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Hearing Tolkien in Vaughan Williams?

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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to express her appreciation to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Originally from the opera *Sir John in Love* (1929) and later arranged by Ralph Greaves for flute, harp, and strings, Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Greensleeves* (1934), according to David Bratman (2010), is "one of the works that Tolkien might have accepted as orchestral film music for hobbits."¹ Although Tolkien regarded himself unskilled in music, claiming "I love music, but have no aptitude for it," he did show love for music: he described the cello as a "lovely and difficult instrument," stated that "anyone who can play a stringed instrument seems to me a wizard worthy of deep respect," and proclaimed music gave him "great pleasure and sometimes inspiration."² Tolkien's son Christopher might not consider the this proposal of film music, however, for he detests the idea of adapting his father's fantasy into movies—this act of "commercialisation," as he calls it, has in his eyes "reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of this creation [*The Lord of the Rings*] to nothing."³

Still, ever since Tolkien's fantasy novels have been turned into films, listeners and readers familiar with both Tolkien and Vaughan Williams have increasingly associated Tolkien's fantasies with Vaughan Williams' music. Bratman published his essay in 2010—seven years after the completion of *The Lord of the Rings* film series (2001–2003) and two years before *The Hobbit* film series (2012–2014) was released—and in the same year, Gregory Martin (2010) pointed out that Vaughan Williams and Tolkien shared similar missions: the former sought to reestablish a lost English musical voice while the latter aspired to resuscitate a distinctive mythology that belonged to the English.⁴ Three years later, Czech violinist Josef Špacek remarked, "When I first heard *The Lark Ascending* (1914) I thought to myself that it sounded just like *Lord of the Rings*."⁵ In 2020, music journalist Jari Kallio also described Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910) as "a musical embodiment of the spirit of J.R.R. Tolkien's magnum opus *The Lord of the Rings* (1937–55)."⁶

Peter Jackson's films seem to have more or less stimulated this phenomenon of connecting Tolkien's fantasies with Vaughan Williams's music; factors such as personal taste may perhaps also contribute to this association. But exploring Vaughan Williams' repertoire that listeners often relate to Tolkien in light of their similar artistic approach, intentions, and philosophies can reveal much more about the peculiar power of the composer's music, especially for those who are already familiar with Tolkien's fantasies, to summon the Middle-earth. This article first draws attention to the two's common devotion to the idea of English consciousness—one that, in a spirit of Romantic nationalism, considers nation as not so much a state construct but a people who share a collective past and culture. This national consciousness eventually grew into a similar characteristic that distinguishes their works: the combination of ecclesiastical and folk materials, inspired by their absorption of folklore, church music, and biblical passages, with a mix of pastoral inclination indicative of their longing for restoration, largely engendered by their war experience. Such fantastic echoes further attest one appealing mark of Tolkien's storytelling is its reluctance to fully separate fantasy and reality, myth and memory, the spiritual and the secular, the transcendental and the historical, and the universal and the local—and that music, as Tolkien insists, has the power to sub-create.

English Consciousness

The idea of national consciousness permeates the works of Vaughan Williams and Tolkien. Music according to Vaughan Williams ought to reinforce national consciousness. Quoting

¹ Bratman, "Liquid Tolkien," 142.

² Carpenter, *Letters*, 172-73; 350.

³ See Rérolle, "Tolkien, l'anneau de la discorde."

⁴ Martin, "Music, Myth, and Literary Depth in the 'Land ohne Musik,'" 132.

⁵ See "Interview: Violinist Josef Špacek talks Tolkien."

⁶ See Kallio, "Perfect Vaughan Williams."

Hubert Parry, he asserts that “style is ultimately national.”⁷ By “national,” however, Vaughan Williams is speaking “not of the appeal of a work of art, but of its origin.”⁸ What makes a nation for the composer is not any political or socio-economic feature but a shared language and historical past that bind the people together:

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.⁹

This concept of “nation” could be traced all the way back to the writing of German philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried Herder, who maintained the nation is not a political entity but a collective identity defined by its language, culture, and folkore.¹⁰ Herder conceptualized the idea of *Volksgeist*, the spirit of the folk, as a manifestation of the people of a nation rather than a state. T.C.W. Blanning puts it this way,

[Herder]’s ideal state was decentralized and as invisible as possible, relying on the voluntary cooperation of its citizens... True value in any nation resided not with the elite’s classical culture... but with the common people, whose roots were firmly planted in native soil and history. Folk art, folk dancing, and folk songs were not to be despised for their roughness but to be treasured for their authenticity. They were the “archives of a nationality” or “the living voice of the nationalities, even of humanity itself” and from them “one can learn the mode of thought of a nationality and its language of feeling.”¹¹

With similar sentiments, Vaughan Williams wrote to Harold Child about an idea of writing “a musical, what the Germans call ‘Bauer Comedie’ [Peasant Comedy]—only applied to English country life (real as far as possible—not sham)—something on the lines of Smetana’s *Verkaufte Braut*.” He continued to explain,

For I have an idea for an opera written to real words, with a certain amount of real English music and also a real English subject might just hit the nail right on the head... and the whole thing might be folk song-y in character, with a certain amount of real ballad stuff thrown in.¹²

While Vaughan Williams sought to write music that is thoroughly English, Tolkien wished to do the same in the area of fantastic literature. In 1936, he told his audience that “we may regret

⁷ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 2.

⁸ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 2.

⁹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 68.

¹⁰ As Hugh Seton-Watson remarks, “Fichte and Herder stressed the importance of language as the basis of nationality. Herder emphasised the divine diversity of the family of nations, the unique quality of each culture.” See Seton-Watson, *Nations And States*, 6.

¹¹ Blanning, *Culture of Power and the Power of Culture*, 259. Quotes from Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 198; originally from Johann Gottfried Herder, *Herders Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berline: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung), vol. 9, 530, 532; vol. 3, 29; vol. 24, 266.

¹² Ursula Vaughan Williams, *Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 402.

that we do not know more about pre-Christian English mythology.”¹³ In a letter dated 1951, he explained similarly his early desire to construct an English mythology: “I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil) There was... nothing English.” He continued, “I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend... which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country.”¹⁴ Tolkien admitted the Shire is “more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee.”¹⁵ As Dimitra Fimi (2009) observes, “a moment of pure English nationalism” led to the invention of Anglo-Saxonism which held to a glorious and mythical Golden age and, recognizing the English—unlike the Welsh, Scots, and Irish which had established a “Celtic” heritage—had no mythology of its own, Tolkien’s attempt to write an English mythology became “both interpretable and justifiable.”¹⁶ Vaughan Williams and Tolkien’s English contemporaries shared a kindred preoccupation with national consciousness; Ford Maddox Ford, for example, describes the essence of Englishness in *Spirit of the People* (1907):

Modern Englishness manifests itself primarily as a ‘Historic Spirit’, the expression of a schoolboy’s knowledge of the English past, which, over the course of generations, has evolved into a naturalized mode of understanding English history, culture, and nationhood. To be English is, above all, to know; it is to be conscious of England’s historical continuity and to recognize one’s place in a community of Englishmen who share this consciousness.¹⁷

To know and to become conscious of his nation’s historical culture, a composer in Vaughan Williams’ view must bathe in “the tunes of his own country,” so much so that these tunes “become an integral part of himself.”¹⁸ Vaughan Williams considers English hymns and folk songs the ultimate national tunes that reinforce England’s national consciousness. A son of a Church of England parson, Vaughan Williams edited *The English Hymnal* (1906), *Songs of Praise* (1925), *The Oxford Book of Carols* (1928), and *Songs of Praise Enlarged* (1931). He wrote original hymn tunes and arranged almost 180 others between 1906 and 1954. Vaughan Williams considered the Bible a “national literature” in which “the spiritual life-blood of a people” flows.¹⁹ As John Bawden (2004) puts it, for Vaughan Williams, whose motivation was “primarily cultural and social rather than religious,” hymnals “offered an ideal means of propagating his concept of a national music through one of the nation’s most influential cultural institutions.”²⁰

Folk songs for Vaughan Williams also train national consciousness as they convey the cultural past of the people. Folk music, he cites Cecil Sharp as saying, “reflects feelings and tastes that are communal rather than personal.”²¹ During his visits to the English countryside between 1903 and 1913, Vaughan Williams collected 800 folksongs. He concludes that

¹³ Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and Critics,” 24.

¹⁴ Carpenter, *Letters*, 144.

¹⁵ Carpenter, *Letters*, 230.

¹⁶ Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, 53-54. Fimi also argues, however, that because “things Celtic” had still crept into his legendarium, “Tolkien’s project ended up being a ‘mythology for Britain’ rather than ‘a mythology for England.’” The “provincial Englishness” of Tolkien’s hobbits, Fimi further suggests, reflected the shift of Englishness’s quintessence: rather than being associated with England’s glorified Anglo-Saxon ancestry, Englishness found its ethos in the simplicity of the English countryside.” See Fimi, 129.

¹⁷ Ford Maddox Ford, *The Spirit of the People*, 35.

¹⁸ Vaughan Williams, *NM*, 27.

¹⁹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 23.

²⁰ Bawden, “Vaughan Williams and the Hymnals,” 2.

²¹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 32.

“national music is not necessarily folk-song; on the other hand folk-song is, by nature, necessarily national.”²² What folk tunes preserve for Vaughan Williams are memories and, consequently, a history. Vaughan Williams not only believed a primordial type of singing existed before speaking—song for him was “the beginning of music” before instrumental music was invented—²³ but he also considered singing the key to remembrance. “In primitive times before there were newspaper to tell us the news, history books to teach us the past, and novels to excite our imagination,” he writes, “all these things had to be done by the ballad singer who naturally had to do it all from memory.”²⁴ He complained about scholars’ tendency to favour written accounts over internalized memory which folk songs demands and trains: “They little realize how reading and writing have destroyed our memory.”²⁵

Like Vaughan Williams, Tolkien, as Verlyn Flieger (2005) states, was very much, in his writing of fantasies, driven by “folklore research, national consciousness... and the desire to write them.”²⁶ Tolkien also held primitive singing and the oral tradition of folklore in high esteem for similar reasons. Song for Tolkien is the medium through which tales are told, myths are passed on, and memories are kept throughout generations. In the poem “The Bidding of the Minstrel” (1914), Tolkien writes about how once the song is interrupted and its words are forgotten, memories would begin to drift away:

But the music is broken, the words half-forgotten,
The sunlight has faded, the moon is growing old,
The fairy ships foundered or weed-swathed and rotten,
The fire and the wonder of hearts is acold . . .
The song I can sing is but shreds one remembers
Of golden imaginings fashioned in sleep,
A whispered tale told by the withering embers
Of old things far off that but few hearts keep.²⁷

Tales for Tolkien are fundamentally sung and spoken, as the poems of *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which are often described as being sung, have proved to be.²⁸ Tolkien also tape-recorded excerpts from both works with the help of his friend George Sayer. Although Tolkien was neither a composer or a performer, his response to words as well as their shape, sound, and meaning in the words of Flieger (1983) “was closer to that of a musician than a grammarian, and his response to language was instinctive and intuitive as well as intellectual.”²⁹

²² Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 62. Vaughan Williams’ changing reception of the composer Joseph Haydn also reveals his belief that folk tunes should be considered an emblem of national heritage. Before Donald Tovey introduced his interpretation of Haydn, Vaughan Williams, following William Henry Hadow, often stressed Haydn’s Croatian background while commending his adoptions of folk tunes. When Haydn was reestablished as a Germanic Austrian figure, however, Vaughan Williams no longer claimed this kinship with Haydn that allowed him to justify his musical practices. He nonetheless continued to admire the composer, acknowledging that since his early years, he had “never wavered” in his admiration of Haydn. See Porks, *Reviving Haydn*, 181-85. Vaughan Williams’s quotation is from Vaughan Williams, *NM*, 179.

²³ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 16-17.

²⁴ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 21.

²⁵ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 28.

²⁶ Flieger, *Interrupted Music*, 8.

²⁷ Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales*, 270-71.

²⁸ As Bratman notes also, the first poem in *Hobbit*, “far over the misty mountains cold,” is described as accompanied by a Dwarf orchestra. The use of instruments such as the clarinets shows anachronisms and suggests Tolkien is more interested in effect than accuracy. See Bratman, “Liquid Tolkien,” 141 and Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 43.

²⁹ Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 33.

Ecclesiastical Music, Folk Tunes, and Pastoral Tone

A distinct feature of “Englishness” exploited by Vaughan Williams, as James Day (2006) remarks, is the English language’s “forceful subtleties of rhythm, sound and stress, especially its syncopated bi-syllables, its percussive consonant-clusters, its wealth of vowel-colour as opposed to vowel frequency...and its subtleties of speech-inflexion.” As Day also notes, however, a sort of “ethical spirituality” that makes works like *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1951) moving is also what characterizes his English consciousness.³⁰ This spirituality is reflected in the composer’s stylistic interest in blending ecclesiastical and folk materials, a tendency that is also seen in Tolkien’s works.

Vaughan Williams considered hymns and folk tunes indispensable to the refinement of English consciousness not only because they reflect a collective past but also because they can be easily learned by the English public. Contending “the musical future of any country is the music that is going on at home, in the schools, and in the local choral societies,” he believed hymns and folk tunes that can be sung corporately in churches and schools help counteract a culture that undermines society by commodifying music.³¹ This commitment to a national music that can be enjoyed collectively led to, as the music in *Hymnal* demonstrates, the dissolving of the boundaries between religious and folk music. “An entirely new weapon for national music, to be wielded through the Church on the life of the nation” as Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling (2001) put it,³² *Hymnal* consists of Gregorian hymns, Vaughan Williams’ own “Sine Nomine,” and “Forest Green,” an adaptation of the folk song “The Ploughboy’s Dream.” In *The Oxford Book of Carols*, a choirbook used by churches, schools, and choral societies, one also encounters the folk tune of *Greensleeves* which exemplifies the synthesis of national, folk, and religious connotations.

What prompted Vaughan Williams to combine religious and folk materials was not just a desire to unify the English people but also a disbelief in a total separation of the histories of “church music” and folk or popular music.³³ Emphasizing that “popular music” existed before the Church had organized its music, Vaughan Williams maintains the plainsong of the Church originated from popular tunes, especially since the parish church used to carry meetings in what is now the public square with churchmen adapting pagan ceremonies to their own use.³⁴ He stresses how “through all the ecclesiastical music of the 15th and early 16th centuries runs the mysterious figure of ‘l’homme armé,’ a secular tune which it became the fashion to introduce as a canto fermo into masses and motets.”³⁵ He also calls attention to the likeness between “Le Chant des Iverées” and “Tonus Peregrinus” in the history of French song.³⁶ Noting the Passion Chorale “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden” originated as a parody of the 17th-century German folkish love-song “Mein G’müth ist mir verwirret,” he also challenged Franz Böhme’s view that the song was composed by Hans Leo Hassler in 1601.³⁷

Tolkien showed a similar hesitation to separate religious and folk materials. A Catholic whose life was saturated by liturgical music, Tolkien in his recitation of his fantasy also united both ecclesiastical and folk tunes. As Bradford Lee Eden (2014) concludes, recordings of

³⁰ James Day, “‘Englishness’ and Vaughan William,” 4.

³¹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 5-6.

³² Hughes and Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance 1840-1940*, 81. Quoted in Bawden, “Vaughan Williams and the Hymnals,” 9.

³³ See also Julian Onderdonk, “Folksong arrangements, hymn tunes and church music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, ed. Alain Frogley and Aidan J. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 136-156.

³⁴ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 74-75.

³⁵ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 44-45.

³⁶ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 75-77.

³⁷ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 78.

Tolkien singing his poems and songs reveal folk tunes and Gregorian chant were Tolkien's primary inspiration and preferred musical type in his legendarium.³⁸ Samwise Gamgee in *Lord of the Rings* sings the tale of the Stone troll "to an old tune"³⁹—and Tolkien himself sang this poem in Sayer's tape recorder with slightly different words in a tune that, according to Sayer, is "an old English folk-tune called 'The Fox and Hens.'" This tune, as Bratman notes, is a Birmingham variant tune for the folksong "The Fox and the Goose" or "The Fox Went out on a Chilly Night."⁴⁰ Tolkien's reaction to Donald Swann song cycle, *The Road Goes Ever* (1967), based on Tolkien's poems also shows the writer's fondness for infusing the sacred Gregorian chant into mythical tales. Swann (1967) recalls Tolkien approved five of Swann's songs but "bridled" at his music for "Namárië." Unsatisfied, Tolkien hummed a Gregorian chant instead.⁴¹ Bratman has pointed out that while the only other poem Tolkien sang in the Sayer collection was the Ents' marching song on Isengard which, again, is a primitive chant, most of the other songs in *Lord of the Rings* are either unaccompanied or given minimal accompaniment of instruments.⁴²

Besides the melding of ecclesiastical and folk elements, what marks Vaughan Williams' most well-known works, particularly those that resonate with Tolkien readers, is the pastoral mode. *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, which also integrates the folk tune "Lovely Joan," not only typifies the coalescence of religious and folk music but also "came to epitomise the English pastoral style."⁴³ Vaughan Williams himself also described *The Lark Ascending* as a "pastoral romance." Written based on a theme by the 16th-century composer Thomas Tallis who served British monarchs including Henry VIII and Elizabeth, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* likewise mixes religious and folk elements in a pastoral tone. The melody in Phrygian mode is derived from the third tune based on Psalm 2 from Tallis's *Nine Tunes for Archbishop Parker's Psalter*, a collection of psalm settings compiled in 1567 for the Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker. Vaughan Williams employs the Renaissance musical device of Picardy thirds, but he also uses flattened seventh intervals, which are common in English folksongs. Wilfrid Mellers (1989) hears the Tallis hymn metamorphosing into "a liberated melody of folklike cast" in this *Fantasia* while the viola solo flowingly transforms "ecclesiastical devotion into pastoral lyricism." The final recapitulatory passage, Percy M. Young (1953) opines, is one that migrates "outside the church" while embodying "something of the pastoral content of *The Lark Ascending*."⁴⁴

Entwined with religious and folk components that are historically rich in English consciousnesses, the pastoral tone of such music captures something central to Tolkien's otherworldly creation: as Martin explains, the arts of both Vaughan Williams and Tolkien were both "rooted in the pastoral idyll of late Victorian and Edwardian England"; the two "saw their vision of arcadia slowly overcome by industrialization, and then abruptly punctuated by the Great War, in which each served."⁴⁵ Both Tolkien and Vaughan Williams had lived through the disastrous effects of war. Tolkien served as a battalion signals officer and had acknowledged that the Dead Marshes "owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme."⁴⁶ He later showed signs of post-war PTSD including chronic pain and "the

³⁸ Eden, "Music," 511.

³⁹ Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, vol. 1, 219.

⁴⁰ Bratman, "Liquid Tolkien," 141-42. See also Cecil Sharp, *Cecil Sharp's Collection of English Folk Songs*, ed. Maud Karpeles (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 399-402.

⁴¹ Swann, "Foreword," vi. See also Bratman, "Liquid Tolkien," 143.

⁴² Bratman, "Liquid Tolkien," 143-44.

⁴³ Bawden, "Vaughan Williams and the Hymnals," 12.

⁴⁴ Mellers, *Vaughan Williams and the Vision of Albion*, 57, 55 and Young, *Vaughan Williams*, 47. Quoted in Pople, "Vaughan Williams, Tallis, and the Phantasy Principle," 53.

⁴⁵ Martin, "Music, Myth, and Literary Depth in the 'Land ohne Musik,'" 132.

⁴⁶ See Simon Tolkien, "Tolkien's grandson on how WW1 inspired The Lord of the Rings."

memory of the fear.”⁴⁷ Vaughan Williams joined the military service of the First World War as a private in 1914 and likewise returned home with PTSD. He wrote *Pastoral Symphony* during a time when many public monuments of mourning were being unveiled, and this work stands, as Eric Saylor (2017) argues, as a “modern manifestation of the ‘Death in Arcadia’ trope” in which “the sight of bodies broken by the monstrous anger of the guns would have disrupted [Vaughan Williams’] vision of that Corot-like landscape.”⁴⁸ Like other English composers, Vaughan Williams used the pastoral mode to “memorialize without proselytizing, mourn without romanticizing, remember without glorifying.”⁴⁹ For the English, the pastoral allowed nostalgia and rumination; as Krishan Kumar (2003) puts it: “Pastoralism, or a rural ideology, is a very old thing in English literary culture.... With its stress on notions of continuity, deference and hierarchy, it could summon up reassuring memories of ‘Old England’ and the glories of the English past.”⁵⁰

Composed based on the folk ballad “Dives and Lazarus” and commissioned by the British Council in 1939, *Five Variants on “Dives and Lazarus”* moves, too, as a piece that is at once ecclesiastical and folkish in nature with a pastoral aura. The original adaption of the story of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16 into the English folk ballad in 1557 itself testifies the historical intertwinement between the religious and the folk or the popular.⁵¹ Vaughan Williams also shows his refusal to divide the religious and the folk, the sacred and the secular, by quoting the “*Dives and Lazarus*” tune in *English Folk Song Suite* (1923) while arranging it as the hymn tune “Kingsfold” in *Hymnal*, which then appears as “O Sing a Song of Bethlehem” and “I Heard the Voice of Jesus say.” Vaughan Williams admitted that he wrote this piece based on the “reminiscences of various versions in my own collection and those of others.”⁵² His words once again evince his sincerity about hearing folk tunes as historical and national products of memory that are handed down through oral transmissions and transcriptions by those who learn by ears.

But memory, as said, also constitutes the basis for the pastoral ideal characterized by freedom from urbanization and decay. The pastoral depicts a long gone past, a time that knew no tension and trouble.⁵³ With a splendid orchestration for strings and harp, *Five Variants* evokes the serenity of the English countryside—not unlike the peaceful Shire or the Warwickshire countryside that Tolkien recalled from his childhood. Yet *Five Variants* looks back to the past as one that knows sorrow and pain; it immediately opens with not only the tender harp but also poignant strings—with the cellos being particularly stirring in warm lyricism—that move listeners into a state of longing through sweeping melodies and sonorous harmonies. In Tolkien’s *Weltanschauung*, this longing ultimately points to Eden. He wrote to his son Christopher:

We all long for [Eden], and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of ‘exile’. If you come to think of it, your (very just) horror at the stupid murder of the hawk, and your obstinate memory of this ‘home’ of yours

⁴⁷ See Croft, “War,” 467. Croft quotes from Bruce Leonard, “The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder of Frodo Baggins,” unpublished paper read at Mythcon XXVII, at Boulder, CO, 1996.

⁴⁸ Saylor, *English Pastoral Music*, 85.

⁴⁹ Saylor, *English Pastoral Music*, 97.

⁵⁰ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, 20.

⁵¹ Arber, *A Transcript of the Registers*, vol. 1, 75-76.

⁵² Quoted in Kennedy, *Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 565.

⁵³ In the discipline of topic theory in musicology, the pastoral is considered a topic that signifies the ideas of “back to nature” and innocence, marked by an absence of strife and tension. See, for example, Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart*; Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics*, 53-67; Haringer, “Hunt, Military, and Pastoral Topic”; Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 183-274; and Ratner, *Classic Music*, 19-21.

in an idyllic hour (when often there is an illusion of the stay of time and decay and a sense of gentle peace) are derived from Eden.⁵⁴

These words uttered after the Second World War epitomise Tolkien's longing—*Sehnsucht*—for a Edenic place of immortality.⁵⁵ This Eden seems to hover between memory and future; it lies at the back of Man's mind as memory because, on one hand, the myth of rustic Golden Age is too familiar;⁵⁶ on the other hand, humanity has all once been children who, in innocence, knew no sin and suffering. But the eschatological Edenic world as envisioned by Tolkien will not be the Eden as the child understands it, for Man is no longer naive and will not return to ignorance: it is innocent in the sense that it is blameless and incorrupt; but it is not innocent in the sense of being ignorant. Having experienced and endured evil, this Eden is tranquil but also glorious, for it will be a new earth with leaves of the Tree of Life that heal.

In Vaughan Williams' hands, the healing power of the leaves of the Tree of Life is heralded precisely by the harp. The harp occupies a special place in Vaughan Williams' music, appearing in not just *Fantasia on Greensleeves* and *Five Variants on 'Dives and Lazarus'* but also seven out of nine symphonies by the composer. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, however, it specifically symbolizes heavenly stillness. In this work based on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the harp performs a celestial effect that signifies life and peace. In Act 2 Scene 2 "The Pilgrim meets Apollyon," Pilgrim, surrounded by many bawling Doleful Creatures in the Valley of Humiliation, is exhausted by Apollyon's confrontation. But the harp then enters and shushes the orchestral chaos while the two Heavenly Beings, Branch Bearer and Cup Bearer, refresh Pilgrim with leaves from the Tree of Life and water from the Water of Life. In Tolkien's world, the harp also epitomizes spiritual harmony: in *Beowulf*, which Tolkien translated between 1920–26, the sound of harps signifies an Edenic tranquillity and arouses the envy of the furious Grendel who typifies Satan. "Grendel," Tolkien writes, "is maddened by the sound of harps."⁵⁷

From National to Universal

Tolkien, who loved peace, loathed the idea of centralized power. Disturbed by "whiskered men with bombs," Tolkien wrote to Christopher: "...the most improper job of any man, even saints ... is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity."⁵⁸ He even said he would "arrest anybody who uses the word State (in any sense other than the inanimate realm of England and its inhabitants, a thing that has neither power, rights nor mind)."⁵⁹ This contempt for totalitarianism likely also led to an alleged distaste for Richard Wagner. The comparison critics made between *Lord of the Rings* and Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876) had always annoyed Tolkien.⁶⁰ He was not so much troubled by Wagner's music but "the assumption by ignorant critics, mistaking common features for influence, that Wagner's work must have inspired *The Lord of the Rings*."⁶¹ Unimpressed by Wagner's interpretation of the Germanic myths,⁶² Tolkien offered a simple

⁵⁴ Carpenter, *Letters*, 110.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of *Sehnsucht* as a powerful expression in Tolkien's work, see Anna Vaninskaya's chapter "J.R.R. Tolkien: More Than Memory" in Vaninskaya, *Fantasies of Time and Death*, 153-228.

⁵⁶ For Raymond Williams, the idea of England's rural life as a Golden Age was a "myth functioning as a memory." See Williams, *The Country and the City*, 43.

⁵⁷ See "Beowulf: The Monsters and Critics," 33 and Chance, *Tolkien's Art*, 37.

⁵⁸ Carpenter, *Letters*, 64.

⁵⁹ Carpenter, *Letters*, 63.

⁶⁰ See Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 206.

⁶¹ Bratman, "Liquid Tolkien," 46-47.

⁶² Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 54.

response to this claim: “Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases.”⁶³ Some scholars, including Christopher MacLachlan and Renée Vink, have argued that Tolkien’s seeming hostility is not to be accepted at face value;⁶⁴ Heather O’Donoghue also notes Tolkien’s claim that “both rings were round, and there the resemblance ends” remains disputable. Nevertheless, Tolkien’s distaste for Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*, O’Donoghue propounds, may be tied to the association of the adaptation of the same legend with Hitler’s nationalistic ideologies and racial supremacism: while there are similarities between two works that seem “irrefutable,” *The Lord of the Rings* in her view can be understood as a “purposeful countering” of Wagner.⁶⁵

Vaughan Williams also had something to say about Wagner, but his words were reverent praises directed to the opera *Die Meistersinger* (1868):

I think there is no work of art which represents the spirit of a nation more surely than *Die Meistersinger* of Richard Wagner. Here is no playing with local colour, the raising to its highest power all that is best in the national consciousness of his own country. This is universal art in truth, universal because it is so intensely national. At the end of that opera Hans Sachs does not preach about art having no boundaries or loving the highest when he sees it, but says what I may slightly paraphrase thus:

“Honour your own masters;
Then even when empires fall
Our sacred nation’s art will still remain.”⁶⁶

Instead of detecting an agenda of nationalistic superiority, Vaughan Williams identified in Wagner’s music a noble desire to conserve the art of the nation. The same thing that he admired *Die Meistersinger* for—a musical faithfulness to one’s national spirit—further occasioned in him, despite his admiration for Wagner, a desire to liberate the English musical culture of his time from the domination of the German tradition. But for Vaughan William, nation, as his paraphrase reveals, is not a synonym for empire. Empires in their quest for power can corrupt and collapse, but nations persist through art. Thus, despite their different receptions of Wagner, both Vaughan Williams and Tolkien in their loyalty to Englishness showed yet another similarity: in perceiving the nation as neither a power nor an administration but a people who share a collective past or, in the words of George Orwell (1941), “common memories,”⁶⁷ their arts had no interest in the nationalism that Orwell speaks of. Vaughan Williams recognizes political nationalism as a movement driven by hostility and anxiety, arguing that “nationalism first appears as hatred and fear of enemies, or at all events the fear of losing one’s livelihood.”⁶⁸ This nationalism “inseparable from the desire for power” is defined by Orwell (1945) as “the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognizing no other duty than that of advancing its interests.”⁶⁹ On such sentiments, Kumar remarks, “The idea that nationalism is something pathological, something at the same

⁶³ Carpenter, *Letters*, 306.

⁶⁴ See MacLachlan, *Tolkien and Wagner: The Ring and Der Ring* and Vink, *Wagner and Tolkien: Mythmakers*.

⁶⁵ See O’Donoghue, *From Asgard to Val halla*, 184-85. See also Birkett, “Old Norse”, 254-255.

⁶⁶ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 72-73

⁶⁷ Orwell, “England Your England,” 35.

⁶⁸ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 53.

⁶⁹ See Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism.”

time deeply foreign, is part of the English understanding of it. Hence the unwillingness to accept that there is or can be such a thing as English nationalism.”⁷⁰

Tolkien and Vaughan Williams are similar in that their national consciousness remains incompatible with political nationalism, and that their Englishness is one that obscures the boundaries between the spiritual and the folk or the sacred and the secular with a pastoral longing. But Tolkien’s endeavour also differed from Vaughan Williams’ in that it stemmed not only from a national concern but also a Christian conviction. His reluctance to segregate the spiritual and the folk partly reflects his belief that truth and myth cannot be divorced from each other. Walter Hooper (1999) argues Tolkien not only “rejected the post-Enlightenment tendency to make a sharp and unbridgeable distinction between history and legend, fact and myth” but also saw Christ as “the myth made fact” and pagan myth as “God expressing Himself through the minds of the poets.”⁷¹

On the other hand, if for Tolkien, God, revealed in Jesus Christ, reveals himself in many myths, then for Vaughan Williams, spiritual truth appears in different forms of revelation—and Christianity is just one name that bears it.⁷² Vaughan Williams nevertheless still articulated his musical philosophy in conventional Christian terms; just as Tolkien would adapt Scriptures like the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 to proclaim “blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme of things not found within recorded time,” Vaughan Williams, contending music is not a “luxury commodity” but “a spiritual necessity” with “spiritual value,” would give musical advice in the name of “sermons” by drawing from verses such as Matthew 18:3 (“unless ye become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven”), James 1:22 (“be ye doers of the word, not hearers only”), Mark 8:36 and Matthew 16:26 (“what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”).⁷³ He even likened music’s destiny to that of Jesus Christ, asserting that music, like the Son whose life is made available to all and yet would be rejected by some, “must be offered to all, though it will not be accepted by all.” Borrowing the words of Jesus in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, he teaches concerning the invitation of music: “Many must be called so that the few may be chosen.”⁷⁴ In the end, however, it was perhaps mostly a closeness to the institutionalised church of his country that prompted Vaughan Williams to, as his wife Ursula puts it, “set to music words in the accepted terms of Christian revelation.”⁷⁵

Music for Vaughan Williams “is reaching out to the ultimate realities by means of ordered sound,”⁷⁶ but as Julian Onderdonk (2013) observes, while the composer was attracted to Christianity’s teaching, he did not seem to see Christianity as such “ultimate realities.”⁷⁷ Yet in his religious pluralism, Vaughan Williams still musically reincarnates a theological posture of the Christian tradition that Tolkien would resonate with. For the composer, one must first be local in order to become universal. For Tolkien, too, taking the historical and national particularity of Englishness seriously is a step rather than a stumbling block to formulating, as Colin Duriez (2003) puts it, “underlying archetypes [that] perhaps focus on the longing of

⁷⁰ Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, 20.

⁷¹ Hooper, “The Other Oxford Movement,” 184-85.

⁷² The composer states concerning *Pilgrim’s Progress*: “I on purpose did not call the Pilgrim ‘Christian’ because I want the idea to be universal and apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life whether he is Xtian, Jew, Buddhist, Shintoist, or 5th Day Adventist.” See Kennedy, *Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 313.

⁷³ See Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 88 and Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 64-69.

⁷⁴ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 238. In Matthew 22:14, Jesus states that “many are called, but few are chosen.”

⁷⁵ Ursula Vaughan Williams, *Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 138. Despite the many views that contend Vaughan Williams was an agnostic, Eric Seddon argues that Vaughan Williams believed “the Christian message was universal.” See Seddon, “Beyond Wishful Thinking,” 18.

⁷⁶ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 206.

⁷⁷ Onderdonk, “Folksong arrangements,” 152.

people throughout the world, based upon the aspirations of our common humanity.”⁷⁸ Vaughan Williams makes plain his belief in his claim that *Die Meistersinger* is “universal because it is so intensely national.” He notices “the national spirit in music has occasionally shown itself in a ‘keep out the foreigner’ movement,”⁷⁹ but he wrote national music for quite an opposite reason. Rather than to promote hostility, he composed national music to foster peace: “The ideal would be for every nation to be different and all at peace.”⁸⁰ He quotes Gustav Stresemann’s saying in 1926: “The man who serves humanity best is he who rooted in his own nation develops his spiritual and moral endowments to their highest capacity, so that growing beyond the limits of his own nation he is able to give something to the whole of humanity.”⁸¹ Stressing even J.S. Bach’s music had to begin “locally” in Germany with specialized meaning before it could appeal to the world universally, he laments “many young composers make the mistake of imagining they can be universal without at first having been local.”⁸² His idea that universal music must first begin local mirrors the theological idea that the “universal” had to first come in the form of “particular,” rooted and raised in local history, to bear universal significance. In the words of the theologian and musicologist Jeremy Begbie (2021), “Universality comes not despite but *through* and *with* concrete particularity.”⁸³

Conclusions: Creating and Sub-Creating Through Music

A probe into why musicians and Tolkien readers alike are so prone to hearing Tolkien’s Middle-earth in Vaughan William’s music has revealed the two’s similarities in terms of their motivations and approach: both were dedicated to the idea of English consciousness, to the amalgamation of ecclesiastical and folk materials, and to a pastoral vision. In juxtaposing the two’s philosophies, however, one also recognizes that to pitch the local or national against the universal, the spiritual against the secular, myth against memory, the otherworldly against the historical, and fantasy against reality is a futile attempt. As Tolkien stated in “On Fairy-Stories” (1947), a fairy-story writer who creates a “Secondary World” that fascinates is always participating in some form of the truth of the “Primary World”:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it...

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be “primarily” true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed...⁸⁴

In remaining faithful to his national consciousness, Tolkien appeals to the universal; in uniting religious and folk materials, he undivides the spiritual and the secular; in bringing forth a pastoral tone, he blurs myth and memory. In pulling us into his sub-creation, making the unfamiliar familiar and the distant near, Tolkien proves the otherworldly and the historical are not opposed to each other and that his fantasy is derived from an earthy reality rooted in human

⁷⁸ See also Duriez, *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis*, 199.

⁷⁹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 69.

⁸⁰ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 154.

⁸¹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 71.

⁸² Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 9.

⁸³ See Begbie, “Music, Freedom, and the Decisive Particular,” 194.

⁸⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 155-56.

soil. As we hear echoes of Tolkien's Middle-earth in Vaughan Williams, we are reminded, too, that music as Tolkien asserts has the power to conceive and create. Vaughan Williams (1963/1986) considers film music a "splendid discipline" of which his preferred way of writing composing is "to ignore the details and to intensify the spirit of the whole situation by a continuous stream of music,"⁸⁵ but his music does more than intensifying the spirit of Tolkien's fantasy. It is not so much that some of his pieces somehow enhance the experience of seeing (although they certainly could); rather, his musical fantasies, when heard by sensitive ears with an imaginative mind, conjures up poetic imageries and narratives, enabling listeners to envision the emergence of the idyllic Shire or the Middle-earth landscape. For Tolkien, music precisely does not so much rest in subservience to moving pictures as if its sole function is to accompany a scene or augment its mood. Rather, things come into existence through music; and music is the means through which the fantasy-world or even the cosmos is formed. In "The Music of the Ainur," the creation account *Ainulindalë* in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, published posthumously in 1977, the Creator Ilúvatar brings the world into being through harmonious melodies sung by resonant voices of the Ainur,

Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words, began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void.⁸⁶

Ilúvatar even allowed the Ainur to weave their own ideas into the music, but the most powerful Ainu, Melkor, in desiring power and glory for himself, brought his dark thoughts into the music, causing discords that distressed other Ainur—although some were also lured to join Melkor in his tunes. Ilúvatar ordered the music to change to a second and a third time while informing Melkor that his destructive disharmony would still contribute to the glory of the world; and the ability of music to create under the power of Ilúvatar was again magnified when Children of Ilúvatar, "conceived by [Ilúvatar] alone," were sung into being by Ilúvatar during the Third Theme.⁸⁷ Tolkien's fantastical idea that creations are conceived through music finds a parallel in his conviction that myth-telling is first aimed at the ears before the hearer's mind could—through hearing the myths told—see the tale unfold before his eyes. Hearing comes before seeing, and to visualize through listening is, according to Tolkien, precisely what both spoken poetry and music allow hearers to do. Receptive listeners who identify works like *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, *The Lark Ascending*, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* or even works like *Five Variants on "Dives and Lazarus"* (1939) with Tolkien's fantasies similarly are caught up in the music's capability to evoke. Can there be more narrative music that conjures up the stories, scenes, and symbols of Tolkien's fantasy world? Possibly, depending on the availability and sensibility of modern sub-creators.

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⁸⁵ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 160-61.

⁸⁶ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 15.

⁸⁷ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 18.

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