

# 1 Constructing Englishness in music: national character and the reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams

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Mention the name Ralph Vaughan Williams and into most people's minds come immediately three words: English, pastoral, and folksong. Few composers produce quite such a strong reflex action. Musicologists for a long time deemed such phenomena as lying beyond the scholarly pale; now, taking a Freudian lead from colleagues in other disciplines, we have begun to realize that unreflective reactions of this kind can be analysed in a respectable intellectual framework, and that they can often tell us a great deal about the ideological substrata on which our view of the musical world is built. Of course, the popular image of nearly every composer involves distortion and over-simplification. Yet when the image arouses reflex reactions that almost invariably carry an aura of adverse criticism,<sup>1</sup> as is the case with Vaughan Williams, we should feel under a degree of obligation to examine them more closely. And where they also run counter to some very salient evidence, available to most informed listeners on just one moment's reflection beyond the knee-jerk response – in the case of Vaughan Williams, how can the composer of the Fourth and Sixth symphonies, say, or the favourite pupil of Ravel, possibly be summed up with those three words? – that obligation hardens to duty.

It is common enough for advocates of Vaughan Williams to

<sup>1</sup> So well established are the pejorative critical traditions that surround Vaughan Williams that Michael Oliver felt it natural to make them the backbone of a programme on the composer in Oliver's BBC Radio 3 series 'Soundings', first broadcast 8 March 1992. The programme countered effectively such notions as Vaughan Williams's supposed amateurishness of technique and the lack of interest in his music outside England; perhaps inevitably in a feature of this kind, however, there was no attempt to analyse the wider context of the composer's distorted reception.

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bemoan the crudely simplistic terms in which this complex and multi-faceted composer is often viewed. Yet the roots of this problem have traditionally been attributed to causes either widely general or narrowly personal in scope – the slump in reputation that so often follows a composer's death, for instance, or an inevitable reaction against the enormous acclaim that Vaughan Williams enjoyed during his lifetime. These factors have undoubtedly played their part. Yet we need to look further; for example, what was the basis of the composer's great popularity that made a reaction likely, if not inevitable? And, why did much of the mythology surrounding Vaughan Williams first develop while the composer was alive and prominently in the public eye, rather than in the years after his death?

The obvious place to start, of course, is with the issue of nationalism. And here the historical ground has recently been well fertilized, not so much by musicologists as by scholars in cognate disciplines.<sup>2</sup> During the last decade or so historians, literary critics, and others have published a wealth of important new work on nationalism, particularly in its more covert manifestations, and this has profound implications for music. Some of the most interesting work has been on British history between about 1880 and 1945, a period that covers the zenith of Great Britain's world dominance as an imperial power.<sup>3</sup> Yet while music has not been ignored in this research, it has still to be treated in any depth, and there has

<sup>2</sup> The role of discourses of gender in music and musicology has rightly been receiving a good deal of attention of late. Constructions of national identity – which, if less fundamental than those of gender, are nevertheless crucial to the definition of self and other – have yet to be given sustained emphasis by the 'new musicology', although there have been some striking individual contributions; perhaps to some extent, ironically, because explicit nationalism, however loosely conceived, has always loomed large even in traditional narratives of music history and historiography.

<sup>3</sup> Of central importance to the present discussion is *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, ed. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Croom Helm, 1986). See also *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel, 3 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), especially vol. III, *National Fictions*; and *Myths of the English*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992). A landmark volume for this whole area of research is *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); see in particular Chaps. 1 and 7, both by Hobsbawm.

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been little detailed reference to Vaughan Williams.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, musicologists concerned with the British scene have so far paid almost no attention to such new thinking; the writings that exist have emanated largely from scholars trained in other disciplines, and the results have been very mixed.<sup>5</sup> This history is still being lived and musicologists' neglect of such questions is part of the wider paucity until late of serious scholarly investigation into British twentieth-century music, a deficiency

<sup>4</sup> The most extended discussion of a musical topic in the above volumes is Jeremy Crump, 'The Identity of English Music: The Reception of Elgar 1898–1935', in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, pp. 164–90. Alun Howkins refers to musical developments in his contribution to the same volume, 'The Discovery of Rural England', pp. 62–88; a number of points arising from this form the starting point for the same author's brief essay 'Greensleeves and the Idea of National Music', in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, III, pp. 89–98, which includes some useful remarks about Vaughan Williams's orchestral fantasia on the 'Greensleeves' tune. See also Robert Stradling, 'On Shearing the Black Sheep in Spring: The Repatriation of Frederick Delius', in *Music and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Christopher Norris (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), pp. 69–105.

<sup>5</sup> The most substantial example of the latter has appeared recently, in the form of a book by historians Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, entitled *The English Musical Renaissance 1860–1940: Construction and Deconstruction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Although the authors independently arrive at a number of the same broader observations offered in the present essay, their treatment of Vaughan Williams is tendentious and misguided; and while portions of their study represent a significant contribution to the field, much of it is profoundly flawed, merely skating the surface of many of the more important issues, peppering its argument with half-truths, and inexplicably failing to take account of some of the most pertinent recent research on British nationalism. More successful, although in musical terms much narrower in focus, is Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), which appeared at almost exactly the same time as the Stradling and Hughes book; Boyes makes no attempt to deal with art music, concentrating instead on the social context and impact of the folk-music revival up to the present day. It must be said, though, that Boyes too is unsatisfactory on Vaughan Williams: she fails to appreciate the complexity of his attitude to folksong, treating his views as simply an extension of those of Cecil Sharp (which they were not, as I shall suggest below). For a perceptive review of both these books see Calum Macdonald, 'The Chauvinistic Lark', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 November 1993, pp. 3–4. Julian Onderdonk explores current attitudes to the folksong revival and Vaughan Williams's place within that in his contribution to the present volume.

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which, as I shall suggest later, is at least partly due to the confused ideological legacy of earlier nationalistic debates. This affects British musicologists especially deeply, but its influence is also strong outside the native shores; and there neglect is reinforced by the bias of most writing on twentieth-century music history towards the modernistic Stravinsky – Schoenberg axis, a bias which has left most major British composers, along with many others, out in the cold.

Yet if scholars of Western music decide to devote sustained attention to the cultural politics of nationalism and imperialism, they will need to give close consideration to the British scene around the turn of the century: here is a case-history of music situated at an unusually crucial position in the ideological fault-lines of an imperial power *par excellence*. And the composer nearest to the epicentre was and is Ralph Vaughan Williams. Not only must Vaughan Williams occupy an important place in any discussion of English national identity in music; to turn the equation around, I believe that the reception of Vaughan Williams's music has been blighted by broader cultural forces, in particular by tensions in the national self-image, and that an understanding of these is essential if we are to achieve a more accurate assessment of his overall achievement, and a less prejudiced response to his music.<sup>6</sup> It must be borne in mind, however, that distortions of this kind are common enough in matters nationalistic: to quote an aphoristic translation of the words of the French historian Ernest Renan, 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation'.<sup>7</sup>

As a preliminary step towards understanding the process of distortion affecting Vaughan Williams, I shall address here three related issues: (1) the nature and limitations of the current associations of the label 'nationalist' as applied to Vaughan Williams; (2) how this label has evolved over the years; and (3) its links with broader constructions of English

<sup>6</sup> That Elgar's reputation has also suffered such a blight, but for different reasons, has long been accepted; see, for instance, Crump, 'The Identity of English Music'.

<sup>7</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 12. Renan's original statement, dating from 1882 and given by Hobsbawm in a footnote, was less pithy: 'L'oubli et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la formation d'une nation et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger'.

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national identity in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Given the complexity of the issues involved, the discussion will, inevitably, often take the form of notes to future research.

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At its simplest level, Vaughan Williams's reputation as a nationalist composer is based on four overlapping elements: his published writings arguing the importance of national roots for musical styles; work as a collector, arranger, and editor of native folksongs and hymn-tunes; educational and administrative activity as a teacher, competition adjudicator etc.; and the manifold influence on his music of a variety of English musical, literary, and other kinds of sources, above all folksong, Tudor and Jacobean music, and English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most notably the King James Bible and Shakespeare. But other, more shadowy, identifications have arguably played an even greater role in shaping the composer's image, especially in filtering the more straightforward elements of his nationalism, and in determining the emphasis given to different parts of his output. Almost invariably, Vaughan Williams's music has been deemed to reflect essential features of the English national character, of the English landscape, and of the English language. And Vaughan Williams the man, not least his commitment to society at large, and the practical nature of much of his activity, has also tended to acquire emblematic status. The power of such

<sup>8</sup> I shall make no attempt here to trace what Carl Dahlhaus has described as the 'immutable ethnomusical component' which investigations of musical nationalism have often sought to identify (*Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson, California Studies in Nineteenth Century Music no. 4 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 40). Whether or not such components exist, they are notoriously hard to pin down, and, as Dahlhaus suggests, the historian is better advised to concentrate instead on functional aspects of musical nationalism (in this context see also Dahlhaus's essay on nationalism in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980)). I should also add that I am not seeking to reconstruct a kind of 'Ur-Vaughan-Williams', free of all ideological additives: such a figure never existed. But there are, of course, many different degrees of ideological distortion and of awareness of one's involvement in such processes.

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identifications derives from the way in which they tap into wider currents of the national self-image. But the current flows in both directions. Facets of Vaughan Williams's character and music have helped to focus and, in turn, to mould some of the most influential perceptions of what it means to be English.<sup>9</sup>

The most enduring example of this process, and of its potentially negative consequences, has been the association of Vaughan Williams's music with the English landscape, and with the genre of the pastoral. Television, film, and radio, such crucial media in modern image-making, offer frequent reinforcement of the link; a special favourite is *The Lark Ascending*, composed in 1914, to which a whole documentary programme was devoted recently on BBC Radio 4.<sup>10</sup> A work such as this is considered by many to epitomize a particularly English experience of the natural world, by extension a species of national spiritual experience, that had never before been expressed with such immediacy. For others, the picture is rather different: the 'cowpat school' sobriquet sometimes applied to Vaughan Williams and his disciples is rarely used more positively than as an expression of indulgent affection, as if for a senile elderly relative or a half-witted country cousin; more often it is a term of derision. Not that this is a denial of the 'Englishness' of such music. On the contrary: it represents, I believe, a profound uneasiness, more often implicit than explicit, with specific aspects of the English national self-image of this century, an uneasiness which takes us to the heart of the cultural forces acting on the reception of Vaughan Williams, the origins of which we must now explore.

The period c. 1880–1950 is generally seen by historians as the high summer – or perhaps darkest winter, in view of its belligerent consequences – of nationalism; the term itself did not emerge until the end of the nineteenth century (although the roots of many national movements

<sup>9</sup> Except in the case of folksong I shall not attempt here to disentangle the complex and problematic issues surrounding distinctions between English and British national identity, the apparently casual blurring of which has important political implications.

<sup>10</sup> First broadcast 18 May 1992, as a special edition of the arts programme *Kaleidoscope*.

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that came to prominence around this time go back much further, of course).<sup>11</sup> Despite the dramatic proliferation of new nation-states in the aftermath of World War I, and the ensuing ascendancy of right-wing national movements, the pre-war period was if anything more momentous, as it saw the profound transformation in the concept of nationalism that made post-war developments possible. Crucial to this transformation was that for the first time ethnicity and language became the core elements of identification for existing nations, and, in like manner, that ethnic minorities within established nations increasingly came to see independence in new nation-states as the only honourable aspiration for them to entertain. Similarly, although musical nationalism is an important force throughout the nineteenth century, it becomes most colourful towards the end of this period, with a proliferation of distinctive national schools, of which one of the latest to emerge is the English. Leon Plantinga expresses the traditional understanding of the roots of nineteenth-century nationalism in the arts, and of the reasons for which England did not fit the general mould, when he writes:

The usual factors in the growth of cultural nationalism – status as a developing nation, struggle against a foreign oppressor, feelings of cultural inferiority – were of course lacking in England. It was mainly in a quickening of interest in the ‘Celtic fringes’ that certain nationalist traits appeared in music, and this occurred only late in the century.<sup>12</sup>

And when commentators discuss the English musical nationalism that finally emerged in the twentieth century, it is seen as a sort of cultural icing-on-the-cake: a pre-eminently powerful and confident nation belatedly

<sup>11</sup> The literature on nationalism is vast. Hobsbawm’s *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* is an excellent introduction to the phenomenon for the period under discussion; see also the same author’s *The Age of Empire 1875–1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), Chap. 6. Most books on nationalism, including Hobsbawm’s, make no more than passing reference to music. It is interesting to note, however, that, whereas the *New Grove Dictionary* has no entry at all for nationalism (this situation will be remedied in the revised version currently in preparation), the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* considers musical nationalism worthy of its own entry, with all other subdivisions of the topic grouped under a single heading.

<sup>12</sup> *Romantic Music* (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 400.

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adds distinctive musical creativity to its undoubted excellence in other areas of artistic endeavour.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, although in the last quarter of the nineteenth century Britain was still enormously powerful, and continuing to assert its cultural values, grave doubts about the future were beginning to set in. One manifestation of this was the search for reassurance and inspiration in previous golden ages of the nation's history, the Elizabethan era in particular. Although such concerns obviously had a passive and inward-looking side, they could also be turned to active and positive effect, as recent scholarship has shown.<sup>14</sup> With the growth of military and economic competition abroad (most notably from Germany and the United States), the need to hold together an expanding empire, and social and political unrest at home, a perception began to develop amongst the ruling classes that, for British pre-eminence to be maintained, there would need to be a deliberate fostering of national identity and solidarity, and an associated promotion of certain moral and social qualities. These qualities were for the most part considered to be those of the countryside, particularly in so far as this embodied an idealized English past, as against the corrupting influences of the modern city: both Tudor and rural England offered an antidote to the ills of urbanization and industrialization, which threatened to undermine nation and empire.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The idea of 'lateness' figures prominently in much writing on English twentieth-century music. Donald Mitchell puts the point forcefully when he writes, 'For English music, such was its curious historical predicament, had to relive its past if it were ever to secure a future. It had, as it were, to start all over again' (*The Language of Modern Music* (London: Faber, 1963), pp. 109–10, n. 2). Elsewhere in the same book Mitchell asserts, 'It is a strange but undeniable fact that a time-lag seems to operate, whereby English composers often come late – and fresh – to a language that elsewhere may already have grown tired' (p. 132).

<sup>14</sup> See the volumes cited in n. 3, especially *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> See Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', pp. 70–1; and Brian Doyle, 'The Invention of English', in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, pp. 89–115, especially 89–91. Howkins makes a point with important ramifications for music, namely that, 'Tudor England was not the period in which England was ruled by the Tudor dynasty, 1485–1603, rather it was a construction based on the later years of the reign of Elizabeth, lasting until the 1680s but with gaps, especially the 1650s'. This definition of 'Tudor' embraces the whole period from Tallis to Purcell, and thus all the older English music that was to exert such a powerful influence on the twentieth-century renaissance. The roots of an idealized vision of the country go back a long way: see Raymond Williams's



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It was against this background that English musical nationalism emerged. It became essential to have music that not only could hold its head up against that of competitor nations, but which could do so in a way that was overtly English, which clearly projected aspects of the national character; links with rural folksong and with Tudor music were the ideal purveyors of Englishness in such a context.<sup>16</sup> At one level this is obviously a simplistic formulation. Yet it is remarkable just how closely parallel, in both dates and dialectic, musical and broader cultural and political trends can be seen to run, as is suggested by a reading of cultural historian Alun Howkins's essay 'The Discovery of Rural England'. To take but one example: the period c. 1890–1914 saw a number of landmarks in the revival of interest in Tudor music, such as the first appearance in print of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, and the establishment of the Cobbett composition prize, which stipulated the use of Tudor models in newly composed chamber music; in architecture of the same period, to quote Howkins, 'English taste, whether for domestic building or for show, had become all but synonymous with the "Tudor"'.<sup>17</sup> Howkins makes significant reference to music in his wide-ranging discussion, but all his points bear amplification. One is struck, for instance, by the fact that English folksong should be 'discovered' at this precise historical moment, it having been long assumed that, unlike their Scottish or Welsh neighbours, the English had no native folk music. The standard literature generally sees this as a sign of a wider musical inferiority complex, and of the low status accorded to music in Victorian society; conversely, the discovery of folk music is taken to be an early symptom of the English musical renaissance. There is no doubt a good deal of truth to this interpretation, and many factors must have played their part, including an English Romantic tradition going back to Wordsworth and nurtured by such influential figures as John Ruskin and William Morris (one thinks, for instance, of Ruskin's concern for the use of natural materials in building, which offers an analogy,

classic study *The Country and the City* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: A Study of the Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1974); and Martin J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> This is no doubt one of the reasons for which Elgar's largely European musical language did not go on to form the basis of a national school.

<sup>17</sup> Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', p. 73.

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albeit not exact, to the use of folksong in original composition). And the folksong movement was part of a widespread contemporary interest in preserving and reviving folklore. Yet this was itself a reflection of the nationalist preoccupations of the age, and for these the discovery of folksong was especially timely: here was potentially powerful new support for a national identity whose need had not been felt so acutely, say, in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when serious folksong collecting could equally well have been undertaken. This may account to a large degree for the extraordinary alacrity with which folksong was taken up in the school curriculum.<sup>18</sup> English folksong was also helpful on another front. A feature of the period was that cultural Englishness had to be defined not only against the threat of the continental 'foreigner', but also against the 'Celticness' of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (for this reason I have been careful here not automatically to equate England with Great Britain). To return to the earlier quotation from Plantinga, if a 'British' musical nationalism was all that was required, there was plenty of folk material already available, and English composers of the nineteenth century had already turned to this on occasion (although so had continental composers, most strikingly in the case of Scottish music). The idea that the folksongs discovered in England in the early twentieth century were distinctively and demonstrably English in origin has now been largely discredited.<sup>19</sup> What matters here, though, is the perceptions of the actors. Cecil Sharp and Vaughan Williams, for instance, were in no doubt that the songs they collected contained the essence of a national, racial identity. In 1907 Sharp wrote:

We may look therefore to the introduction of folk-songs in the elementary schools to effect an improvement in the musical taste of the people, and to

<sup>18</sup> See Vic Gammon, 'Music in the Primary School: Aspects of History and Ideology', unpub. P.G.C.E. Special Study, University of Sussex, 1982; cited in Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', pp. 77–8.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, A. L. Lloyd's landmark study *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967), pp. 46–7, where he remarks that many of the characteristics Cecil Sharp identified as being peculiar to English folksong are in fact 'shared by many other peoples' (the wording of Lloyd's title is significant, avoiding as it does the equation of country of domicile with country of origin). This passage is quoted in Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music*, rev. pbk edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 69, where some of these problems are discussed in the context of English music of the 1930s.