ first published work, Linden Lea, was a song written in 1901 for voice and piano, based on a poem by William Barnes. First, although Vaughan William’s study of English music and philosophy of national music were critical in helping him find his musical voice, his further compositional development owed just as much to the application of foreign techniques and traditions. Second, the influence of nation on Vaughan Williams’s own music has been overstated and overemphasized in criticism and scholarly literature. Third, while his music ultimately transcended national boundaries, the public came to equate his personal voice with an English style, a perception that has marginalized his position within tw Ralph Vaughan Williams stirred strong passions both in his life and since his death. He was dismissed by many – including initially the late Michael Tippett – as responsible for ‘Folk Waffle’. As a composer, however, Vaughan Williams bestrides English music in the 20th century like a colossus. Every aspect of our musical life stands in his shadow. He deserves his place amongst the greatest of English Composers, and I hope the audience will be awakened through my film to Vaughan Williams as a central figure in our musical heritage.’

What the critics say. David Smith and Mary Riddell, The Observer, 9 December 2007. A BBC spokeswoman said: ‘Television arts commissioning can find no record of receiving a proposal from Tony Palmer. This rejection letter did not come from them.'