

could benefit the Universal Church on her human side, at the least for the commending of her to our fellow-countrymen, is a bigger element of what English people can give, precisely as English. Have those of us who are English (few enough, I know) all done all we might to make our own contribution as English men and women? If we had—even in a relatively subordinate matter like vocabulary—perhaps our neighbours would find the approaches to faith somewhat less hard, discouraging and frightening than they do.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS AND THE ENGLISH TRADITION

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IT is curious how the leadership of the musical world has passed from one country to another. This is not always merely the result of fashion or of social causes: it really does appear that the muses are migratory. The commanding influence exerted by any country at one time has tended to swamp or, to change the metaphor, at least obscure the native art of others. One has only to think of the tremendous impact of Italian, and later of German, music in this country to realize this. So complete and far-reaching has the predominance been on occasion that an appearance of a truly international musical style has been given. This was never more clearly true than in the eighteenth century, when the process was aided by a social and aristocratic internationalism. Nevertheless, every nation has a characteristic musical tradition of its own, even though the tradition may sometimes only be traced with difficulty, being continued by a host of minor, forgotten composers. Thus, even in eighteenth-century England, which is popularly regarded as a *locus classicus* of a trough in a musical tradition, there were composers such as Boyce who spoke in unmistakably English accents.

What it is that causes and perpetuates national characteristics is a matter for conjecture. Rousseau attributed it to the influence, *via* song, of language; but, though there may be some truth in this,

it is certainly an inadequate explanation. It is more important to give some account of what is meant by a national tradition, lest the cynic should suspect mere jingoism or an attempt to excuse second-rate music. Sometimes, it is true, it can only be described in generalities, conceived in terms of personal reaction. Frequently, however, it can be measured in technical terms: this is particularly true of folk-music, which develops uninterrupted and unhampered by the fashions and vicissitudes of the professional musical world. Folk-music indeed, as Vaughan Williams has often pointed out, is both proof and example of a national tradition, of a native care for music¹; but 'composed' music also often shows an extraordinary persistence of technical processes or stylistic features, even if nothing less definite be allowed.

Both in folk-music and (until comparatively recently in the history of music) composed music, national characteristics were not deliberately cultivated. England, for example, has never fostered any kind of musical protectionism: even its greatest composers have absorbed quantities of foreign influence. That these men preserved their own essential qualities with integrity, expressed their own native traditions, was not a matter of conscious effort or theoretical conviction. Purcell, for example, was prepared to admit in the Preface of *Dioclesian* that music in England was in a backward state and was 'now learning *Italian*, which is its best master': an implication, but certainly no defence, of an English style.

The emergence of a deliberate and doctrinaire nationalism belongs to the nineteenth century, and was frequently associated with popular political movements. From the earliest stages of the nationalist movement in music, which were to be found in Russia, composers turned to folk-song both as a gesture and because folk-song represented most clearly—sometimes, indeed, *alone* represented a native musical tradition upon which they could build. The folk-song movement in England only caught on rather late. For although there were isolated collectors like John Broadwood as early as the eighteen-forties, it was not until the turn of the century that a methodical, large-scale and scientific

1. 'If we have no folk-songs or none of any musical value, does it not follow that there is no music inborn in the nation? What, then, will be the use of all our institutions and associations for performing, teaching and fostering an art the very germs of which are not part of our nature?'—Quoted in *Vaughan Williams* by Percy M. Young. (London, 1953.)

collection of folk-songs was undertaken by people like Baring-Gould, Lucy Broadwood, Fuller Maitland, Frank Kidson, Cecil Sharp and Vaughan Williams himself. Nor has the folk-song movement in this country been able to avoid a suggestion of artificiality for, in marked contrast to the Russian folk-song to which composers like Glinka and Borodin turned, English folk-song in the twentieth century is not a vigorous, living tradition. As Constance Lambert pointed out in *Music Ho!*, 'English folk-songs have for the average twentieth-century Englishman none of the evocative significance that the folk-songs of Russia had for the average nineteenth-century Russian. The Petrograd coachmen would have been found singing tunes of the type that occur quite naturally in *Boris*, but the London bus conductor is not to be found singing the type of tune that occurs in *Hugh the Drover*; if he sings at all he is probably singing a snatch of "Love is the Sweetest Thing", in an unconvincing though sickening imitation of the American accent.'

Lambert seems to have drawn from this the erroneous conclusion that folk-song cannot provide a basis or an inspiration for a genuine style of English composition. Curiously enough, it was precisely because of the close liaison between music and real life (on which Vaughan Williams has always insisted) which folk-song represented, that it so appealed to him and became a 'touchstone of artistic sincerity' as Mr Howes puts it in his new book.² No composer has identified himself more closely with his contemporaries than Vaughan Williams (in his compositions for particular occasions, his readiness to explore new media, his keen interest in all forms of music-making, and spiritually in works like the Sixth Symphony), so that it is certain that to him folk-song is no mere escapist's delusion. 'The evolution of the English folk-song by itself has ceased, but its spirit can continue to grow and flourish at the hands of our native composers.'³

This quotation hints at the answer to a more serious objection to the use of folk-song, which is that a folk-song is already a complete organism in itself, and one which does not lend itself to the extension or development necessary for an extended composition. As Lambert put it in a now famous aphorism, 'The whole trouble with a folk-song is that once you have played it through there is

2. *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, by Frank Howes. (Oxford University Press; 25s.)

3. Quoted in Young, *op. cit.*

nothing much that you can do except play it over again and play it rather louder.' The remarkable thing about Vaughan Williams is not that he has disproved this dictum, but the way in which he has shown its irrelevance. For his greatest works show how he has *absorbed* folk-song into his personal style rather than 'used' it⁴: for him, as for Bartok, folk-song was the beginning not the end. There are, for example, virtually no quotations from folk-song in the symphonies, though its spirit is never far absent. Thus Dr Young describes the epilogue of the Sixth Symphony as 'the culmination of a lifetime of experience [which] must be seen as continuous with the vision which saw beyond the confined range of folk-song the initial urge which demands the creation of folk-song and folk-poetry'.

Important though the influence of folk-song has been on Vaughan Williams' style, it could be over-stressed, not only because there have been other powerful sources of inspiration but because it is above all a personal, mature style, and not an imitation or pastiche.⁵ Nor does Vaughan Williams suggest that English composers should base their works on folk-songs, or even try to cultivate a 'folk-song idiom'. 'To write rhapsodies on folk-tunes is a very good exercise for the composer, but to garnish our ordinary English hotch-potch of every modern composer from Brahms to Debussy with a few English folk-tunes by way of ornament will not make a national style.'⁶ What he does maintain is that, for better or worse, music which is spontaneous and has integrity *must be rooted* in native traditions. One can *learn* from foreign composers, as English composers including Vaughan Williams (who studied with Ravel) have always done, but an art which is solely concerned to imitate foreign models exactly is bogus. 'If an Englishman tries to pose as a Frenchman or a German, he will not only make a bad Englishman, he will also make a bad foreigner. . . . In art, as I suppose in every activity, the best results are obtained by developing one's natural faculties to the highest.'⁷ Nationality in music is thus seen in its proper perspective: not merely as something which arises from the cult of

4. This is not always true, however, and when folk-songs come consciously to the fore (as in *Hugh the Drover*) the sentiments have a peculiar unreality—which only Lambert could abuse adequately—not so far removed from Ye Olde Tea Shoppe variety.

5. cf. 'Vaughan Williams and Folk-song', by Elsie Payne in *The Music Review* of May, 1954.

6. Quoted in Young, *op. cit.*

7. Quoted in Young, *op. cit.*

folk-song, but as something which inevitably emerges from honesty and integrity of expression. In fact folk-song is not an essential of a recognisably national style as one can see from Elgar, Walton, Rubbra and other composers who are rarely if ever affected by folk-song.

Mr Howes' book is 'neither biographical nor critical but is wholly expository. Its method is that of conventional analysis, but its intention is in general to relate technical features to aesthetic effect. . . . This then, though it sounds rather pompous to apply to a book of glorified programme notes, is intended as a study in applied aesthetics.' The analyses are clear, sober and accurate, and, provided the reader understands the necessary smattering of technical terms and can read music examples, should prove an aid to the understanding and appreciation of the music. Its value would have been enhanced by a general chapter of assessment, though it might be objected that this would have been out of place in what is really a reference book. And yet, excellent though these analyses are, one is left reflecting how much greater the music is than the sum of its parts. There is a rapturous beauty in so much of Vaughan Williams' writing which analysis cannot comprehend, a profound mystical quality which words are powerless to express. For as with Bach or Beethoven, Vaughan Williams is not just a composer, a maker of musical tunes, but a great soul giving expression in sound. If St Thomas More had lived in the twentieth century and had written music it would have been like this.
