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**'THE STUFF OF LIFE' – ASPECTS OF FOLKSONG  
IN THE FABRIC OF ART MUSIC IN THE BRITISH  
ISLES**

**Abstract:** Folksong has at many stages played an important role in the art music of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales; in various guises it has also gone on to influence art music in other English speaking parts of the world, notably the United States of America. The primary purpose of this paper is to look at folksong's historical role in the British Isles – with a brief glance at parallel influences and interpretations of the idiom in America – the means by which it has been transmitted and the results of its presence in a number of repertoires. In addition, a major focus of interest is the way in which folksong in Ireland became a significant symbol of national identity.

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The role of folksong, or what is often frequently referred to as national song,<sup>1</sup> in the development and revival of a number of branches of classical music in Central Europe, Scandinavia and Russia is firmly established. From a European perspective, the crucial presence of folksong in the art music of the British Isles across several centuries of evolution is perhaps less well understood, in part, paradoxically, because it is so pervasive. At nearly every stage in the musical development of British (understood here to mean English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh) music, folksong has been a major factor in conditioning melodic and harmonic style, and to an appreciable extent, form. At the same time folksong has added a particular melos as well as

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<sup>1</sup> In the Czech tradition, for example, the distinction between 'lidové' ('of the people') and 'národní' ('national') is a crucial one where definitions of particular forms of melody are concerned. 'Lidové' is cognate much more with what might be described as genuine folk music emanating from remoter regions with a much more clearly ethnic profile; 'národní' as a term is applied to the popular collections of songs (many of non-Czech origin) which were in common currency and which major composers, such as Smetana and Dvořák, might have understood as folksong.

certain cultural markers to compositions frequently destined for bourgeois and upper class audiences. More subtly, and in the twentieth century, perhaps more importantly, the presence of folksong has done much to clarify aspects of musical language at a time of directional uncertainty where style is concerned; a process by which, to quote the title of this paper, folksong does indeed, as far as music is concerned, become the 'stuff of life'.

While no-one would argue that the same level of scientific background in the development of methodologies and protocols for the collecting of folksong practised by Bartók and Kodaly in Hungary (or even Bartoš and Janáček in Czechoslovakia) existed in England, the efforts of the folklorists and folksong collectors Cecil Sharp, Maude Karpeles and the composers Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst were of enormous significance. From the late nineteenth well into the twentieth century, figures such as these made a more or less systematic effort to collect and catalogue folksong in England extending their work to survivals of these traditions elsewhere (notably in the Appalachian mountains in the United States of America). Their efforts were primarily born of an enthusiastic desire to capture a fast disappearing wealth of native melody, though they were also based on an expression of frustration with the inadequacies of earlier collectors and their products.

Some of the cultural effects of this period of collection will be examined below, but some consideration of what preceded their efforts must be examined since it parallels in many ways the situation on the continent. Collections of folksongs in various forms go back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Thomas Ravenscroft produced three volumes which included folk and popular song (*Pammelia* 1609, *Deuteromalia* 1609 and *Melismata* 1611). The collecting of folksong continued in a sporadic and largely unsystematic way into the eighteenth century, and towards the turn of the century into the nineteenth began to increase markedly. Much impetus was given to what was fast becoming a profitable publishing venture by the practice of commissioning well-known contemporary composers to make arrangements of folksongs for voice and instrumental combinations then popular among amateur performers. Joseph Haydn along with certain of his pupils made numerous arrangements of, mainly Scottish, folksongs for violin, cello, the popular and readily available piano (called *fortepiano*; the harpsichord which was still current in many households was offered as an alternative) and voice for the Scottish publisher George Thomson, as did his contemporary, pupil and rival during Haydn's first stay in London in the 1790s, Ignaz Pleyel; early in the nineteenth century another successful contributor to this growing literature was another of Haydn's pupils, Ludwig van Beethoven.

Of a slightly different order were the publications of Thomas Moore (1779–1852) which provide a fascinating test case in the fixing and propagating the image of Ireland, at that stage still part of the British Isles. Moore's *Irish Melodies* were first published in 1808. The full title of the publication, as it appears elaborately engraved on the frontispiece, indicates the particular division of labour in the preparation of the volume: 'A Selection/ of/ Irish Melodies,/ with Symphonies and/ Accompaniments/ by/ Sir John Stevenson Mus. Doc./ and Characteristic Words by/ Thomas Moore Esqr... They comprised traditional Irish melodies (if texted, most of these would originally have been to Irish words) fitted by Moore to new texts, in the spirit of the originals, in English.

These volumes had a spectacular publishing history being reprinted many times through the nineteenth century. The first American edition of the first volume was produced as early as 1808 (or early 1809). The last volume, with Sir Henry Bishop supplying the musical arrangements, was produced in 1834. Apart from English and American imprints, these volumes were widely available in Europe published by Augener and Novello. Even outside the British Isles, the effect of these songs was extensive where performers were concerned and quite decisive for certain composers. Undoubtedly, without the background of these Irish songs the work of America's greatest song writer of the nineteenth century, Stephen Collins Foster (1826–1864), would have been very different. Much in the manner of Moore's collection, Foster produced his own set of *Irish Melodies*, all of which show the influence of the earlier style in their simple accompaniments and harmonies, and the pentatonic outline of their melodies – the most famous and characteristic of which is the well known ballad, 'Jeanie with the light brown hair'. Beyond this first of Foster's volumes, the elements of style he adopted from his Irish models became a major feature of his later songs to the extent that his so-called 'Plantation Songs', 'Ethiopian Melodies' and 'Minstrel Songs' are as much if not more indebted to Irish features as to the music of the slaves and oppressed black population of the southern states of America. Written for a predominantly white society and white performers, including the Original Christy Minstrels and The Great Southern Sable Harmonists (all of whom were white singers 'blacked up' to seem like Negro minstrels), Foster's style remained a potent presence in American music. Even before the end of the century, his songs were, in Virgil Thomson's words: 'Part of

every American's culture who has any musical culture'.<sup>2</sup> Through the work of Foster, the outlines of Irish, and the closely related melodies of Scotland, had passed into the national consciousness. The pentatonic curves of Foster's melody, made up of an amalgam of primarily Irish, Scottish, and to an extent black American thematic characteristics created a powerful strand in American art and popular music. Antonín Dvořák, writing in New York in the early 1890s with the powerful, if musicologically uninformed, voice of a composer come to initiate a new school of American composition, touched on a certain truth when he stated that:

I found that the music of the two races (Indian [native American] and Negro) bore a remarkable similarity to the music of Scotland. In both there is a peculiar scale, caused by the absence of the fourth and seventh, or leading tone.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Moore can hardly have had an inkling of the extent to which his *Irish Melodies* would affect musical traditions in the English-speaking world nearly a century after their first publication. But his effort at recovery was in many ways the product of the modern age, reflecting new trends in social and political thought where folk art was concerned, much of it provoked by the philosophy of the French Enlightenment. Attitudes towards country life, often defined in terms of elemental crudeness had given way to a romantic image of pastoral tranquillity in which the natural beauty of the country dweller became an important factor. Moore's collections were a celebration of a native art in which the folk singer, and more particularly in the case of Ireland, the harpist as representative of an ancient cultural lineage, was the symbol of righteous political virtue in the face of oppression. A rallying call from his publication is to be found in the Air 'Thamama Halla', published both in verse form and with a musical setting. The first stanza gives an idea of the quality of the sentiment in a poem where the upholders of Ireland's native culture are seen very much as victims:

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Jackson (ed.), *Stephen Foster Song Book*, New York: 1974, p. vi.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Dvořák knew virtually nothing of native American (American Indian) music and not a great deal about black American music. The quote is reprinted in John Clapham, *Dvořák*, London: 1979, pp. 201–2.



Like the bright lamp that lay on Kildare's holy shrine<sup>4</sup>  
And burn'd thro' long ages of darkness and storm,  
Is the heart that sorrows have frown'd on in vain,  
Whose spirit outlive them, unfading and warm!  
Erin! oh Erin! thus bright, thro' the tears  
Of a long night of bondage, thy spirit appears!  
(Thomas Moore: *Irish Melodies*, 1808, p. 11)

In the remaining verses the imagery focuses on apostrophes to freedom and the renewal of the nation: '... tho' Slavery's cloud o'er thy morning hath hung, The full noon of Freedom shall beam round thee yet' and 'Till the hand of Spring her dark chain unbind, and daylight and liberty bless the young flow'r. Erin! oh Erin! *thy* winter is past, And the hope that liv'd thro' it shall blossom at last!').

Even the iconography of the engravings adorning some sections of the publication is rich with the conceits of innocence married to national imagery. At the head of the first volume, Ireland is portrayed as a maiden, the central picture surrounded by foliage punctuated with wreaths of shamrock, the national flower. The maiden herself seems almost a negation, if not an actual parody, of the imperialist images beloved in English iconography at the end of the eighteenth century. Instead of a proud Britannia with shield, spear and lion, the maiden rests with her elbow leaning on a traditional Irish harp; in right hand is a quill pen and in her left a rolled scroll of parchment. To her right, fallen to the ground is a spear, and to her left a shield, emblazoned with a shamrock, and an upturned helmet set almost carelessly on the greensward. In other illustrations in Moore's publications the pictures favour images of peaceful creativity, for example, the crowning of a bard.

These highly evocative engravings and, of course, the collection of songs itself, were vital in fixing images of the Irish nation in the context of the British Isles.<sup>5</sup> The single crucial musical image was, of course, the harp. The harpist was a central figure in early Irish music and culture. Major Gaelic chieftains held their harpists, who collaborated with poets in the providing of a rich oral tradition of bardic sung poetry, in positions of considerable

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<sup>4</sup> This is a reference to the inextinguishable fire of St Bridget at Kildare (mentioned, as Moore himself points out, in Giraldus Cambrensis).

<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, an obvious parallel with the impact of Herder on the construction of a national identity in Germany and later in Bohemia. The products as far as folksong collecting was concerned are to be found in von Arnim and Brentano's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1806–8) and later the massive collections of Moravian folksong by Sušil and Bohemian folksong by Erben.

privilege. This tradition continued into the Norman era in Ireland and beyond into Tudor times in the sixteenth century. The Irish harp, though beautiful in tone, was, *sui generis*, limited to its ancient oral repertoire and proved less able to cope with the requirements of the increasingly chromatic music favoured by the educated classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition, the arrival and popularity of the fortepiano in the context of domestic music making in tandem with new styles in music proved as far as the harp was concerned a fatal combination. There is an irony that the accompaniments to Moore's *Irish Melodies* along with those of other new collections of folksongs were arranged for the piano and would have been played on that instrument in many an Irish household while the harp languished as a piece of ornamental furniture in the corner. The itinerant harpers, in some ways a kind of latter-day troubadour, travelling from house to house and performance to performance, were still to be found, though drastically decreased in numbers, in the late eighteenth and even in the nineteenth centuries. But fundamental shifts in taste and the growing ability of amateur performers on the piano meant that the attractions of this once remarkable live tradition were fading fast.

A central figure in the latter days of the harp in Ireland was Turlough Carolan (Toirdhealbhach ó Cearbhalláin, 1670–1738). At the age of eighteen he went completely blind as the result of smallpox, thus leaving few options for employment. One possible solution was to take up the profession of harpist; the Irish harp tradition was entirely oral and the instrument was managed with relative ease by the unsighted. Several of the profession were blind, but, with the aid of a helper, managed to make successful careers. Having started relatively late in life, Carolan had difficulty in approaching the dexterity and finesse of his colleagues, but he soon developed a reputation as a composer. Quite often he would originate a song tune and then add words later. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that folksong was the primary influence on his music; along with many of his Irish and English contemporaries, he seems to have been particularly fond, of Italian music, in particular the sonatas and concertos of Corelli and Vivaldi widely performed in England and Ireland throughout the eighteenth century. But, despite the very real attractions of the contemporary classical repertoire, folksong was a presence in his style; though sublimated and considerably refined. As an element in melodic design in his compositions it was a telling point at which folksong entered the fabric of his musical style. Of equal importance was the way in which Carolan's output acted as a vessel for the folk impulse since many of his most memorable melodies, some of which may indeed have carried native characteristics, entered the musical

continuum, themselves becoming virtual folksongs transmitted orally, in manuscript copies and eventually reaching print.

In many ways, the last gasp of the harp tradition as it was understood from ancient times came with the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. This unique gathering marked an early attempt to record for posterity – a clear forerunner of the work of such as Vaughan Williams, Bartók and Janáček – a repertoire on the verge of disappearance. It took place, appropriately enough for such an Enlightenment-inspired event, during the celebrations of the taking of the Bastille in July. Eleven harpers were involved, ten Irish and one Welsh. Their performances occurred over three days while the youthful Edward Bunting transcribed the musical substance of their performances.<sup>6</sup> The event proved to be a considerable public attraction. It was held in the Belfast Exchange Rooms and visiting members of the public paid handsomely to hear the performances at the rate of half a guinea; a number of prizes were given (the fifty-six year old Charles Fanning was awarded the top prize of 10 guineas) and all eleven players received some money.

The experience of the Festival was formative for Bunting and he spent time in the next eighteen years touring Ireland collecting still more music from singers and instrumentalists. Bunting's transcriptions and his subsequent publications are an invaluable document and include information about players, tuning and performance practice. Nevertheless, his volumes of pieces of 1797, 1809 and 1840 reflected the developing fashions of the day and were designed (and increasingly suited) to the piano and its playing techniques. Much the same is true, of course, in Stevenson's and Bishop's arrangements for Moore's melodies which, for obvious commercial reasons, favoured a pianistic accompaniment and the much more classical approach to harmonisation which in many songs tended to distort the inherent qualities of the originals

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Bunting (1773–1843) was a talented organist from Armagh. Though certainly able, his transcriptions of the harp repertoire are problematic from a number of points of view. He often did not notate the bass parts and failed to recognise fundamental aspects of improvisatory ornamental writing. Recently practitioners of the Irish harp have also begun to question his notation of melodic lines since some of them seem unidiomatic given the nature of the instrument. His extensive collection of manuscripts is held in the special collection of the main library, The Queen's University of Belfast.

Focusing on Bunting and Moore, albeit briefly, raises interesting questions about the nature of the preservation of the folk idiom, questions which were not to be addressed in a more scholarly fashion until much later. But the achievement of these two pioneers is also a clear indication of an enduring fascination with folksong in the British Isles and the way in which a particular philosophical stance can be brought to bear on a national repertoire. The folk, or popular manner was certainly known to composers at this and many other times. The case of the greatest musical visitor to England, Joseph Haydn, in the late eighteenth century is certainly of significance here. Well before coming to England, Haydn had made use of folksong in some of his symphonies, and throughout Central Europe, from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, the practice of incorporating native elements into art music was popular, as the Pastorella genre shows. Nearly contemporary (1794) with the Belfast Harp Festival and Bunting's first collecting trips, Haydn made use of a folksong, 'Lord Cathcart' (or 'Lord Cathcart's Wee')<sup>7</sup>, in the finale of his hundredth symphony composed for his second trip to London. Even where the folksong cannot be identified, the popular manner is evident, quite frequently in Haydn, but closer to home as far as the British were concerned in, for example, the chamber music of composers such as Stephen Storace (1762–96).

The plain fact is that composers had been making extensive use of folk material for centuries. There is a whole tissue of folk allusion to be found in the music of the composers of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Weelkes made extensive and elaborate works for voices and viols, known as 'Cryes of London', from the calls of vendors. Folksong was also used in keyboard music. A number of composers wrote lengthy sets of variations for keyboard (virginals, harpsichord or chamber organ) on songs currently popular. Of the forty two pieces included in William Byrd's remarkable collection of virginal music *My Ladye Nevells Booke*, the copying of which was completed in September 1591, seven are primarily based on what could be described as folk or popular tunes: (27) Will Yow Walke the Woods Soe Wylde; (28) The Maidens Songe; (31) Have With Yow to Walsingame; (32) All in a Garden Grine; (33) Lord Willobies Welcome Home; (34) The Carmans Whistle; (37) Sellingers

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<sup>7</sup> See H.C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn in England: 1791–1795* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), pp. 564–6.



Rownde. A number of other pieces in the collection include allusions to folk or popular songs as follows: (4) The Battell; (5) The Galliarde for the Victorie; (6) The Barleye Breake; (8) The Huntess Upp; (10 and 11) The Firste Pavian and Galliarde; (21) The Sixte Galliarde; (25) The Passinge Mesures: The Nynthe Galliarde; (29) A Lesson of Voluntarie. In all, at least sixteen of the pieces in *Ladye Nevells Books* are based on, or make allusion to, popular sources. In some pieces the quotation or use of a folksong might have a significance greater than popular allusion. In the case of the set of variations on the song 'Walsingham' (used also for a set of variations by John Bull, copied as the first number in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*), with its allusion to the Marian shrine at Walsingham (dissolved in 1538), the use of the melody would have had significance for Byrd's fellow Catholic recusants during the reigns of the Protestant monarchs Elizabeth I and James I. Also, folk melodies, or parts of them, could turn up in the texture of keyboard pieces which did not bear the title of a particular song. Two examples are to be found in Byrd's *Barleye Breake*, a depiction of a game for couples involving a mock battle; Byrd introduced the bare melodic outline and harmony of the well-known folksong 'The leaves be greene'<sup>8</sup> at the start of his second section and concluded the piece with another well known melody, 'The Bells of Osney' (for further information about Byrd and his use of folksong see Oliver Neighbour, *The Consort and Keyboard Music of William Byrd*).

The content of a series of collections of keyboard music after the heyday of the virginalists (Bull, Gibbons and Byrd were all dead by the mid 1620s) shows that the interplay of folk and art music continued, if at a much less sophisticated level, for several decades and surfaces again in keyboard collections, notably Purcell's *Musick's Hand-maid* ('A New Scotch Tune' and 'A New Irish Tune': London, 1689), at the end of the seventeenth century. The folk/popular impulse was, of course, present again in such works as John Gay's enormously popular *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), and, as we have seen above, was a powerful presence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> The text of the opening of the song was: 'The leaves be green, the nuts be brown, they hang so high they will not come down'. Though well known as a song in its own right, this melody was also the basis for music for viol consorts known as 'Brownings' of which genre Byrd produced a famous example.

An important development where folksong as an emblem of nation within the art music tradition is concerned occurred in the realms of early romantic music. The Scottish Highlands became a favoured place of tourism and a resort for the romantic imagination partly through the enormous popularity of Ossian's *Fingal* (a favourite of Napoleon) and the novels of Walter Scott; the latter provided the subject matter for a number of early romantic Italian operas. To an extent this projection of the Highlands as a place of romance, complete with tartan-clad clansmen was a manufactured image. Though certainly beautiful, the Highlands still suffered from the depredations of the clearances. The most famous musical results involved the German composers Felix Mendelssohn and Max Bruch: the first wrote a fine 'Scottish' symphony with imitations of Highland folksongs and, it seems, the quotation of the melody 'Scots wha hae' ('Scots will have') at the conclusion of the finale; for his part, Max Bruch wrote a Scottish Fantasy for violin and orchestra in which for much of its length the thematic material is based on Highland melodies (including, once again in the finale, 'Scots wha hae'). More locally, the effect of Highland myth and melody can be found in the work of a remarkable Scottish composer, Hamish MacCunn (1868–1916). Born into a privileged, ship-owning family, MacCunn had great musical gifts which enabled him to win a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London, only recently opened. Many of his works reflect an interest in Scotland and the Highlands in particular. His most famous work is an overture called *The Land of the Mountain and the Flood*, the title of which is taken from Walter Scott's poem 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel'. But this was only one of several overtures, cantatas, and even two operas which celebrated the history and mythology of the Highlands in much the way that the symphonic poems and operas of Smetana, Dvořák and Fibich celebrated the glories of the Czech past real or imagined. The remarkable aspect of MacCunn is his level of musical success and integrity; the fact that he does not appear to be popular today probably reflects ignorance, or possibly some kind of *froideur* about the programmatic content of his work rather than its musical substance. MacCunn's musical idiom reflects the preoccupations of his contemporaries; Mendelssohn, Brahms, Wagner and Dvořák are all perceptible influences on his music, as indeed they were in the compositions of nearly all British composers towards the end of the nineteenth century. But beyond these influences there is a melodic accent which is among the most distinctive in British music in the nineteenth century. Part of its success is based on an openness to the characteristics of Scottish rhythmic

peculiarities in word setting (note in particular the start of the short Cantata *Lord Ullin's Daughter*) and the melodic aspects of national melody which in turn generate harmonies (often involving plagal progressions) that become a recognisably individual part of MacCunn's style.

This openness to native raw material was a subject to which one of the most famous musical visitors to England often alluded. Antonín Dvořák first came to London in 1882 to conduct concerts of several of his works which were gaining considerable popularity in England. Over the next fifteen he visited England seven times and received a number of significant commissions from musical societies and festivals. Critics in England were quick to perceive Dvořák's effective use of the popular accent in certain of his works, in particular the first set of Slavonic Dances, op. 46. In a contemporary review of these in the *Monthly Musical Record*, the writer ended his notice with the following comment:

There is no great pretension in the work as a musical composition other than that which aims at the representation of a national peculiarity, and the reproduction, in a quasi-classical form, of things that are in their origin popular.<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Dvořák offered advice to the composers of Britain to base their classical compositions on the: '... fine melodies of Ireland and Scotland'.<sup>10</sup> While far from scientific in his methods of observation, Dvořák frequently noted the presence of national music in the work of other composers. Writing about Schubert's original use of national characteristics in his music, Dvořák offered the following analysis of the practice:

During his residence in Hungary, he assimilated national melodies and rhythmic peculiarities, and embodied them in his art, thus becoming a forerunner of Liszt, Brahms and others who have made Hungarian melodies an integral part of European concert music. From the rich stores of slavic folk music, in its Hungarian [sic], Russian, Bohemian and Polish varieties, the

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<sup>9</sup> Notice reprinted in Norman Demuth (ed.), *An Anthology of Criticism*, London, 1947, p. 290.

<sup>10</sup> From an interview printed in the *New York Herald*, 21 May 1893. Reprinted in John Tibbetts (ed.), *Dvořák in America: 1892–1895*, (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1993), p. 356.

composers of today have derived, and will continue to derive, much that is charming and novel in their music. Nor is there anything objectionable in this, for if the poet and the painter base much of their best art on national legends, songs and traditions, why should not the musician?<sup>11</sup>

Dvořák made similar observations regarding the potential for classical music in America:

In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will.<sup>12</sup>

The profound irony that Dvořák himself had a profound aversion for using 'borrowed' material was almost certainly lost on his British and American contemporaries. While Dvořák frequently affects the popular style, he almost never quoted actual folksong and only rarely reflected specific features of its outline in his music; his Czech word-setting, however, after an uneasy start was remarkably idiomatic.

But the notion that he had used local material, i.e. plantation songs and spirituals, to add native colour to his 'New World' symphony was widely held. The misconception had considerable effect in Ireland. After the symphony's premiere in Dublin in 1901, the committee of the annual competitive music festival (Feis Ceoil) founded a competition for the composition of an Irish symphony based on traditional songs and folk melodies. The first winner, in 1902, was a Neapolitan composer and pianist who had come to Dublin in 1882, Michele Esposito; the following year (1903) the prize was won by a native of Ireland, Hamilton Harty, from County Down in Ulster. Faithfully building his work on melodies which were certainly recognisable to his audience, Harty's *Irish Symphony* is a vigorous and ingenious four-movement work. Although it has been

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<sup>11</sup> Antonín Dvořák (with Henry T. Finck), 'Franz Schubert', *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, New York, 1894; reprinted in John Clapham, *Antonín Dvořák: Musician and Craftsman*, London 1966, p. 296–305.

<sup>12</sup> Antonín Dvořák, 'The Real Value of Negro Melodies', *The New York Herald*, 21 May 1893; most of this article is reprinted in John Tibbetts, *Dvořák in America; 1892–1895*, Portland, 1993, pp. 355–9.



recorded,<sup>13</sup> and is still occasionally performed, it has never approached in popularity Dvořák's model. In part this may be accounted for by the difference between genius and talent, but, perhaps also, the very limited local dimension represented by themes with a clear significance only in Ireland and the relative lack of assimilation of the melodies, means that to an extent the work is not only founded on, but trapped by its locality. To make use of native material while transcending its reference and reaching a broader audience is a much more complex process.

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Dvořák's advice to English and American composers may not have been the starting point for succeeding generations in the British Isles, but their activities indicate that they had come to conclusions which were remarkably close to his recommendations. In England, the activities of Vaughan Williams at the turn of the century as a folksong collector (over a period of nine years he collected folksongs in Norfolk, Hereford, Surrey and Sussex) soon produced all manner of creative fruit. An interesting aspect of the creative fertilisation of folksong is that it found its way into Vaughan Williams' edition of the English Hymnal (published 1906), thus introducing a new generation of Church of England worshippers to at least a small part of their heritage of traditional melodies. Of course, the most profound effect was on Vaughan Williams' own music. While fashions have changed concerning the reception of his work, no-one can deny his central role in English music in the twentieth century. He influenced at least two generations of composers and even reactions against his style and ethos by, for instance, Benjamin Britten, are to an extent conditioned by his colossal achievement. For composers like Vaughan Williams, a crucial creative issue was the identity of English music. For much of the nineteenth century, taste in Britain among audiences and composers was largely based on an appreciation of German music, with the work of Mendelssohn, Brahms and Wagner comprising a key corpus which was modestly extended by the music of such 'exotics' as Gounod, Dvořák and Tchaikovsky. Vaughan Williams' recognition of this frankly stultifying state of affairs led to an attempt to escape the German-orientated English tradition, epitomised in many ways by his teacher, the Anglo-Irish composer, Charles Villiers Stanford, by studying with the French composer Maurice Ravel during three months in 1908. He

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<sup>13</sup> A modern recording by the Ulster Orchestra conducted by Bryden Thomson is available on the Chandos label (CHAN 8314).

also consciously allowed his own researches into folksong to enrich his musical style.

In some ways the work that best epitomises these new compositional impulses in Vaughan Williams' early maturity is the song cycle for tenor, piano and string quartet, *On Wenlock Edge*. The influence of Ravel is to be heard in the harmony and instrumental texture at many stages, notably at the very start of this song cycle in the song 'On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble' with its depiction of a high wind. The folksong impulse is more complex to define and relates quite closely to the choice of poetry used. The cycle is based on six poems from A. E. Housman's collection *A Shropshire Lad*, which, since its publication in 1896, proved something of a lodestone for many British composers. The poems have a perceptible bitter-sweet melancholy often focused on lost love and youth, a quality shared with many folk ballads in currency at the time. The title of this paper is taken from the second of the poems set by Vaughan Williams, three verses which in many ways distil the inchoate longing found in much of Housman's verse:

From far from eve and morning  
And yon twelve-winded sky,  
the stuff of life to knit me  
Blew hither: here am I.

Now for a breath I tarry  
Nor yet disperse apart  
Take my hand quick and tell me,  
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;  
How shall I help you, say;  
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
I take my endless way.

Vaughan Williams' superb setting of this affective, if somewhat obscure, love song lifts it into a much more exalted category. The composer's simple, yet sophisticated musical line, energised by an ear attuned to the nuances of spoken English is the new accent Vaughan Williams had been seeking for his music. An accent fired by his native language and the way in which folksong reflects it as a very direct form of musical communication. As far as the music is concerned, 'The stuff of life' goes beyond the poetic content of the verse; in many ways it results from Vaughan Williams' tutelage under

the influence of folksong, the manner in which his musical voice had been refined by his contact with this native resource.

The direct impact of folksong is to be felt in Vaughan Williams' first two symphonies. French influence, in the introduction of the first movement of 'A London Symphony' (no. 2) more especially that of Debussy than Ravel, is again to be found set against the background of broadly conceived symphonic structures. In a 'A Sea Symphony' the scherzo contains folksong elements, namely 'The Golden Vanity' and 'The Bold Princess Royal'; in 'A London Symphony' (described almost as accurately as a 'Symphony by a Londoner'; Vaughan Williams spent much of his creative life in the capital city) the ambience is much enhanced in the atmospheric slow movement by the song of a lavender-seller played by a solo viola. These picturesque aspects of the use of folksong are charming, but they are relatively slight set against the extended span of the symphonic canvasses involved. The crucial feature of the involvement of folksong is the way in which it focuses vital musical elements such as melody and consequently harmony. Folksong is a potent presence in terms of both explicit reference and more general melodic outline in Vaughan Williams' operas *Hugh the Drover* (described as a Ballad Opera) and *Sir John in Love*, from which perhaps his most famous folksong-based piece derives, *The Fantasia on Greensleeves*.<sup>14</sup> While folksong quotation is less obviously part of Vaughan Williams' compositional armoury in later works, the folk affinities remain in melodic outline, modal inflection and many aspects of harmonic detail. Later generations may have challenged many of the precepts of Vaughan Williams' practices, but the lessons learned early in the twentieth century have been well assimilated. The definition of folksong may need to be extended to blues, spirituals, jazz and beyond in the work of such composers as Michael Tippett, James MacMillan and Mark-Anthony Turnage, but the principle is still there with folksong continuing to be very much 'the stuff of life' as far as contemporary music in the British Isles is concerned.

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<sup>14</sup> Arranged by Ralph Greaves.

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