



ORPHEUS WITH HIS LUTE
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
Words by William Shakespeare (c. 1564-1616)
For Unison Treble Voices and Piano
Oxford University Press OCS52

ANALYSIS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ralph Vaughan Williams

Vaughan Williams is considered one of the most important composers of his generation and to be the primary influence in reviving English music in the 20th century.

He was born in 1872, the youngest of three children. After his father's death in 1875, his mother moved the family to her childhood home in Surrey. He grew up in an intellectually stimulating family (among some of his more interesting relatives were great-great-grandfather Josiah Wedgwood – yes, *that* Wedgwood – and great uncle Charles Darwin).



His maternal aunt taught him piano and violin at a young age. Later education included viola. He attended the Royal College of Music, where he would later teach composition, and Trinity College in Cambridge, eventually earning a degree in music (1894), then history (1895).

As a composer, Vaughan Williams worked to seek the best advice but to use his own judgment. After finishing his degree, he continued at the RCM, studied with Max Bruch in Berlin (1897) during his extended honeymoon and later (1908) studied with Maurice Ravel in Paris for three months. Ravel said that Vaughan Williams was the only student of his "who didn't try to write my music." He had a close, lifelong friendship with Gustav Holst. Their friendship is notable in that the two composers regularly subjected their work in progress to each other's criticism.

During the period "Orpheus" was composed (?1901), Vaughan Williams was working primarily the medium of vocal music. He was becoming increasingly interested in the regenerative use of national musical resources: English folksong and music of the Tudor period.

Vaughan Williams also cared deeply about the longings and struggles of the common people. He never forgot that his music was for people – not some lofty, academic exercise - and was interested in every situation, however humble, for which music was needed. This illumination of the human condition along with his revival of the English musical voice, led John F. Kennedy to call him an "extraordinary, ordinary man" (1964). His ashes are interred in Westminster Abbey near Henry Purcell's.

Text

The text comes from Shakespeare's *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*. Queen Katherine, Henry the VIII's wife, has been summoned to court to hear the Pope's verdict on whether or not Henry may divorce her (in order to marry Anne Boleyn). She pleads with the king, saying she has been a loyal and honest wife for two decades. The king goes over his reasons why his marriage to Katherine is unlawful and must be dissolved. Katherine, furious, refuses to submit to the divorce and sweeps out of court. At the beginning of the next scene, Katherine is in her chambers and says to her serving woman, named Patience, "Take thy lute, wench. My soul grows sad with troubles; Sing and disperse 'em, if thou canst." It is here that "Orpheus" is sung.

Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus was the greatest mortal musician, nearly equally the gods in the excellence of his art. There was no limit to his power when he played the lyre and sang. Both people and nature followed him; trees uprooted themselves, mountains bowed, rivers changed their courses. He fell in love with Eurydice and married her. Immediately after the wedding, as Eurydice was walking in a meadow, a snake bit her and she died. Orpheus' grief was overwhelming; he was determined to go down to the underworld and bring her back. The entire underworld stopped to listen to his music – the Furies and even Hades himself cried and were moved as they listened. Hades allowed Eurydice to travel back with Orpheus, but on one condition: he must not look behind him to see if she followed. Orpheus struggled on the journey but did not look back, until, at the final moment, he couldn't bear it and turned. It was a moment too soon; Eurydice had not yet come into the daylight. She vanished. Orpheus, again overcome with grief, left the company of men and lived in the wilderness, playing for the rocks and rivers and trees. He was eventually killed by a frenzied mob of men who tore his body apart. His head was found by the Muses, who buried it on their sacred island.

Dedication

The piece was dedicated to Lucy Broadwood, active member of the English Folk Song Society, founded in 1898 with the purpose of discovering, collecting and publishing English folksongs. She was the editor of the Society's *Journal* and also a contributor. Other contributors included Vaughan Williams and Percy Grainger.

Sources

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- Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, 1997 reprinting, originally 1941, W.W. Norton & Co.
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MUSICAL ANALYSIS

Form

"Orpheus" is composed using ternary form, though with slight rhythmic adjustments in the returning "A" idea, altered for the setting of the text. The "A" idea is in F Major and the "B" idea is in the relative minor.

Rhythm

The rhythm of the vocal melody is relatively straightforward in order to fulfill its primary objective: text declamation. Half and quarter notes make up the bulk of the melodic line, with occasional dotted quarter - eighth note patterns, used to follow the spoken cadence of a phrase. Eighth notes are used sparsely in the vocal line but frequently in the piano accompaniment, and then nearly always as passing tones. This rhythmic pulse feels increasingly transfixing as the piece goes on. Significantly, the constant, running eighth note pulse finally slows at m 25 and then halts in m 26. It becomes a simple, sustained chord with an augmented, melismatic vocal melody above it, thus illustrating the release from care and grief.

Melody

The melodic line is strongly pentatonic. That said, it is also composed nearly entirely from a small, three-note motivic kernel: the interval of a third (either major or minor) followed by a major second.

This *motif* appears first in m 3 ("*lute made trees*"), but twists up or down over a dozen times in the short - 28 measure - melody.

This simple three-note *motif* gets masterful treatment in part because Vaughan Williams, when not using it literally, suggests it, like an aural haunting. Some examples of the way he alters it:

- the interval order of the three notes is inverted so that the second precedes the third (e.g. m 19 "*heads and then*")
- passing tones are used to decorate and fill in the *motif*. If one mentally removes them and listens only to the rhythmically stressed beats, it's heard yet again. (e.g. m 7-8 "*when he did sing*")
- the *motif* straddles the middle of two distinct phrases. In other words, the first note of the *motif* is the final note of a phrase, which, to the listener, seems to cut the *motif* in half (e.g. m 11-12 "*eversprung; as sun*" and m 24 "*heart fall*")

Looking from far away, the melody seems to be as familiar and simple as an old English folksong. Looking closely, it's a dense, intricate, ingenious puzzle - - - like viewing DNA through a microscope.

Vaughan Williams' choice of these particular three notes is significant, for the *motif* arises from the *do-re* and *sol-mi* patterns from the pentatonic scale. These pitches are the melodic building blocks of the Kodaly method (beginning with *sol-mi*, then adding *la*, then *re*), which is based on musicological research from a variety of cultures. Vaughan Williams recognized that the pentatonic scale is used widely in the folk music of many cultures, including English folksongs, and that these patterns of thirds and seconds are the heart of the pentatonic scale. The composer is well-known for using pentatonic scales throughout his oeuvre of work, but particularly in this early period of composition. To anyone raised in the culture of Western Europe, Britain or the United States, it strikes a primal vibration of recognition. Using the scale as the melodic basis in "Orpheus," Vaughan Williams creates a comfortable, lulling feeling within the listener's subconscious, within their soul.

Examples of the Use of the Three-Note Motif

1.	m 3	<i>lute made trees</i>
2.	m 4	<i>and the moun</i>
3.	m 8	<i>to his mus</i>
4.	m 9	<i>nts and</i>
5.	m 11	<i>sprung as sun</i>
6.	m 13	<i>a lasting</i>
7.	m 14-15	<i>ev'rything</i>
8.	m 15	<i>rd him</i>
9.	m 17	<i>billows of</i>
10.	m 21-22	<i>is such art</i>
11.	m 22-23	<i>killing care</i>
12.	m 24	<i>heart fall a</i>
13.	m 26	<i>hear (melisma)</i>
14.	m 27	<i>hearing (melisma)</i>

Harmony

The piece has a modal flavor, though in F Major, and it takes full advantage of the familiar aural relationship between tonic and relative minor. The "home-vacation-back home again" is another way Vaughan Williams creates a piece that seems familiar upon the first listening.

The modal color of the harmonies, the way they move and the way they cadence, are familiar and comforting because they are similar to so many folksongs of the British Isles and America.

Timbre

"Orpheus" is a song of simplicity for voice and piano. The tessitura is from D to D, only an octave, set in the middle of the range in an easy key in which to sing. Therefore, the vocal tone color is not overly bright or dark, just straightforward and unpretentious, as in a folksong. It's reasonable to expect the musicians to slightly shift the tone color in order to enliven and dramatize the text. "To his music plants and flowers/Ever sprung, as sun and showers/There had made a lasting spring," necessitates a brighter, lighter sound than "Hung their heads, and then lay by."

Texture

Though only for two instruments, the texture the listener hears is homophonic. In essence, the piano has the same fast-moving harmonic rhythm as the vocal line, supplemented with running eighth notes to add thickness of texture. The piano thus functions as a lute in a 16th century lute song (think

John Dowland). Often in those pieces, the melodic line would be relatively uncomplex, sung in the rhythm of text declamation. The lute, however, would be playing quick, running lines underneath.

On the final phrase, however, the texture thins as this eighth-note pulse slows, then stops. The long, sustained chords are held in the piano. But as the percussive tone dies away, the singer's texture is heard almost alone during the line, "*fall asleep, or, hearing, die.*"

Expression

Phrase lengths generally follow the lines of text. Occasionally, they are slightly altered from the Shakespeare line breaks in order to group related ideas into more modern language conventions and to allow for longer melodic lines.

Andante tranquillo (*a tranquil walking pace*), the tempo marking, is suggested by the context of the poem within Henry VIII. Queen Katherine is in her private rooms, having just come from court where a cardinal from Rome read the Pope's decree that the king may divorce her. She pleaded with the king; he was unmoved. She commands her serving woman, Patience, to sing and disperse her troubles. "Orpheus" is the result.

The expressive markings used, such as *dolce* (*sweetly*), *smorzando* (*extinguished; perform with the sound dying away*), *decesendos*, *piano*, the *fermata*, and the like are used to aid in musical expression of the text. An important moment, however, is the *mezzo-forte* – the loudest dynamic marking in the piece – *a tempo* following the *smorzando*. So far in the text we've been hearing about the story of Orpheus. Now comes the moral – the reason to be paying attention.

The Heart

The heart of "Orpheus With His Lute" is magical, lulling power to transfix. The modal flavor, the unflagging use of the pentatonic melodic *motif* and the gentle eighth-note rhythm stream all combine to create a hypnotic quieting that reverberates throughout body and soul.

THE PLAN

Introducing the Piece

Students read the poem apart from the music and reach understanding of the text by grouping "sentences" together and finding the noun-verb component of each "sentence." Then review the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Shakespeare knew the story of Orpheus and used it in his plays. 400 years later, an English composer named Ralph Vaughan Williams, who happened to be quite interested in English music of Shakespeare's time, set the poem to music.

Skill Outcome

Students will perform with a unified sound: matching vowels, balanced dynamics and accurate intonation.

Thinking About Unison

- What's the definition of *unison*? (one sound)
- Describe a quality *unison* sound.
- How does a choir achieve a quality *unison* sound?

Brainstorm alone, then pair-share, then create a list on the board. Group like ideas together; connect to the outcome.

The Water Is Wide – Part 1

Sing the folksong by rote as a warm up. Work for unified tone, highlighting tall vowels. Use the song in conjunction with other strategies below, such as the listening circles.

Matching Vowels

- Mirror of truth.
- Mirror games – facing each other, 1-on-1 or small groups.
- Lots of hands on the face and other physical gestures to unify placement.
- Sing phrases only on vowel sounds.
- A few students in front of the choir while the choir listens: give direction on unity vowel shape until there is unified timbre. Then ask 1 student to sing it the “old way” while the rest do the “new way.”

Balanced Dynamics

- Singing with eyes down while conductorless – feel it as a community.
- Hands on shoulders during circles.
- Draw attention the *mf* at the *a tempo*; discuss why it might be there.
- Start a singer on a pitch with an “oo” vowel. One by one, cue them to come in with an invisible “sneaky” entry. Then try to begin *tutti* while the same sound is still in the choir’s ears. Then have changed voices drop the octave to be more in their tessitura.

Accurate Intonation

- Physical gestures to find the “focus” or the “center” of the pitch.
- Sing a phrase in tune, then distort it to an out-of-tune, out-of-focus sound, then fix it again.

Listening Circles

- Form a large circle, or have each voice part form an individual circle, or perhaps concentric circles. Singing into the circle helps to hear others; singing with your back to the circle helps more concentrated listening (no more visual cues)
- Divide the choir into 2 or 3 groups; students sing only when directed to. Add a blank wall as a group.
- Employ singers to act as listeners – for just a phrase, for the “A” idea, etc. Or number off the choir corresponding to phrases. Instead of singing that phrase, the corresponding students listen to the choir.

Assessment

- Creation of the unison list
- Lots of teacher observation
- Self-assessment with mirror of truth
- Verbal and written feedback when acting as a listener

Knowledge Outcome

Students will identify *motifs* and evaluate their significance.

What’s A Motif?

What words can you think of that begin with “mot”? Share the etymology of the word. Connect the definition of a musical *motif* to words like motor, motto, mother or a criminal *motif*.

Discovering Motifs in Orpheus

1. The Giant Orpheus Puzzle
2. Before/After Journal Assignment: Now that you’ve unlocked the *motif* puzzle, how do you think understanding it will make a difference when you sing the piece? Record “before” ideas; perform without stopping; record “after” observations.

Motif Scavenger Hunt On Your iPod

See how many songs you listen to that use *motifs*. Two questions to use for discussion after they come up with some:

- How long is a *motif*? When is a musical idea too long to classify as a *motif*? (Use the example of *Snow (Hey Oh)* by Red Hot Chili Peppers – this is a song the kids all know and most really like – find the musical *motif* within the guitar riff.)
- Can a drum beat pattern be a *motif*?

Do you think this will change how you listen to the songs in which you found the *motifs*? How? Has it changed how you listen to new music?

Assessment

- Puzzle
- Journal entries
- Homework Scavenger Hunt – examples they found and journaling

Affective Outcome

Students will explore the powerful symbiotic connection between one's musical choices and their emotions and experiences.

The Story of Orpheus

- Understanding the text of the piece: group like ideas together, then find the noun-verb of each.
- Slideshow of the story with follow up discussion and journal question:
- What do you think Orpheus' music sounded like in order to be powerful enough to bring iron tears down Hades face? or make a tree uproot? (For Forrest, it's Jimmy Page's guitar.)

Being a Musical Detective

Why do you think Mr. Schwieters blasts early 80s rock from his classroom every morning? Why do you think Mr. Georgeson plays his guitar during your math tests? Why does the Upper School varsity football team have the same song playing as they enter the field each game? Look for other examples of the music-emotion connection in our school life or in your own. (Examples: Joe's warm up song before track meets, my Glenn Gould). How are all these examples similar? Different? You can hardly substitute one music choice for a different situation OR one music choice for a different person. Why?

Musical Symbiosis (to be done after Musical Detective)

- Thinking about these questions reminds me of symbiosis (e.g. clownfish and anemone). Go over the term. On one side of the equation there is the MUSIC and the other side is YOU – with all your emotions and experiences. How do we choose music that's meaningful to us?
- What was your opinion of "Orpheus" the first time we sang through it? Do you feel differently about it now? Why is that?
- Think about this question: The music that we like – is it something in the music, in the notes – OR – is it something in us? Decide one way or the other. Support.

Remembering Affective Experiences

- Once the choir knows *The Water Is Wide* well, before singing it again, tell my story about Cherry.
- Journal: Remember a time when a particular song made a profound emotional impact on you. What was the song? Where were you? Was it live music or recorded? Was there something important going on in your life? What was the emotion you felt? Tell the story...
- Homework: Interview 3 close friends, family members or teachers – must be of at least two different generations (extra credit to any interviewee over 70 years old!) – about a powerful memory they have around a song (same idea as above). Discussion within the

choir after the assignment is complete about surprises they found or realizations they had.

- Summarize: in what ways are all of these – my story, your story, your interviewees stories – all connected to the person’s emotions and experiences?

Performance of *Orpheus*

Nearly all the things we’ve done about emotion in music so far have had to do with being the audience member (mostly) or the composer (a bit). Now think about the third and final part of the musical triangle: the performer – YOU. How can you, as the performer, share your knowledge of and feeling about this piece? How can the environment you create make an impression on the audience’s emotions and experiences? (Make it real: bring out the video camera! Record and watch.)

Assessment

- Journal entries
- Discussion
- Videorecording

Music Selection

Vaughan Williams is considered to be one of the most important composers of English music in the 20th century. This is a masterful piece that is accessible to middle school choirs. It has multiple tie-ins with curriculum topics the students are learning about (pentatonic scales, Orpheus, Shakespeare, for example) and provides an organic, non-cliché way of getting young teenagers to think about why they like the music they like. Reflection on such a charged topic is an important step of broadening one’s world view and being open to new experiences.