SOCIALIST MUSIC IN BRITAIN: THE INFLUENCE OF WILLIAM MORRIS ON
GUSTAV HOLST AND RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

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by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore the effects of the English poet and socialist revolutionary William Morris on the British musical landscape during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with particular attention to the lives and music of Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. At the turn of the nineteenth century, both composers were still young and impressionable. Having been raised in middle class backgrounds during a period of relative prosperity in Britain’s history, Holst and Vaughan Williams nonetheless sympathized with the idealist, utopian teachings of Morris. Both composers would be lifelong socialists (though arguably less radical with time), yet despite the extensive record of these inclinations, few scholars have studied the impact of socialism on the compositional processes. This thesis will first examine Morris, his philosophy, and his broader influence on music at the end of the nineteenth century. The remaining two chapters will consider the implications for each composer and his music.
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Chapter 1

William Morris and His Brand of Socialism

Among the lectures and theoretical essays found within the collection *On Art and Socialism*, William Morris—the poet, craftsman, author, and revolutionary—makes a passionate plea to middle-class and artistocratic Socialist sympathizers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

Surely there are some of you who long to be free; who have been educated and refined, and had your perceptions of beauty and order quickened only that they might be shocked and wounded at every turn by the brutalities of competitive Commerce; who have been so united and driven by that, though you are well-to-do, rich even maybe, you have now nothing to lose from social revolution: love of art, that is to say of the true pleasure of life, has brought you to this, that you must throw in your lot with that of the wage-slave of competitive Commerce; you and he must help each other and have one hope in common, or you at any rate will live and die hopeless and unhelped. You who long to be set free from the oppression of the money-grubbers hope for the day when you will be compelled to be free!¹

Morris had a broad audience in mind when he wrote these words, but this statement certainly would have resonated with two young composers just coming of age in late-Victorian England: Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Both men (though Vaughan Williams to a greater degree) belonged to the class of well-to-do individuals Morris particularly hoped would be sympathetic to his brand of socialism, and it seems they were.

Before dealing with specific manifestations of William Morris’s influence in the lives and works of Holst and Vaughan Williams (topics that occupy the last two chapters in this thesis), I will address in this chapter the understanding these

composers had of Morris, socialism, and English society at this critical time in their professional and personal development. To appreciate Morris’s impact, one must examine the world of the young Holst and Vaughan Williams, composers who in their process of maturation “outgrew [this era], personally and musically.” This chapter thus presents itself in three parts. First, a brief introduction to the England of Morris, Vaughan Williams, and Holst clarifies the reasons why these figures found socialist ideals attractive. In particular, this section explores the sense of malaise that clouded English nationalism in late-Victorian England as well as the Empire’s economic woes. I then turn to the relationship between socialism and music, with special attention to Morris’s personal feelings for music. The final section shifts from Morris’s own musical ventures to his ideology—the elements of his thinking that are most relevant to work of Vaughan Williams and Holst. My intent is to reveal the pillars of Morris’s brand of socialism, along with his nostalgic tendencies and love of the pastoral.

Britain at the end of the nineteenth century was an Empire coming to the realization that it would soon be replaced as the world’s dominant power. During the nineteenth century nationalism had arisen across the European continent, sparked by the French Revolution. Ensuing revolutions, perhaps most importantly those of 1848, allowed a much more tangible form of nationalism to develop in countries such as France, Italy, and Austria. Contrastingly, the nationalism present

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3 Of Course, one could make a distinction between nationalist sentiments in England, Scotland, Wales. Vaughan Williams and Holst, however, were primarily associated with English nationalism.
in England was far more reserved, for reasons that have been studied at length elsewhere. Nonetheless, despite the innocuous nature of English nationalism, for the majority of the nineteenth century, the colonial and economic power of the British Empire did inspire a certain brand of patriotic zeal.

However, by approximately 1880, a palpable shift in English national pride had occurred. This period was “a time of particular fascination and resonance when England not only was at its apogee as a world power, but also, paradoxically, was beginning to experience severe difficulties in maintaining the role her power imposed upon her.” To be sure, at the end of the nineteenth century, Britain was still the most powerful nation on the planet. Indeed, the final decades of the 1800s until the end of World War II were “a period that covers the zenith of Great Britain’s world dominance as an imperial power.” However, towards the beginning of this era a real sense had set in among the English people that an end to Britain’s reign seemed inevitable. One can understand, then, how some may have felt that drastic social changes would be necessary to thwart this trend.

Much of this malaise stemmed from economic strife that plagued England during this period. The concerns equate to two basic ideas. First, by the end of the nineteenth century, for nearly all intents and purposes, the Industrial Revolution had run its course in Britain. “By the 1870’s the [British] economy was ‘mature’ in

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4 For example, see Chris Williams’s thorough contribution to *What Is a Nation?*, ed. Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 272-92.
the sense that its basic productive framework was already mapped out. The intensive capital-goods, heavy-industry phase of its history was coming to an end.”

In contrast, other nations—particularly the United States and Germany—had just begun to hit their industrial strides. Overall, England suffered various competitive impediments: capital tied up in obsolescent plant equipment that had been established in the early and middle nineteenth century; major industries encumbered with heavy fixed charges . . . ; prodigal wastage of fuel resources, and failure to develop human capital.

These problems led to pervasive view that Britain had peaked too soon in terms of industry.

The second problematic economic development during this time frame involved the troubles of the English working class. In general, wages in England rose at the end of the nineteenth century. However, unemployment remained high among the lower classes. With limited options, members of the working class began to think as a more unified body about their condition. As Peter Jones writes, “If we are seeking an economic explanation for the socialist revival, it does seem likely that high and erratic unemployment under conditions of general economic expansion and rising living standards is likely to [have caused] great discontent.” The growing homogeneity of the working class allowed the possibility of a social revolution to grow.

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 33.
10 Ibid.
Socialism and Music

The socialistic groups that addressed the troubling social conditions in England at the end of the nineteenth century differed in ideology—some were more unabashedly Marxist, for example—yet a significant number shared a passion of music. Chris Waters has claimed that “Victorians assumed that music could exert a refining influence in society, elevating the passions and paving the way for social harmony,” and therefore “any study of music in socialist thought must begin with this simple assumption.”socialist revolution. However, only certain styles of music could accomplish this goal:

Central to socialist cultural thought was the belief that workers should have access to the music heritage of the nation. The components of this heritage varied according to the ideological assumptions of those who spoke in its favour. But all agreed that ‘English’ music was important, whether of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or of the ‘folk.’

As my later chapters will show, these types of music attracted Holst and Vaughan Williams, and not by mere coincidence.

As music “provided the opportunity for comradeship in performance and could be directly inspirational,” socialists groups employed it in several ways. First, socialist choirs became commonplace. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the prominence and importance of socialist choirs cannot be overstated. As

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12 Ibid., 127.
Andrew Heywood notes, “it . . . appears to have been common practice to begin or end large political meetings with a solo performance by a competent comrade as well as by mass singing.”\(^{14}\) Choir singing was thus a form of bonding for the often diverse members of socialist groups. Gustav Holst’s role in performances at meetings of Morris’s socialist group is of particular note (see below, pp. 22).

Just as important as the mere act of singing at these socialist meetings was the choice of specific tunes. Socialist song books were assembled to provide material for choir singing, but also in the hope that such tunes would spread to the working class. “For many socialists, a new national repertoire of songs was one means of giving a common focus to the musical life of the nation.”\(^{15}\) For this reason, a variety of these songbooks were compiled, including *Chants of Labour* (1888), *The Labour Songbook* (1888), *Socialist Songs* (1889), *Songs for Socialists* (1890), *The Labour Church Hymnbook* (1892), *The Clarion Songbook* (1906), and *The SDF Songbook*, among others.\(^{16}\) While distinctions could be drawn among these anthologies in regard to content, a particular song or lyricist could be included in several different volumes.

One name commonly featured in these collections is that of William Morris. According to Waters,

William Morris stands out as the most well-represented poet of socialism in the anthologies. Most of his songs were written between 1883 and 1886 for *Commonweal* and *Justice*, and were published as a pamphlet by the Socialist League, *Chants for Socialists*. Their popularity rested less on their expression

\(^{14}\) Ibid.  
\(^{15}\) Waters, *British Socialists*, 105.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 107.
of socialist convictions than on the way in which they conveyed those convictions through forms of imagery that would have been familiar to those knowledgeable of romantic verse.\(^\text{17}\)

To be clear, Morris did not compose any music himself; he simply wrote new lyrics for preexisting tunes. Nonetheless, his contribution was pervasive enough that young socialists, such as Vaughan Williams and Holst, could not fail to notice his influence.

While Morris’s main musical accomplishments may have been his contributions to these songbooks, he actively engaged with and appreciated musical activities (contrary to the views of some scholars).\(^\text{18}\) Morris seemed particularly fond of early music, preferring it to that of his own era: “[W]hile Morris was critical of the instruments associated with Victorian music making . . . He was appreciative of those linked to the music of earlier periods.”\(^\text{19}\) Any apparent expression of disinterest in the art should not be overvalued. Morris was a man who longed for the past, and that character trait applied to his musical taste as well.

Indeed, anecdotal evidence of Morris’s appreciation of early music is rather abundant. Arnold Dolmetsch, the nineteenth-century musicologist known for creating an interest in performance practice and instruments of earlier centuries, recalls that Morris “understood [early] music at once, and his emotion was so strong that he was moved to tears!”\(^\text{20}\) Dolmetsch even claims that Morris summoned him to play the virginal for him on his deathbed, which belies the claims of later

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 110.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 37.
\(^{20}\) Quoted in ibid., 38.
biographers who fail to acknowledge this facet of Morris’s interests.\textsuperscript{21} Another acquaintance of Morris notes that the poet became “full of regret” after missing a performance featuring choral music of the medieval era.\textsuperscript{22} Thus while Morris may have considered “Victorian music . . . the prevailing self-image of the age” and “a mass celebration of self-confident society,” his enthusiasm early music would also influence “modern” composers such as Vaughan Williams and Holst.\textsuperscript{23}

The Ideology of Morris

At the core of Morris’s feelings on music was his general ideology. While Holst and Vaughan Williams may have been familiar with Morris’s specific musical interests, they certainly encountered the literature on his socialist ideas. It must be noted that Morris’s theories are at times difficult to comprehend. While Morris often called for simplicity in life, he did not always take his own advice. In fact, Morris’s thought may appear downright paradoxical to the casual observer, given that he made his living through capitalist means. The remainder of this chapter will thus present an overview of the most relevant portions of Morris’s theories, meaning those that inspired Holst and Vaughan Williams. As a means of departure, and in an attempt to quickly dispose of any unwelcome associations, it will first be useful to briefly discuss the differences between Morris and Karl Marx. From there, the core of Morris’s argument can be presented, namely his understanding of the relationship between work and leisure. Finally, the chapter will conclude by

\textsuperscript{21} For example, see E.P. Thompson’s aforementioned biography.
\textsuperscript{22} Quoted in Heywood, “William Morris,” 34.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 37.
exploring Morris’s interest in the medieval period and the pastoral, including references to his most well-known work, the utopian novel *News from Nowhere*.

William Morris was not simply an English follower of Karl Marx. On the contrary, Marxists often disparaged Morris, ashamed to share with him the title of socialist. Friedrich Engels, the German philosopher and co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*, condescendingly dismissed Morris as a “settled sentimental socialist.”

Staunch Marxists such as Engels saw Morris as a bit too soft, a figure not fully committed to the upheaval of the social order and the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Similarly, followers of Morris preferred to deemphasize his reputation as an English counterpart to Marx. Within English socialist circles, a great deal of attention was given to ensuring that Morris’s political activities did not overshadow his status as an artist. The first biographers, those concerned with Morris’s legacy, “found it intolerable that an artist whom some of them regarded as a new Michelangelo or a new Leonardo da Vinci should be counted as a follower of Marx.”

It appears then that the Marxists and English socialists shared a common desire to not let their leaders be associated with each other.

For his part, Morris did recognize that he differed from Marx significantly, but he did not feel the need to address that distinction with abrasiveness. In fact, Morris realized that he and Marx did share some beliefs. For example, both men “agreed that man is essentially a maker and that the essence of his human life is

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embodied in the things he makes: a house, a tapestry, a wallpaper.” Overall, Morris did not disagree with Marx’s theories as much as they confused and bored him.

Reflecting on his initial joining of an English socialist group, Morris wrote,

> Having joined a Socialist body . . ., I put some conscience into trying to learn the economical side of Socialism, and even tackled Marx, though I must confess that, whereas I thoroughly enjoyed the historical part of Capital, I suffered agonies of confusion of the brain over reading the pure economics of that great work.

Morris’s feelings towards the economic ideas of Marx do not seem to have changed over the course of his socialist career. Sometime after his initial reading of Marx, Morris was questioned about his opinion on Marx’s theory of value. In response, Morris replied, “To speak quite frankly, I do not know what Marx’s theory of value is, and I’m damned if I want to know . . . political economy is not my line, and much of it appears to be dreary rubbish.”

Morris’s answer begs the question as to what exactly was his “line.” The answer rests in understanding that Morris held a multifaceted conception of socialism. On one level, Morris’s definition was fairly generic:

> Well, what I mean by Socialism is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master’s man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick workers, nor heart-sick workers, a world, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all—the realization at last of the word COMMONWEALTH.

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Morris recognized the effect the growth of industry had had on England during the nineteenth century, and could not comprehend why such an increase in wealth had led to so little change in the social structure. In fact, as noted earlier, by the end of the nineteenth century, inequality had actually grown as a result of unemployment during the Industrial Revolution. Paul Harrington is correct then in assessing that “the socialism of Morris had its origins in guilt, the guilt of no longer being able to accept, in an age of unequalled prosperity, that severe poverty was inevitable.”

While Morris was concerned with the basic economic ideal of socialism, what made his brand of socialism unique was his belief that the economic effects of socialism would lead to a rejuvenation of art in society:

I assert first that Socialism is an all-embracing theory of life, and that as it has an ethic and religion of its own, so also it has an aesthetic: so that everyone who wishes to study Socialism duly it is necessary to look on it from the aesthetic point of view. And secondly, I assert that inequality of condition, whatever may have been the case in former ages of the world, has now become incompatible with the existence of a healthy art.

According to Morris, socialism would set workers free to create art of the type of beauty he felt modern society lacked. Furthermore, Morris believed that socialism would offer people the time to ensure that they could focus on turning even the mundane, ordinary objects needed for daily life into works of art. Morris believed that “to the Socialist a house, a knife a cup, a steam engine, or what not, anything, I

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repeat, that is made by man and has form, must either be a work of art or
destructive to art.”  

Perhaps more so than his confidence in the ability of socialism to restore art
was Morris’s belief that capitalism—“Commerce” as he normally refers to it—hurts
art’s development. Only after reaching the conclusion that art could not upend the
capitalist elements of society on its own did Morris become interested in
socialism. To Morris, the constant demand placed on the worker to produce a large
number of goods created a sense of artistic apathy among the proletariat. Morris
talked about workers as though they had become lifeless machines numb to beauty:

It must be remembered that civilization has reduced the workman to such a
skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for
any life much better than that which he now endures perforce. [In contrast],
it is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before
him, a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyments of
real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary to man as his daily
bread.

Art, which could thrive in a socialist society, would reawaken the common man’s
sense of a fulfilling life.

Morris did not see the working classes as the only victims in a capitalist
society. Higher classes, those which purchased goods made by their working class
counterparts, also suffered under the system in place at the end of the nineteenth
century. Morris saw capitalism as “[enslaving] not only the poor people who are

32 Ibid.
33 Holbrook Jackson, “Introduction,” in On Art and Socialism, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: John
34 Morris, “How I Became a Socialist,” 278.
compelled to work at its production, but also the foolish and not over happy people who buy [goods] to harass themselves with its encumbrance.”

However, while Morris may have held some sympathy for the upper classes, in his writings he clearly found them at fault. Like many socialists, he saw the higher classes as uncaring for their fellow man, the worker. To Morris, “the creation of surplus value [was] the one aim of the employers of labour; they [could not] for a moment trouble themselves as to whether the work which [created] the surplus value [was] pleasurable to the worker or not.” As Morris believed that life should have its share of happiness and pleasure, he despised those who prevented anyone from enjoying their life.

Morris shamed the higher classes, of which he himself was admittedly a part, for their half-hearted attempts to help the poor:

I say that we of the rich and well-to-do classes are daily doing in like wise: unconsciously, or half consciously it may be, we gather wealthy by trading on the hard necessity of our fellows, and then we give driblets of it away to those of them who in one way or another cry out loudest to us. Our poor-laws, our hospitals, our charities, organized and unorganized, are but tubs thrown to the whale: blackmail paid to lame-foot justice, that she may not hobble after us too fast.

Until the higher classes were willing to make concessions and change the present social system, the working and poor classes would tend to deteriorate. Furthermore, Morris recognized the cooperation of the upper classes as necessary if art was to flourish.

37 Morris, “Art and Socialism,” 112.
As part of his message to the higher classes, Morris urged the transformation of factories into "[centres] of intellectual activity . . . [that] will provide . . . the power of producing beauty which are sure to be claimed by those who have leisure."\(^{38}\)

However, both his contemporary critics and those of later ages failed to recognize this necessity. Some suggested that the current capitalistic system, with machines that could do the work much faster than any group of workers, actually gave people the time needed to pursue artistic endeavors. Morris responded, however, that while machines could have been used in the way his critics described, the opposite had taken place:

The wonderful machines which in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimize repulsive labour and to give pleasure, or in other words added life, to the human race, have been so used on the contrary that they have driven all men into mere frantic haste and hurry, thereby destroying pleasure, that is life, on all hands: they have instead of lightening the labour of the workmen, intensified it, and thereby added more weariness yet to the burden which the poor have to carry.\(^{39}\)

Machines should have increased available time for artistic endeavors; instead, they simply created a more hectic culture.

Despite his lofty goals for society, Morris was to some degree a realist; he recognized that a social revolution would not occur overnight. For that reason, he sold for profit his own artistic creations, beautifully ornate furniture pieces, whose style he intended as an aesthetic model for objects in a socialist society. This action has led to the questioning of Morris's integrity and his dismissal by some as a hypocrite. Morris fully admitted the paradox at play in his life, however. In an


interview towards the end of his life, Morris was asked to explain why he, as a socialist, interacted so willingly with the capitalist system. In response, Morris stated that “while I believe the competitive system to be wrong, I am doing my best to sweep away and set up what I believe to be right in the place of it; my individualist critics are equally well aware that the present system is wrong, but they are doing their best to perpetrate it.”

Morris genuinely believed in the socialist dogma he espoused to others, and he believed in its potential for change, but he also accepted society’s current realities. Certainly the same could be said for Vaughan Williams and Holst, two men who held onto Morris’s ideals throughout their lives even if the social structure in which they lived discouraged them from fully committing to those beliefs.

The Past and the Pastoral

Two particular sources of inspiration for Morris’s socialist beliefs also later influenced the music of Holst and Vaughan Williams: the idealization of both England’s past and the pastoral. With respect to his nostalgic tendencies, Morris openly acknowledged that a complete return to the past was out of the question. He knew that “we cannot turn our people back into Catholic English peasants and Guild craftsmen, or into heathen Norse bonders.” What Morris longed for was a return to the ideals of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Most notably, he believed that these periods in history allowed the worker to take pleasure in his or her work.

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Peter Stansky notes, “Morris’s ‘medievalism’ was not a kind of romantic costumery: he advocated a return to what he considered the sounder procedures of an earlier time for both idealistic and practical purposes.”⁴² Morris simply wanted to recapture the spirit of the past.

Morris’s fascination with the past stemmed first from his beliefs in its relationship with art. According to Morris, “Art was once the common possession of the whole people; it was the rule in the Middle ages that the produce of handicraft was beautiful. Doubtless, there were eyesores in the palmy days of medieval art, but these were caused by the destruction of wares, not as now by making of them.”⁴³ Morris believed that modern society had become too comfortable with the production of ugly objects, whether or not those objects had been intended to be considered as art. Furthermore, Morris believed that creations of the past were not only aesthetically pleasing, but practical. To Morris, the Industrial Revolution had allowed the construction of goods that in addition to being ugly, served no purpose. The art of the past was pure; it was beautiful and useful. For this reason, Morris claimed, “anyone who wants beauty to be produced at the present day in any branch of the fine arts . . . I care not what, must be always crying out ‘Look back! Look back!’”⁴⁴ As my ensuing chapters will show, both Holst and Vaughan Williams took this advice to heart.

⁴² Stansky, Redesigning the World, 5.
⁴³ Quoted in ibid., 67.
⁴⁴ Quoted in Thompson, William Morris, 658.
Alongside Morris’s nostalgia was his passion for rural England. Morris believed that modern society had ignored the needs of the lands outside of England’s urban centers. Rob Young concludes that “the second half of Victoria’s reign was, for William Morris, a period of horrendous progress and defilement of the intrinsic decency and dignity of the rural way of life.”\(^4\)\(^5\) To Morris, the pastoral, like England’s past, represented a place where people could pursue their work in a leisurely manner that allowed them to pursue artistic endeavors. In a letter Morris espouses a portion of his pastoral vision:

> Suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green field, so that you could be in the country in five minutes’ walk, and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied the (difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really wanted: then I think one might hope of civilization had really begun.\(^4\)\(^6\)

Morris valued rural England for its simplicity, one of the core characteristics on which he believed a socialist society that allowed art to flourish would thrive. While Morris’s pastoral vision can be found in many of his writings, such as the letter mentioned above, his book *News from Nowhere* is perhaps his most significant glorification of pastoralism.\(^4\)\(^7\) Additionally, as *News from Nowhere* was his most popular work and “[reached] a much wider audience than the usual socialist propaganda,” it deserves special attention.\(^4\)\(^8\) From its inception, Morris intended for *News from Nowhere* to glamorize the pastoral, as it was a response to a

\(^4\)\(^6\) Stansky, *Redesigning the World*, 50.
popular text of another socialist, Edward Bellamy, that idealized industrialism. Consequently, *News from Nowhere* “contains little economics: the good society, as seen by Morris, is social life based on voluntarism, without government or any sort of compulsion, and this principle will produce harmony and a healthy life for all without any elaborate economic organization.” The underlying feature of Morris’s utopian society was thus cooperation.

In terms of format, “*News from Nowhere* . . . takes the form of a dream vision, in which the narrator, one William Guest finds himself in a London of the twenty-second century, in which the ugliness and illness of industrial society have been replaced by ‘a well-ordered and well-farmed country.’” Rural England as Morris and contemporaries knew it was thus not the setting of the novel. Instead, “for all its rural characteristics, *News from Nowhere* takes place . . . in a transformed London, a ‘London, small, and white, and clean,’ like [a] fourteenth century city.” On one level then, *Nowhere* emphasizes Morris’s nostalgia. More importantly, Morris’s novel shows the power of the pastoral. In Morris’s mind, the ideals of pastoralism were strong enough that they could one day alter and rejuvenate the city many at the end of the nineteenth century still considered to be the world’s greatest. Urban society would succumb to the authenticity and simplicity of the rural lifestyle.

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49 Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, 70.
52 Ibid., 99.
The emphasis on the pastoral is also expressed in the characters found in *News from Nowhere*. In his assessment of Morris’s work, Chester N. Scoville remarks that the inhabitants of *Nowhere* “dress ‘in bright colours,’ and in many cases they ‘wear no shoes’ having such ‘a close friendship with the earth’ that, for instance, they feel emotionally the changing of the seasons.”\(^{53}\) Additionally, certain characters make explicit remarks that seem to uphold pastoral ideology. Clara, a guide of the visitor Guest, criticized erstwhile generations for “always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate—‘nature’ as people used to call it—as one thing, and mankind as another.”\(^{54}\) Through Clara, Morris suggests that his own society forge a greater oneness with the natural world. Furthermore, Guest’s preference for the tan-skinned female character blatantly idolizes the countryside. Caroline Arscott explains that “the contrast between the white skin of Clara with her beautiful gown and the brown skin of the country Ellen who is barefoot and lightly clad leads Guest to recognize that there is the greatest beauty in the suntanned body.”\(^{55}\) Here Morris approaches a sexualized glorification of the pastoral.

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\(^ {53}\) Ibid., 97.
\(^ {54}\) Quoted in ibid., 98.
Chapter 2

Gustav Holst

A fundamental theme in the writings of Gustav Holst’s daughter, Imogen, and in those of his close friend, Ralph Vaughan Williams, is the observation that Holst was a quiet, humble man. Unlike Vaughan Williams, who was known for his grand and almost domineering presence, Holst contented himself with a much more reserved character and lifestyle. In his own writings, especially his letters to Vaughan Williams, Holst leaves the impression of a man indecisive at best and sorely in need of a confidence boost at worst. Holst’s reserved personality and unwillingness to face controversy has been interpreted as apathy towards political and social issues. In this chapter I intend to show that Holst held strong socialist and utopian views after being inspired by William Morris, even if he kept them close to his chest. Furthermore, I will present examples in which social equality and inequality find their way into the music, reflecting the seriousness with which he regarded issues of social stratification.

Scholars have largely ignored Morris’s influence on Holst. Even in the writings of Imogen, little attention is given to this relationship, so that tracing Holst’s interest in Morris proves more difficult than it might have been. Nonetheless, sources do exist to establish the connection. In an essay centered on the life and works of his friend, Vaughan Williams explains Holst’s connection to the nineteenth-century socialist:

It was Holst’s strong sense of human sympathy which brought him when a
young man into contact with William Morris and the Kelmscott Club. The
tawdriness of London, its unfriendliness, the sordidness both of its riches and
poverty were overwhelming to an enthusiastic and sensitive youth; and to
him the ideals of Morris, the insistence of beauty in every detail of human life
and work, were a revelation. No wonder then that the poetic socialism of the
Kelmscott Club became the natural medium of his aspirations.\textsuperscript{56}

Holst’s daughter, on the other hand, dismisses her father’s socialist activities
without a trace of romanticism: his “socialism was never very active” and he only
“remained in the club for the sake of good companionship.”\textsuperscript{57} One should be
suspicious, however, of Imogen’s attempt to separate her father’s legacy from an
ideology considered radical by many of her contemporaries. Given Vaughan
Williams’s deeper involvement with the movement, it seems advisable to weight his
interpretation of his friend’s socialist leanings more heavily.

Admittedly, Holst’s contact with Morris was most likely brief in nature. As
Andrew Heywood has noted,

although there is no direct evidence to fit the date, 1895 would seem to be
plausible in that Holst is said to have actually listened to Morris and this
would therefore indicate a date prior to when Morris made his last
appearance at a [Hammersmith Socialist Society] meeting.\textsuperscript{58}

Morris’s ill health and subsequent death in 1896 limited the interaction of the two
figures. Nonetheless, other documents suggest that Holst continued on in the
socialist cause without Morris, having been inspired enough by the craftsman’s
beliefs.

\textsuperscript{58} Heywood, “Gustave Holst,” 40.
According to records of the Hammersmith Socialist Society, even in the years following Morris’s death, Holst was not simply an onlooker at group meetings:

Holst’s commitment, far from waning after initial interest, actually broadened and deepened over a period of two years. In particular it appears that he decided to begin attending the less glamorous business meetings during 1896 and subsequently took a full part; moving a motion, acting as chair, and taking the minutes. These are the actions of an established and trusted member.\(^{59}\)

Holst was even among a select group of members that met immediately following the death of Morris to examine the future of the society and find a new meeting place other than Kelmscott House, Morris’s residence.\(^ {60}\) Furthermore, Holst’s fervency within the socialist circle seems to have attracted his future wife, Isobel Harrison. Like Holst, Isobel was a highly involved member of the group who, in addition to being “an active socialist in her own right, . . . may well have had a socialist family background.”\(^ {61}\) To marry someone so set in her socialist beliefs, Holst likely felt confident in his own.

While Holst served in a variety of roles, “the death of Morris . . . forced a change in the nature of Holst’s socialist activity in a musical direction.”\(^ {62}\) Holst thus stepped into what was perhaps his greatest role in the Society: director of the Socialist Choir. Rob Young writes that “in 1897 Holst was formally invited to conduct the Hammersmith Socialist Choir. His involvement lasted several years . . .

Seated behind a harmonium installed on a cart, Holst directed the singing during the

\(^{59}\) Ibid.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 41.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 41-2.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 41.
Society's street demonstrations." This position allowed Holst to put his musical capabilities to use within the socialist group.

The choir performed works by a variety of composers, but concert programs display an apparent preference for the compositions of early English composers, such as Thomas Morley and Henry Purcell. Considering Morris's predisposition for music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, such programming should not be dismissed as coincidental. Furthermore, the choir was not socialist in name only. Performances “were held under the auspices of the Hammersmith Socialist Club,” the object of which was “to draw together Socialists of all shades of opinion, for the purposes of mutual intercourse, and where possible, concerted action.”

The Hammersmith Socialist Society eventually disbanded, though the beliefs the group instilled in Holst remained, and more significantly, affected his compositional process throughout his life. Though tracing the effect of Morris and socialist thought on Holst’s music is not an exact science, both Holst’s contemporaries as well as later scholars have generally recognized his music’s parallels with Morris’s ideals. The conductor Constant Lambert commented that

There is something about [Holst’s] music both unbearably precious and hearty. It precisely recalls the admirably meant endeavors of William Morris and his followers to combat the products of those dark satanic Mills with unpleasant handwoven materials.

63 Young, *Electric Eden*, 56.
64 Heywood, "Gustav Holst," 42.
65 Ibid., 41
Despite the fact that Morris had died nearly four decades before the time of Lambert's writing, he nonetheless felt the socialist leader's influence could still be heard in Holst's music.

American musicologist Byron Adams has more recently argued for an especially strong connection between Morris and Holst's music. Adams considers Holst essentially a musical extension of Morris, especially in light of the composer's high volume of pedagogical compositions:

Examining Holst's career in light of his relationship to William Morris provides at least a partial answer to one of the central questions concerning this enigmatic composer: why did such a supreme technician choose to compose so much music for amateurs? The answer is to be found not solely in the accidents of his life, but in his aesthetic view. For Holst, like Morris, there was no dichotomy between the beautiful and the useful. Holst became the William Morris of music, a craftsman par excellence who applied the highest standards of technical accomplishment to bear on each task at hand, no matter how humble.67

Seen from Adams's perspective, Holst believed in art that was not only beautiful, but practical. In Holst's mind, the pieces that could best serve his students at the St. Paul's school and Morley College could also serve the loftiest artistic purposes.

Complementary to this philosophy, and that of Morris, was Holst's passion for coaxing musicality out of the working and rural classes. Holst believed that the people of the lower classes could offer up performances of music rivaling those trained in conservatories. Indeed, while “at Morley College from 1907 to 1924 . . . his pupils were mainly working class.”68 Additionally, “Holst encouraged his Morley

68 Heywood, “Gustav Holst,” 43.
College students to work with him on his festivals at Thaxted where he drew broadly on the talents of the population of a small rural community.” Holst did not choose the glamorous route of a composer; he chose a pedagogical one in the hopes of awakening a true working-class—and socialist—musical movement.

In addition to composing his own works, Holst relied on pieces of early music for his concert programs. This form of programming is, of course, consistent with Morris’s thought. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Morris saw in the works of previous centuries a beauty not found in most pieces of the Victorian era. Of course, Holst was particularly biased towards English composers. Heywood writes that one program of the Holst’s students at Morley College “included the first performance of Purcell’s Fairy Queen since the seventeenth century and the three part mass by William Byrd.” Holst thus wanted his students to appreciate forms of music that, according to the arguably tendentious historical views of Morris, grew out of a time when working-class individuals such as themselves would have had an equally important role as the upper classes in the production of art.

Holst’s passion for early music influenced his own compositions as well. Commenting on his friend’s compositional style, Vaughan Williams writes,

[Holst] does not serve up the harmonic tricks of the last quarter of a century, he does not introduce a ‘major ninth’ regularly every eight bars, he is not afraid of long tunes (he has often the courage to let them stand alone, or with the merest suggestion of harmony), he is not always making eight horns bellow out high D’s, he owes much to Bach, to Purcell, to Byrde and Willbye; and yet (or perhaps therefore) he is one of the few composers who can be called truly modern... If Holst’s music is modern it is not that he has

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
acquired a few tricks which to-day are hailed with wonder and to-morrow are as flat as stale ginger-beer but that he has a mind which is the heir of all the centuries and has found the language in which to express that mind.\textsuperscript{71}

Vaughan Williams’s claim that Holst’s lack of traditional modernist signifiers and “shocking” compositional choices makes way for a purer form of modernity is a dubious one, though several commentators following Vaughan Williams have tried to expand this argument.\textsuperscript{72} More significant though than the label Vaughan Williams prescribes to Holst is his description of his style and his emphasis on the latter’s compositional influences.

Holst’s style, including his nod towards early music, closely corresponds to his overall personality. Holst was not a grandiose artist; for his milieu he was rather simple. Holst’s music was charged by the realities of his life and again is most expertly described by Vaughan Williams:

So many artists are conquered by life and its realities. Money making, marriage, family cares, all the practical things of life are too much for them, and as artists they succumb and the creative impulse shrivels and dies. But to Holst the interests, responsibilities and realities of life are not a hindrance but a stimulus—they are very stuff out of which he has knit his art, the soil on which it flourishes . . . Life and art are to Holst not the enemies but the complements of each other, and as time goes on and his life gets busier and more varied, his artistic production becomes larger and finer, his style more mature, pronounced and individual.\textsuperscript{73}

Vaughan Williams’s thoughts concerning Holst’s beliefs on the relationship between life and art are strongly reminiscent of the beliefs of Morris discussed in the

\textsuperscript{71} Vaughan Williams, “Gustav Holst,” 181-2.
\textsuperscript{73} Vaughan Williams, “Gustav Holst,” 185.
previous chapter. Art is not created in a vacuum; the most captivating art emerges from the beauty of life itself.

I now turn to a discussion of four of Holst’s works: “Elegy” from *Symphony in F: The Cotswolds* (1900), *The Mystic Trumpeter* (1904, revised 1912), *A Dirge for Two Veterans* (1914), and *Hammersmith* (1930). These compositions span the full breadth of Holst’s career. While Holst composed the former three works in the two decades after Morris’s death, he was not commissioned to write *Hammersmith* until just four years before his own. Moreover, these works span the large-scale genres, and include an orchestral symphonic work, a work for soprano and orchestra, a piece for an all male choir, and a work for symphonic band. Holst’s admiration for the style of early English composers demands to be read in light of English socialist thought. By the same token, the use of folk song conveys socialist ideals: “although Holst never collected folk songs himself, he was very familiar with them through his friendship with Ralph Vaughan Williams and other collectors.”74 Here, however, I intend to focus primarily on the stylistic features by which Holst displays the inequality that pervades a capitalist world and also the unity that follows a socialist revolution.

It seems fair to begin with Holst’s “Elegy” from *The Cotswolds*, as this work is not only the oldest of the four, but also contains a direct link to Morris. “Elegy” was in fact written in memoriam of Morris. Holst’s daughter notes that the symphony as a whole “was meant to express [Holst’s] deep love of the Cotswold hills,” and indeed

this movement seems the most passionate. Paul Harrington writes that the movement "indicates the size of the debt that Holst felt he owed to Morris. This slow movement rises far above the range and achievement of the rest of Holst’s music of the 1890s by sheer force of conviction." Harrington seems to imply that Holst put more effort than usual into a movement intended to pay homage to Morris, or at least that the challenge he had set himself pushed him toward an extraordinary achievement.

The movement contains a number of strikingly relevant features considering questions of inequality. In addition to the simple flowing main dotted rhythmic motive, the chromatic counter-melody captures the attention of the listener (Figure 1). Despite the line’s moments of descent, it nonetheless conveys an overall spirit of ascension, foreshadowing similar moments in two better-known works of later decades, Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* and Vaughan Williams’s *The Lark Ascending*. Both of these works could easily be called transcendent, and this figure in Holst’s “Elegy”—and perhaps the movement as a whole—could be described similarly. Considering the work’s dedicatee and communicative intent, one might be forgiven for hearing a musical rendering of the ascension of Morris’s spirit. Yet one could also read this passage as the upward movement of a capitalist world towards a socialist utopia reminiscent of Morris’s *Nowhere*—as Harrington seems implicitly to have done.

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76 Harrington, “Holst and Vaughan Williams,” 117.
This interpretation would help explain another unusual passage in the movement. Approximately half way through the piece, a striking moment of polyrhythm occurs across the various parts (Figure 2). On one level, the disjunct triplet figures of the upper strings battle against the eighth notes in the violas, celli, basses, and bassoons. Simultaneously, however, the tied notes in the upper winds and horns create tension with the strings. Finally, at the change to 3/4 (m. 70) order is seemingly restored. Though this moment of metric discord is not the only one in the movement, it is certainly the most startling, portraying in easily audible terms transition from chaos to order. Composed only a few years after Morris’s death and during a time when Holst apparently still held a connection with the Hammersmith Socialist Society, the music here seems to engage on its own terms with the fundamental insights of socialist thought.
Figure 2: Polyrhythm in "Elegy"
Before turning to *The Mystic Trumpeter* and *A Dirge for Two Veterans*, a short digression is necessary to discuss the significance of Walt Whitman for English socialist thought. (This discussion is relevant to Chapter 3 as well, since Vaughan Williams also called upon Whitman’s literature.) Whitman’s forthright homoeroticism seems not to have interested either Holst or Vaughan Williams, though certainly many British figures were fascinated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by this dimension of the poet’s work. Instead, both composers searched for texts that conveyed a sense of spirituality without endorsing any one religious tradition:

During the crises of faith that beset the Victorian and Edwardian thinkers, composers searched for alternatives to biblical texts that yet would express both the spiritual restlessness and “evolutionary” optimism of their ties. Vaughan Williams and Holst, both political radicals and agnostics, were looking for symbolic and mystical poetry that was resonant and new, free from the taint of a Christianity that seemed outmoded and intellectually compromised. In Whitman they found a poet at once democratic, mystical and “evolutionary.”[^77]

Whitman’s poetry lent itself to the depiction of a socialist utopian society. For this reason, Whitman was also read at English socialist meetings, including those at Hammersmith.[^78]

Holst’s *The Mystic Trumpeter* calls upon the words of Whitman, including a setting of the poem “From noon to Starry Night” from *Leaves of Grass*. While the entire poem seems to hint at a desire for a more ideal society, one particular stanza emphasizes that point:

Now trumpeter for they close,
Vouchsafe a higher strain than any yet,
Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,
Give me for once its prophecy and joy.\textsuperscript{79}

It is instructive to ponder the kinship that a disciple of Morris would have felt with these words; Holst’s setting of passage makes the connection explicit. Other than the voice, the most active line is found in the harp, before (on the word “joy,”) the rest of the orchestra enters to assist in a powerful, if not entirely seamless, transition to the tonic chord of C major (Figure 3). Here the musical forces come together as a unified society moving towards a more perfect future. The harmonic irregularities strengthen the impression suggesting that a move towards a utopian socialist society would not come without a struggle.

The end of the work lends itself to a similar interpretation. In the final stanza, the soprano sings the line “Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love!” Just prior to the first iteration of the word “joy,” the strings, including the harp, move towards a resolution in figures involving both sixteenth-notes and triplets. The strings, meanwhile, are instructed to play using mutes, although a fortissimo dynamic is indicated, creating a harsh yet fantastical and subdued color. Finally, on the word “freedom,” the music modulates from B major to C major, the key of resolution in the previously mentioned portion of the piece. Just as striking as this tonal shift is the dynamic change to piano, the dynamic marking that lasts until the end of the piece. This change suggests a triumphant change in society, albeit one that leads to a

\textsuperscript{79} Gustav Holst, \textit{The Mystic Trumpeter} (London: Novello, 1989).
tranquil result: a socialist utopia. One recalls here his daughter’s comment that, up until the point of its composition, *The Mystic Trumpeter* “was his nearest approach to an expression of what he wanted to say.”

![Figure 3](image)  

**Figure 3**: Moment of resolution in *The Mystic Trumpeter*

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Holst again used the poetry of Whitman in *A Dirge for Two Veterans*. The poem of the same name, printed in 1865, reflects on the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{81} Imogen Holst pins down the underlying inspiration, observing that “the first thing [Holst] wrote during [World War I] was the *Dirge for Two Veterans* . . . Many people have taken it for granted that *Mars* was inspired by the war, knowing that it dates from 1914. But it was the *Dirge* that was to be his comment on that year of catastrophe.”\textsuperscript{82} The work thus represents an attempt by Holst to capture the spirit of the months leading up to the outbreak of war. It is not difficult to see, however, that the work’s political ramifications go beyond this interpretation.

Overall, the work is rather modest and lasts less than ten minutes even taken at the slowest tempo. Scored for a TTBB choir, brass, and percussion, the music evokes the sounds of the military. The setting of the text is nearly universally syllabic and the voice parts are almost persistently homorhythmic. Yet despite the work’s overt simplicity, it does contain one unusual complicating element. Periodically throughout the piece, the upper brass will switch from playing in 4/4 to 12/8 (Figure 4). When this occurs, it creates occasional moments of polyrhythm. As in the case of the “Elegy” found in the *The Cotswolds*, these moments of metrical friction seem reasonably contextualized as an expression of his ongoing concerns with social inequality, especially given the manner in which they resolve themselves. For twenty-one measures of the work, the upper brass disappears, only

\textsuperscript{82} Imogen Holst, *A Biography*, 45.
to return while muted five measures before the end and after the voices have sung their last word. While the lack of upper brass in the trumpet certainly adds to the solemn nature of the poem’s end, in a more specific sense it seems, as at the end of *The Mystic Trumpeter*, to suggest that a kind of peace has been achieved. The uneasy moments of polyrhythm created by the 12/8 have dissipated now that the battle—i.e., the social revolution—has been completed.

![Figure 4: Polyrhythm on the word “city” in *A Dirge for Two Veterans*](image)

Nearly two decades after *A Dirge for Two Veterans*, Holst composed *Hammersmith* for symphonic band. Jon Mitchell boldly describes *Hammersmith* as “a masterpiece of twentieth-century counterpoint and orchestration, [... Holst’s] most formidable work for the military band medium.”¹⁸³ Imogen had reached the same conclusion in her biography writing that *Hammersmith* is “undoubtedly to be

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reckoned among his greatest works."\textsuperscript{84} Such praise would have pleased Holst, considering he labored over the piece for several years before finally allowing its performance.\textsuperscript{85} Perhaps he recognized that he was nearing the end of his life and wanted to make one of his final works count; certainly from the beginning of the compositional process, he felt an especially deep personal investment in it.

In her biography of Morris, Fiona MacCarthy has suggested in passing that \textit{Hammersmith} shows a direct relationship to Holst's earlier years as a socialist activist.\textsuperscript{86} Regrettably, MacCarthy does not elaborate or defend this argument, but despite this oversight, the claim seems plausible if one looks to both the work itself and the facts surrounding its composition. Holst obviously composed \textit{Hammersmith} at least with the town Hammersmith itself in mind, if not specifically the socialist group by the same name. According to Holst's daughter,

\begin{quote}
The mood out of which [\textit{Hammersmith}] had grown was a mood that had haunted him for nearly forty years: during his solitary walks in Hammersmith he had always been aware of the aloofness of the quiet river, unhurried and unconcerned, while just round the corner there was the noise and hustle and exuberant vulgarity of the cockney crowd, pushing and shoving and seating and searing and shrieking and guffawing its good humored way.
\end{quote}

At the very least then, the work represents the detachment between the peaceful River Thames and the hustle and bustle of the city life.

\textsuperscript{84} Imogen Holst, \textit{A Biography}, 16.
\textsuperscript{85} Mitchell, \textit{From Kneller Hall}, 122.
Yet alongside this juxtaposition is one that bears equal significance. Holst also appears to have been disconcerted by the level of inequality he found in the city:

The aspect of the district [of Hammersmith] which made the deepest impression on [Holst] was the element of dramatic contrast everywhere in evidence. Here 125,000 inhabitants are packed into an area of 3.6 miles. Some of the live in middle-class ‘respectability’ in quiet residential streets to the north; the rest live among the poverty and noise of the shipyards, lead mills, oil mills, distilleries, motor works, shops, pubs, and wharves to the south along the bank of the river Thames.  

Holst thus saw the distinction between nature and industrialization in Hammersmith, but the prevalence of social inequality. That Hammersmith should be understood in light of social equality is even hinted at by Holst in the work’s dedication to “the author of ‘The Water Gypsies,” a tale of a Hammersmith woman’s attraction to two men of opposite social classes.  

The music itself is rather complex and a complete analysis of it rests beyond this scope of this study. However, some portions of the work and its general form clearly lend themselves to analysis in terms of inequality. The work begins with a wave-like procession of half-notes in the tubas and baritone. This motive continues, albeit in minor variations, until the end of the “Prelude” of the work. The following “Scherzo,” in contrast, is quick, hustled, and at times confusing. While the “Prelude” undoubtedly represents the river and perhaps a simpler, more equal society, the “Scherzo” conveys the loud and complicated city. For example, as in the previous

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88 Ibid.
works, moments of prominent polyrhythm seem to suggest disagreement analogous to that manifested among the social classes (Figure 5). By the end of the piece, the attention has once again turned to the material of the “Prelude.” In stark contrast to the work’s earlier sections, the piece ends quietly and tranquilly, with the low brass sounding the final notes in hushed tones. Such an ending hints at a belief that simpler and pastoral elements will one day win out over the bombastic features of the city and its inherent social disparity. In this sense, *Hammersmith* may be Holst’s final statement on the socialist beliefs instilled in him nearly four decades earlier by William Morris and the Hammersmith Socialist Society.
Other than perhaps *The Planets* and a few pedagogical works, the music of Gustav Holst has often been pushed aside to the margins of twentieth century music history. However, in these lesser-known works, there rests an intriguing story of a composer inspired by a radical thinker to communicate his social views through music. In the works discussed in this chapter, and perhaps others as well, Holst captured on the inequality of the society in which he lived and expressed his desire for the rise of a socialist utopia.
Chapter 3

Ralph Vaughan Williams

“He was a socialist, as you know.” This is how Ralph Vaughan Williams’s second wife, Ursula, described her husband to Ken Russell, director of a short documentary about the composer. While Russell may have been familiar with Vaughan Williams’s political leanings, the same cannot be said for the majority of musicologists. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the socialist aspirations of important strands in the folksong movement, and of Vaughan Williams in particular, have often been obscured completely. This has made it possible for Vaughan Williams to be cast at times as a cozy Establishment figure playing opposite the left-wing young bloods of Tippet and Britten in the 1930s, and then of a younger generation of composers, such as those of the ‘Manchester School’, in the 1950s.

Vaughan Williams’s music has traditionally been characterized, arguably correctly, as conservative, mostly due to his relatively tonal method of composition. Indeed, his rebellion against the atonal interests of his continental contemporaries complemented the agitation he felt toward his affluent background. The composer was “restless: not forced by lack of money to have a regular job like most of his friends, he felt guilty about having all his time for himself and feared he was not using it fully.” This resentment Vaughan Williams held towards his affluence contributed to his lifelong socialist tendencies, and also his admiration for William

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91 Vaughan Williams was a member of both the Wedgewood and Darwin families.
Morris. The goal of this chapter is thus not to extrapolate examples of folk song or from Vaughan Williams's music; that has been done elsewhere. Here, the aim is to show that such stylistic features were included as a result of Morris’s influence on the composer.

Vaughan Williams's connection to William Morris was perhaps less direct than that of Holst's, but was nonetheless significant. Holst actively worked with Morris, but Vaughan Williams was just as ardent a disciple of the visionary. In many regards, specifically those relating to the nostalgic and the pastoral, the ideologies of Morris and the seminal figure of the English Musical Renaissance overlapped. As Rob Young has observed, "Vaughan Williams . . . envisioned exactly what Morris had achieved in News from Nowhere: a future for British music woven with the rich threads from its past." William Morris believed that the answers to the problems of the present, as well as those of the future, resided in the annals of history. Likewise, Vaughan Williams was "an agnostic, a questioner; he believed in the strength of national roots and he looked to the past in order to venture into the future."

Clearly Vaughan Williams and Morris shared a passion for the romanticized notions of England’s history. So while Holst only “occasionally brought Vaughan Williams to Kelmscott House,” the meeting place of Morris and his circle, it would

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93 Rob Young, Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain’s Visionary Music (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 76.
seem that was enough interaction to influence the young composer. Both Morris and Vaughan Williams would scoff at any comparison to Marx; their fight did not involve class struggle. Instead, they envisioned an idealized society based on restoration of a mythical past in which every man and woman was considered valuable. This idea is reflected in Vaughan Williams's statement “that all right-minded people are communists, as far as the word means that everything should be done for the common good.”

Certainly one can read Morris's ideals between the lines of Vaughan Williams's writing on music:

> We are apt to look on art and on music especially as a commodity and a luxury commodity at that; but music is something more—it is a spiritual necessity. The art of music above all the other arts is the expression of the soul of a nation, and by a nation I mean not necessarily aggregations of people, artificially divided from each other by political frontiers or economic barriers. What I mean is any community of people who are spiritually bound together by language, environment, history, and common ideals and, above all, a continuity with the past.

Vaughan Williams, however, seemed attracted to the Elizabethan era more than any other moment in the past. To Vaughan Williams, and to those of many others of the time, the Elizabethan era represented purity, equality, and near-utopian ideals—the brightest spot in England's past.

Within an edited collection of his writings, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, the composer commented specifically on his love of Elizabethan music. Praising its longevity, Vaughan Williams stated that “Elizabethan music is still a living force both

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95 Young, *Electric Eden*, 56.
96 Quoted in Harrington, “Holst and Vaughan Williams,” 125.
for today and tomorrow, because it means something to us still, both for its own sake and for what it presages for us both for the present and for the future.”

To Vaughan Williams, Elizabethan music’s freedom from superfluous gestures and cosmopolitan conceits made it natural and pure. Additionally, Vaughan Williams emphasized the Elizabethans’ use of the singing voice. The composer writes, “Here it is that we can learn from the Elizabethans. They knew nothing of international celebrities or of world movements in art, but wherever four or five people gathered together they wished to make music on those instruments which heaven had provided for them—their own natural voices.”

*Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910) captures Vaughan Williams’s fascination with Elizabethan music more so than any of his other compositions, at least those predating the Great War. In an attempt to recall Tallis’s choral style, despite being composed for two string orchestras, the work manifests a distinctly choral character. Wilfred Mellers calls “the harmonic dislocations . . . humanly corporeal and dramatic” and describes music played by Orchestra II as a “choir of slightly distraught angels.” In this sense, the piece reflects one of Vaughan Williams’s primary fascinations with Elizabethan music.

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Of course, Fantasia contains a much more direct reference to the Elizabethan era than a choral-like tune: the use of a Phrygian melody by Thomas Tallis (Figure 6). This modal tune is set by Vaughan Williams using a lush string texture and polyphony. As Young writes, “Tallis is the jewel in the crown of Elizabethan choral composers, whose extravagant, soaring polyphonic flights find their echo down the centuries in Vaughan Williams’s opulent string-writing.” Young’s flowery analysis nonetheless captures the idiosyncratic nature. An early reviewer of the work, Fuller Maitland, observed that, “throughout its course one is never quite sure whether one

101 Young, Electric Eden, 76.
is listening to something very old or very new.”¹⁰² Modern critics have even suggested uncertainty as to the piece’s historical origins, though the sources seem clear.¹⁰³ Like Morris, Vaughan Williams calls upon an idyllic Elizabethan atmosphere for political reasons.

Elizabethan architecture has a role as well. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, “English taste, whether for domestic building or for show, had become all but synonymous with the ‘Tudor.’”¹⁰⁴ For contemporary listeners, Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia* often evoked images of buildings from England's past:

Tallis's melody . . . is utilitarian music and may be related to the architectural principle of the Normans, to which Tallis was accustomed at Waltham Abbey. By repletion Vaughan Williams builds, as it were, an arcade . . . His habit of altering the basic material by sudden and mystical changes of tonality shows a similar fascination to that which is experienced as the eye catches their arch lit by the high light of the sun, that in one shadow, that in another, a fourth softened by light filtered through *grisaille* . . . The atmosphere of the cathedral is certainly felt within the music.¹⁰⁵

Even if one reads Young’s interpretation of Tallis's music as an exaggeration, the overall premise of his idea seems arguable. However, Young was not alone in his interpretation. Ursula wrote in her biography of her husband that “It seemed that his early love for architecture and his historical knowledge were so deeply assimilated that they were translated and absorbed into the texture and line of the

¹⁰² Quoted in Poole, “Vaughan Williams, Tallis, and the Phantasy Principle,” 51.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Poole, “Vaughan Williams, Tallis, and the Phantasy Principle,” 52.
music.” In this sense then, Vaughan Williams’s piece has not only a sonic connection to the music of England’s past, but a visual one as well.

While Vaughan Williams found his principal inspiration in the third of nine psalm tunes composed by Tallis in 1567, Fantasia also draws on folk music, another tool through which the composer expressed his passion for socialist ideals. To Vaughan Williams, melodies sung in church share a natural connection to England’s folk music tradition. In National Music, the composer writes,

You will notice that it is in the beginnings and endings of the tunes that we find most likeness to the church melody. This is just what we should expect. The church was trying to attract people to its new religion. If you want to give people something new, start with what they are accustomed to, then having startled them with your new notions, let them down gently at the end with the idea that what you had said is not so very new after all.

In Vaughan Williams’s mind, church music evolved out of folk music, which begins to explain why as a lifelong agnostic, Vaughan Williams nonetheless felt comfortable quoting traditional religious tunes and even edited the English Hymnal.

While it has become a cliché to equate Vaughan Williams with the promotion of folk song, one should realize that, as Julian Onderdonk notes, his “collecting work was inconsistent, and his views of folksong often contradictory.” Of course, some of the discrepancies may have been the result of a changing of opinion over Vaughan Williams’s famously long life. What is certain is that his discovery of folk music

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106 Ursula Vaughan Williams, R.V.W., 88.
108 Vaughan Williams, National Music, 78.
while studying at the Royal College of Music impacted his compositional process enormously. In the words of Ursula, he found folk song “immensely liberating.”\textsuperscript{110}

On one hand, Vaughan William’s affection for folk song could be attributed to his belief in its potential as a source of inspiration not only to himself, but to all English composers. The composer lamented that

\begin{quote}
Art for art’s sake has never flourished in England. We are often called inartistic because our art is unconscious. Our drama and poetry, like our laws and our constitution, have evolved by accident while we were thought we were doing something else, and so it will be with music. The composer must not shut himself up and think about art, \textit{he must live with his fellows and make his art and expression of the whole life of the community}—if we seek for art we shall not find it.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

While Vaughan William’s did not openly scorn cosmopolitan composers, he nonetheless insisted that an English composer’s success lay in his pursuit of the music of the rural and working peoples. A student of Ravel, it would have been hypocritical for Vaughan Williams to refuse continental influence or training. However, while studying the methods of non-English composers could prove beneficial, it was not essential. As the composer observed somewhat romantically, “Integration and love. These are the two key words. The composer must love the tunes of his own country and they must become a part of himself.”\textsuperscript{112} With very few exceptions—the Fourth Symphony, for example—Vaughan Williams took his own advice over his lengthy career.

\textsuperscript{110} Ursula Vaughan Williams, \textit{R.V.W.}, 100.
\textsuperscript{111} Quoted in Ibid., 101-2, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{112} Vaughan Williams, \textit{National Music}, 27.
Vaughan Williams thus promoted folk song as a source of inspiration for all English composers, even as it also allowed him to write music containing a clear connection to the past, the common man, and the socialist ideals of Morris. It was “an art that was drawn directly from the very poor, that contained the best of the common people, [and] had an inevitable appeal for anyone touched by the ideas of Morris.” Along with other folk song collectors such as Cecil Sharp, Vaughan Williams saw that repertoire as a pure relic of the ideal past of which Morris and his followers spoke. Indeed, modern day folk song collectors have criticized the reverence of folk song made by collectors of Vaughan William's era:

Folklorists assert that the collectors’ promotion of folksong constitutes what historians have called an ‘invented tradition’—a bid to invest authenticity and authority in revived or newly minted cultural forms by means of dubious appeals to antiquity, as a means of confronting perceived problems in the social order. One may argue, then, that the motivation of Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries in cataloguing folks songs was based in political ideology as much as a desire for a certain musical aesthetic.

Vaughan Williams might not have disputed the point. In his own writings, he suggested that his interest in folk song stemmed partially from their connection to the working and rural classes. Quoting the scholar Gilbert Murray and audaciously comparing folk songs to the Bible and the writings of Homer, the composer claimed that they

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113 Harrington, “Holst and Vaughan Williams,” 114.
have behind them not the imagination of one great poet, but the accumulated emotion, one may almost say, of the many successive generations who have read and learned and themselves afresh re-created the old majesty and loveliness . . . There is in them, as it were, the spiritual life-blood of a people.115

One might observe that as skeptic with respect to organized religion, Vaughan Williams found some degree of spiritual fulfillment in the songs of rural people.116 However, the key point remains that, whatever the role of spirituality, Vaughan Williams saw the folk songs as reflective of a deep cultural history.

Even more important to Vaughan Williams was folk song’s link to the common man. Indeed, he recognized this relationship to such a strong degree that he was known to question publicly “how folksong could become the basis of an English school of art music, when none of the art-music composers came from the peasant class and could not therefore claim folk music as their own.”117 Of course, this concern did not seem to stop him from attempting just that kind of evolution. One must then wonder about the motivation for such a decision. Certainly Vaughan Williams believed in the political ramifications of folk song, specifically its innate activism against his own class: “implicitly at times, explicitly at others, the folksong movement championed the music of the rural working class against the decadent tastes and products of the upper and upper-middle classes—and drew some hostility on that account.”118 One would not want to argue, considering his compositional output, that Vaughan Williams did not also enjoy the aesthetic nature

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115 Vaughan Williams, National Music, 23.
116 For more on the spiritual elements in Vaughan Williams’s compositions, see Byron Adams’s article in Vaughan Williams Studies.
118 Ibid., 13.
of folk song, but it would be equally preposterous to ignore his awareness of their social and political connotations.

Those who championed folk songs did not seek a Marxist revolution that would turn the social structure of England on its head. “The broader message, however, was one of social regeneration and cohesion.”¹¹⁹ This thought dovetails perfectly in line with the agenda of Morris. Folk song, as “an art that drawn directly from the very poor, that contained the very best of the common people, had an inevitable appeal for anyone touched by the ideas of Morris.”¹²⁰ Even one of the composer’s last works (in prose or music), The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs, “represents a respectful handshake between the last surviving link to the Morris generation and the modern, proselytizing Marxist generation that followed.”¹²¹

One could look to several pieces as an example of Vaughan Williams’s employment of folk song. A Sea Symphony, one of the composer’s most popular pieces, seems an effective test case. The grand nature of Vaughan Williams’s first and only choral symphony may not seem to correlate with the nature of folk song and especially the humility of the common man. Yet one could argue that the more grandiose aspects of the piece amplify the statement. Vaughan Williams’s inclusion of two folk tunes in A Sea Symphony is an integral element of the work’s expressiveness.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
¹²¹ Young, Electric Eden, 129.
Michael Kennedy emphasizes the importance of the folk tune in the third movement of the piece, writing that "the sensation of a stormy sea is exhilaratingly communicated [with] . . . whirling chromatic scales for the orchestra, [and] with the folk song “The Golden Vanity’ quoted in the woodwind.” Of course, given the nautical theme of the work, Vaughan Williams’s interest in this folk song seems predictable. Moreover, Vaughan Williams may simply have enjoyed the melody. But a closer reading of the political implications reveals deeper levels of meaning.

The basic thematic content—the seas—had specific connotations for Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries, relating to struggle and adversity. “Whereas the songs on rural life and work are mostly positive and do not dwell on the poverty and the unpleasant realities of everyday life, many songs of the sea take a much more realistic view and do not shrink from the hardships involved.” Any choice of a sea-related song would thus highlight the problems of current society rather than praise the virtues of one restored along the lines imagined by Morris.

Furthermore, one can interpret “The Golden Vanity” as an allegory of the common man suffering under the foot of the upper class in a capitalist society. In Vaughan Williams’s chosen version of the tune, a young cabin boy offers to destroy a nearby enemy ship for the captain. In return, the captain promises him riches as well his daughter’s hand in marriage. After the boy successfully puts holes in the

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124 Various versions of “The Golden Vanity” exist throughout Europe and North America, sometimes with different title, such as “The Sweet Trinity” or “The Golden Willow Tree.” However, it seems plausible that when writing *A Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams had in mind the version he later recorded in *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*. 
enemy ship to sink it, he swims back to his own ship, but the captain refuses to let him back on board. Instead, the captain states, "I will not take you up," and then, "I will shoot you, I will kill you, I will send you with the tide and I'll sink you in the Lowlands." While the boy eventually convinces the other members of the crew to help him back onto the ship, it is too late and the boy dies on the deck. The captain used the cabin boy before disposing of him, just as a capitalist society uses the working man without adequately rewarding him for his deeds.

**THE GOLDEN VANITY**

![The Golden Vanity sheet music](image)

*Figure 7: “The Golden Vanity”*

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125 Ibid.
Another important factor in reading *A Sea Symphony* is Vaughan Williams’s use of texts by Walt Whitman. Like Holst, Vaughan Williams took a keen interest in the nineteenth-century American poet. According to Ursula Vaughan Williams, another, and very different, kind of writer was beginning to fill his mind. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, in several editions, from a large volume to a selection small enough for a pocket, was [Vaughan Williams’s] constant companion. It was full of fresh thoughts, and the idea of a big choral work about the sea—the sea itself and the sea of time, infinity, and mankind, was beginning to take shape in many small notebooks.\(^{126}\)

As his second wife suggests, Whitman’s text allowed Vaughan Williams to promote his ideas of a unified society based on the ideas of Morris. Adams notes that “Vaughan Williams arranges his selections of *Leaves of Grass* so that the sea stands, rather predictably, for the evolution of the individual soul and, by extension, all humanity, toward a transcendent unity.”\(^{127}\) Obviously, with this goal in mind, Vaughan Williams did not use some of the more sexually explicit passages of *Leaves of Grass*, so as not to distract from his political message.

Vaughan Williams’s obsession with Whitman, one that the composer himself proudly admitted he “never got over,” did not begin and end with *A Sea Symphony*.\(^{128}\) Another large-scale choral work, *Toward the Unknown Region*, uses the words of Whitman and was composed not long after Vaughan Williams would have been exposed to the ideas of Morris. Here Vaughan Williams set the entirety of Whitman’s work, the poem “Darest Thou Now, O Soul,” though again he steered clear of Whitman’s homoeroticism and indeed may thereby have missed the central

\(^{126}\) Ursula Vaughan Williams, 65, emphasis added.

\(^{127}\) Byron Adams, “‘No Armpits, Please, We’re British,’” 35.

\(^{128}\) Ibid, 25.
message. Adams, for example, finds that Vaughan Williams “vitiates the poetry with the music. The setting utterly misses Whitman’s conception of death as a ‘bursting forth,’ a delirious species of cosmic orgasm.”

On the other hand, a comfortably non-sexual, political theme becomes clear towards the end of the work in the composer’s setting of the line “then we burst forth.” Michael Kennedy, comparing the motivic material at this point with a similar moment in Vaughan Williams’s earlier work, House of Life, suggests that “there is a symbolic significance here in the similarity of musical image presenting itself in Vaughan Williams’s mind when he contemplated the saints resting from their labors . . . and the bursting forth to Whitman’s ‘Joy, O fruit of all,’ the fulfilment of the soul.” Toward the Unknown Region links directly back to an earlier piece that directly comments on individuals’ rest from work and also Vaughan Williams’s personal belief that Whitman was the voice of the “divine average.”

While Kennedy’s analysis seems plausible, one could contrive another interpretation. Like Kennedy’s reading, this one also points towards socialist thought; the difference between the two is rather nuanced. Just before the initial complete statement of “Then we burst forth,” the brass sounds a fanfare like figure reminiscent of a military’s call to arms (Figure 8). Here, both the text and music suggest an impending social revolution, a “bursting forth” of the working class. “Joy” is just achieved after the revolution within a utopian realm.

129 Ibid, 34.
131 Vaughan Williams, National Music, 38.
Vaughan Williams’s advocacy for the rest of the working class, and for a more unified society in terms of distribution of labor, matches certain musical characteristics of the piece as well. An early reviewer of the piece, Herbert Thompson of the *Yorkshire Post*, commented after its premiere in 1907 that it was a “very striking work, original, and [showed] a homogeneity that very little of the British school reveals.” The unity of the piece thus reflected the congruent society that Vaughan Williams hoped would emerge. If to its first audiences *Toward the Unknown Region*’s “choral style . . . in its breadth and directness, was a reminder of the days of Purcell,” it used this musical connection to the past to point once again toward Morris’s ideals.

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