RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: MODERNIST?

REFLECTIONS ON VAUGHAN WILLIAMS AS A MODERNIST COMPOSER THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF THE STYLE AND RECEPTION OF HIS *FANTASIA ON A THEME BY THOMAS TALLIS*

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Submitted: February 23, 2001

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Vaughan Williams is widely regarded as one of the great English composers of the twentieth century. He was a key figure in the revival of English music in the early twentieth century and is noted for his emphasis on the development of a 'national'[1] style. The classification of Vaughan Williams in the context of music of the early twentieth century is divergent. The commonly held view regards him as achieving a distinct national character in the common practice tradition[2] while, more recently, there has been a second opinion which recognizes the strains of similarity between the compositional philosophy and style of Vaughan Williams and the that of the widely recognized 'modernist'[3] composers of his era, particularly Stravinsky and Bartok.[4]

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[1] In his paper "Should Music Be National" Vaughan Williams explains his position on the nation nature of music as such "Art, and especially the art of music, uses knowledge as a means to the evocation of personal experience in terms which will be intelligible to and command the sympathy of others. These others must clearly be primarily those who by race, tradition, and cultural experience are the nearest to him; in fact of those of his own nation, or other kind of homogeneous community … in spite of the fact that they have a musical alphabet in common, nobody could mistake Wagner for Verdi or Debussy for Richard Strauss. And, similarly, in spite of wide divergences of personal style, there is a common factor in the music say of Schumann and Weber." (Vaughan Williams, Ralph. *National Music and Other Essays.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p 1-2)

[2] This view is prevalent in most musical textbooks and encyclopedias such Grout's *History of Western Music* and the *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

"Vaughan William's music drew inspiration form nation sources – English literature and traditional song, hymnody, and earlier English composers such as Purcell and Tallis – as well as the European traditions of Bach and Handel, Debussy and Ravel." (Grout, Donald Jay and Palisca, Claude V. *A History of Western Music* 5th ed. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company: 1996 p706)

"The achievement that most clearly transcends this period ambience is the Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis for double string orchestra (1910, rev. 1919). This is perhaps the first unqualified masterpiece; it is also the work that has traveled most widely, which challenges the view that the composer's 'Englishness' necessarily limits his appreciation abroad. He was drawn to Tallis' Phrygian tune when researching for The English Hymnal and found in it a grandeur and an intimacy which crystallized something essential to his own musical style: this way of writing for string, though many times modified, may be traced as afar as the Ninth Symphony". (Millen, Miriam. "Ralph Vaughan Williams." Stanley Sadie, ed *New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians* . W. Norton, 1980 vol. 19, p572)

[3] Key proponents of this view has been James Day in his biography *Vaughan Williams* and Robert P. Morgan's discussion of Vaughan Williams in his *Twentieth Century Music.*

"Yet something new also sets these works apart from the main line of this tradition. Most immediately noticeable is the music' essentially melodic and nondevlopmental character, consistent with the folk influence. But most original is a new way of unfolding the musical materials so as to produce large-scale formal structures, not dependent upon marked levels of contrast and thus basically nondramatic in character.. Yet this melodic, nondevlopmental quality, which in a less composer might lead only to a series of disconnection tunes, is achieved by Vaughan Williams through variational procedures that allow each movement to evolve logically from its origins. This highly personal conception of symphonic continuity was perhaps his most important

Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*[5] represents one of his first mature and personally characteristic pieces. Is this *Fantasia* merely an adaptation of renaissance style within the common practice tradition or does it represent a break from the common practice tradition using renaissance modality as a pivot point? If the latter is true how did he achieve this? What were the reactions of the general musical populace to this piece? Why has the view of Vaughan Williams as a 'modernist' only recently begun to gain momentum?

It is from the *Fantasia* that this paper attempts to address the question of Vaughan Williams 'modernity'. After presenting a brief background of Vaughan William's life, education, interest in folk and early church music, and the musical situation in England and the rest of Europe in the early twentieth century this paper examines the strength of the 'Vaughan Williams a modernist' argument through a technical analysis of his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. It also surveys the reaction to the piece and the composer's own views on the music of his age as expressed in his lectures and essays.

Vaughan Williams' compositional style, as exhibited in his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, was 'modern'. His use of mode in his particular piece was, in a way not entirely dissimilar to Bartok's approach, a clear break from the common practice tradition particularly major/minor tonality. It in through this aspect of his work rather than, like

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contribution to the new English school of symphonic writing" (Morgan, Robert P. *Twentieth-Century Music.* New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991 p134)

[4] Bartok in particular shared Vaughan William's interest in folk songs. "In his autobiography of 1921 (Bartok) identified the 'decisive influence' of his folk music studies as the manner in which these 'freed me from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys' leading eventually 'to a new conception of the chromatic scale, every tone of which came to be considered of equal value and could be used freely and independently'" (Wilson, Paul. *The Music of Bela Bartok.* New York and London: Yale University Press, 1992 p2)

[5] Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis for double string orchestra was written in 1910 and later revised and shortened by Vaughan Williams in 1919. It is based on Tallis' Third psalm tune from the Archbishop Matthew Parker's Metrical Psalter of 1567-8 which was included in the English Hymnal, edited by Vaughan Williams, of 1906.

some of his contemporaries, being through an explicit rejection of tonality, traditional voice-leading practices and treatment of dissonance, that Vaughan Williams' voice is characteristic of the twentieth century rather than the nineteenth..

Vaughan Williams was born in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire on October 12, 1872. His early musical education was provided by his aunt who taught him piano, harmony, and through bass. He began to study the violin at seven and later changed to the viola while at Charterhouse, his public school. After Charterhouse he attended the Royal College of Music[6] for two years, where he studied composition with Hubert Parry[7], followed by three years at Cambridge, 1892-5, where he studied with Henry Wood[8] and earned a MusB in 1894 and a BA in history in 1895. After Cambridge he returned to the Royal College of Music to study with Charles Stanford,[9] it was here he befriended Gustave Holst, a fellow student.[10] The friendship between Vaughan Williams and Holst extended to musical confidences – the two men would critique each other's work in progress, a practice they

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[6] The summer between his Charterhouse and the Royal College of Music he went to Munich where he heard his first Wagner opera.

[7] Who Vaughan Williams describes as being "very insistent on the importance of form as opposed to color. He had an almost moral abhorrence of mere luscious sound." He also attributes from parry an inheritance of "the great English choral tradition which Tallis passed on to Byrd, Bryd to Gibbons, Gibbons to Purcell, Purcell to Battishill and Greene, and they in their turn through the Wesleys to Parry. He has passed on the torch to us and it is our duty to keep it alight" (Vaughan Williams p182)

[8] Who was "the finest technical instructor" Vaughan Williams studied with. (Vaughan Williams p183)

[9] Vaughan Williams did not see eye to eye with Stanford. He writes "the details of my work annoyed Stanford so much that we seldom arrived at the broader issues. Stanford never displayed great enthusiasm for my work. But his deeds were better than his words, and later on he introduced my work to the Leeds Festival, thus giving me my first opportunity of a performance under these imposing conditions."(Vaughan Williams p185)

[10] For more detail on Vaughan Williams early years see Vaughan Williams "A Musical Autobiography" in his *National Music and other essays* (p175-4), James Day's biography of Vaughan Williams (p1-35) and Miriam Millen's article in the Groves (p569-70).

maintained until Holst's death.[11] They also shared a common interest in folk and Elizabeth music and, by logical extension, modality.[12]

So by 1895 Vaughan Williams had tread the established path of musical education for *bourgeoisie* gentlemen of his generation. He was part of a tradition of English music emerging from what Morgan terms "a sort of musical Dark Ages". Morgan highlights Parry and Stanford as representing a

> "more cosmopolitan outlook and interest in current musical developments in Europe…(and Delius and Elgar as)…both fully aware of the most up-to-date continental tendencies and producing work at a level of technical assurance and expressive individuality."[13]

The musical situation in England near the turn of the century was full of the promise of a new day. One which would see a break from the 'common practice' tradition of the 19th century and looked forward to establishing a new and viable national school of composition.

Yet, at this point, we have in the 23 year old Vaughan Williams a man, who by his own admission,[14] was quite ignorant of music literature beyond his tastes. Which at that time centered around Byrd, Purcell, and Elgar in the English tradition and Bach and Gounod in the continental one. He disliked the idiom of Beethoven, a distain which continued, albeit with recognition of it greatness, till his death. He had experienced performances of Wagner in 1890 and Verdi in 1891, which had successfully shaken some of his musical prejudices and

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[11] Vaughan Williams referred to these meetings as 'Field Days' and described them as 'the greatest influence on my music'. He discusses their meetings in his 'A Musical Autobiography' essay: "How soon we started our 'Field Days' I cannot remember, but it must have been soon. On these occasions we would devote a whole day or at least an afternoon to examining each other's compositions .. they continued .. for nearly forty years. I think he showed all he wrote to me and I nearly all I wrote to him." (*National Music* p193).

[12] "Together with Gustave Holst, Vaughan Williams instituted the revival of modalism in Britain – not so much the modalism of British folk song as that of sixteenth-century vocal polyphony – Tallis, Byrd, Weelkes, Morely and the rest" (Sackville-West, Edward, and Desmond Shawe-Taylor. *The Record Guide*. London: Collins, 1951. p786)

[13] Morgan p128-9

[14] "I was painfully illiterate in those days, even more so than now." (Vaughan Williams p181)

expanded his musical world beyond the realm of what he had been taught. In particular Vaughan Williams notes that the experience of Verdi's *Requiem* demonstrated to him that musical devices he thought to be cheap, even incorrect, could in fact be used effectively in building a powerful, successful composition. He reflects on the day he heard the Verdi *Requiem* in his essay "A Musical Autobiography" stating that "that day I learnt that there is nothing in itself that is 'common or unclean', indeed that there are no canons of art except that contained in the well-worn tag, 'To thine own self be true.'"[15] A lesson that was likely of great value once he 'discovered' folk songs.

During his second stint at the Royal College of Music Vaughan Williams and Stanford had disagreed over Vaughan Williams' use of flattened sevenths. According to Vaughan Williams, Stanford

> "tried to prove to me that the flat leading note was pure theory and that all folk-songs descended on to the tonic, but I felt in my bones that he was wrong, though it was only later, when I heard traditional singers, that I was able to prove my point to my own satisfaction. Max Bruch was equally worried by this idiosyncrasy of mine"[16]

Vaughan Williams had studied with Bruch in Germany in 1897 an experience that Vaughan Williams relished not only for the development of his compositional technique but for the encouragement that Bruch offered him, which was a first Vaughan Williams.

The next major influence in Vaughan Williams' musical development was the commencement of his career as a folklorist. Vaughan Williams' awareness of folk songs dated back to his childhood and he first clearly recognized his appreciation for the idiom in 1893 through the publication of *Dives and Lazarus* in *English Country Songs*.[17] He collected his

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15 *National Music* p 183

16 *National Music* p187

17 Collected and arranged by Lucy Broadwood and Fuller Maitland.

first folk song on December 4, 1903 when he heard a performance of *Bushes and Briers* at a tea party. In 1904 Vaughan Williams joined the Folk Song Society[18] and collected 234 songs that year, a total which would rise to 810 over the following ten years. Also in 1904 he was given the opportunity to edit the English Hymnal,[19] through this he was not only received his introduction to Tudor polyphony but at also transcribed the Tallis melody that was to become the basis of his *Fantasia.*

Vaughan Williams saw folk songs and the Tudor polyphony as two key elements in the restoration of English national music. To his mind "creative salvation would be found, not in imitating foreign models, but the regenerative use of native resources…(He was interested in)…music for the people (and found this in the music of the church and folksong which he felt expressed)…the common aspirations of generations of ordinary men."[20] Vaughan Williams writes in his essay "Should Music be National" that "If the roots of your art are firmly planted in your own soil and that soil has anything individual to give you, you may still gain the whole world and not lose your own soul."[21]

The experience of the English Folk Society was not unique. Similarly in Hungary, though not in such an institutionalized fashion, Bartok and Kodaly undertook the exercise of collecting folk songs. The logic behind their collections was the same as in England – that

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[18] In the same year Cecil Sharp challenged the society to stop merely sitting around discussing folk songs and to go out into the countryside and the towns and start to collect them.

[19] Vaughan Williams describes the experience thus "In 1904 I undertook to edit the music of a hymn-book. This meant two years with no 'original' work except a few hymn-tunes. I wondered then if I were 'wasting my time'. The years were passing and I was adding nothing to the sum of musical invention. But I know now that two years of close association with some of the best (as well as some of the worst) tunes in the world was a better musical education than any amount of sonatas and fugues)." (Vaughan Williams p190).

[20] "his feeling for genuinely popular traditions amounted to a reverence that was almost religious: the most obvious comparison is with Bartok and Kodaly in Hungary" (Millen p569)

[21] Vaughan Williams p11

the music of the "common practice" era was primarily rooted in Teutonic tradition. Hence a national style could only be achieved by going back to the "true" music of the nation – folk music.[22]

In 1908 Vaughan Williams went to Paris and studied with Ravel.[23] The musical situation in France at the end of the nineteenth century was not entirely dissimilar to England in that there was a lack of a viable national style. There had been an attempt made to rectify this situation through the creation of the *Societe National de Musique* by Saint-Saens, Chabrier, and Faure but it was only with the emergence of Debussy that France found its national voice and international reputation. Ravel was the next French composer to achieve international acclaim. Morgan notes that "Ravel once stated that his sole aim as a composer was to achieve 'technical perfection,' and the extraordinary care and meticulousness of his workmanship reflect that attitude"[24] and that the tonal pull, regular rhythmic patters, and clear frame divisions

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[22] Morgan quote form Bartok's comments "On the Significance of Folk Music" about countries with little musical tradition finding their musical heritage "For an artist it is not only right to have his roots in the art of some former times, it is a necessity. Well, in our case it is peasant music which holds our roots." Bartok concluded by quoting Kodaly: "folk music must for us replace the remains of our old music … A German musician will be able to find in Bach and Beethoven what he had to search for in our villages: the continuity of a national musical tradition" (Morgan p105)

[23] Vaughan Williams wrote of his motivations to study with Ravel and the experience in his essay "A Musical Autobiography

"In 1908 I came to the conclusion that I was lumpy and stodgy; had come to a dead-end and that a little French polish would be of use to me. So I went to Paris armed with an introduction to Maurice Ravel. He was much puzzled at our first interview. When I had shown him some of my work he said that, for my first lesson, I had better 'ecrire un petit menuet dans le style de Mozart'. I saw at once that it was time to act promptly, so I said in my best French: 'Look here, I have given up my time, my work, my friends, and my career to come here and learn from you and I am not going to write a "petit menute dans le style de Mozart".' After that we became great friends and I learnt much from him. For example the heavy contrapuntal Teutonic manner was not necessary; 'complexe, mais pas complique', was his motto. He showed me how to orchestrate in points of color rather than in lines. It was an invigorating experience to find all artistic problems looked at from what was to me an entirely new angle". (*National Music* p 190)

Vaughan Williams also noted with pride that "Ravel paid me the compliment of telling me that I was the only pupil who 'n'ecrit pas de ma musique'" (Vaughan Williams p191).

The friendship between the two composers extended beyond the summer of 1908, Ravel visited Vaughan Williams the following year.

[24] Morgan p125

> "set Ravel somewhat apart from the main currents of early twentieth-century musical development, which were still significantly colored (even in the case of Debussy) by the esthetics of late Romanticism. On the other hand, his music offers clear anticipations of the neo-classical development that was to dominate the postwar years".[25]

Vaughan Williams' studies with Ravel were a key step in the consolidation of his compositional style, in her article in the Groves Miriam Millen notes that "contact with the music of Ravel and other contemporary composers taught him subtlety of effect, nuance, color, and atmosphere."[26]

Elsewhere in Europe in the period between 1907-1909 the musical world was experiencing a paradigm shift. After pushing tonality as far as it could go with his Chamber Symphony in 1907 Schoenberg's output during next two years stands as a landmark of the twentieth century's conscious break from tonality.[27] Morgan defines the two key aspects of Schoenberg's music during this period…

> "First, the degree of emphasis on nonharmonic tones finally reaches a point where these tones lose their inclination to resolve at all, thus making it impossible for the listener to infer even a latent triadic background. … The second aspect, closely connected to the first, is there more or less complete abandonment of conventional tonal functions in Schoenberg's music during the 1908-09 period. No longer does a single pitch, or the major or minor triad based upon this pitch, act as a constant functional reference for the other tones (and the triads built upon them)."[28]

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[25] Morgan p126

[26] Millen p813-4

[27] According to Morgan "In a two-year period of astounding creative activity, from 1907 to 1909, Schoenberg made his final break with tonality and triadic harmony and moved into the previously uncharted areas of free chromaticism, producing a series of works that fundamentally altered the course of music: the Second String Quartet, Op. 10; Three Piano Pieces, Op. 11; Two Songs, Op. 14; the song cycle Das Buch der hangenden Garten (the Book of the Hanging Gardens), Op.15; Five Orchestral Pieces, Op.16, and the monodrama Erwartung(Expectation) Op. 17." (Morgan p67)

[28] Morgan p67-8

Also during this period Bartok was beginning to integrate his folk song findings into his work. For Bartok the folk songs 'freed me from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys' leading eventually 'to a new conception of the chromatic scale, every tone of which came to be considered of equal value and could be used freely and independently'"[29] His first piece that demonstrated this was his String Quartet No. 1 in A minor which was written in 1908. Though this piece did not make the radical break from tonality that was characteristic of Schoenberg's output during this period it did through its modality stretch the limits of the existing tonal system in new ways.

1909 saw a new direction in the musical style of Stravinsky. In this year his orchestral works *Scherzo Fantastique* and *Fireworks* premiered. Until 1908 he had studied under Rimsky-Korsakov and had primarily produced works based on traditional classical techniques. *Scherzo Fantasique* was of particular significance concerned issues of tonality because it was based on octatonic pitch relationships.[30] Stravinsky also had an affinity to the folk music of his native land, Russia, though this was to have a more subtle effect on his work than on either Bartok or Vaughan Williams.

The following year, on September 6 of 1910, Vaughan Williams conducted the first performance of the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* at the Three Choirs Festival. The piece is based on Tallis' third psalm tune from the Archbishop Matthew Parker's Metrical Psalter of 1567-8. A tune which, as noted above, Vaughan Williams was exposed to when

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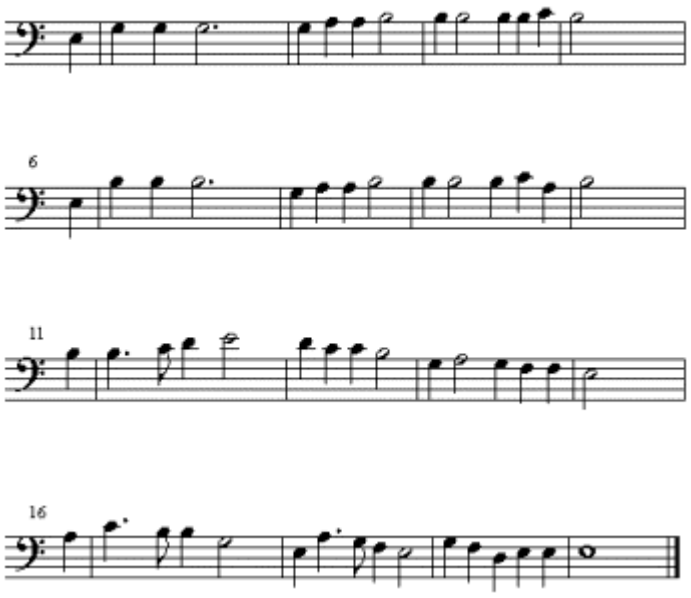
[29] Wilson p 2

[30] Fireworks on the other hand "is almost completely anchored in the home key of E major, remaining largely bound to the tonic triad. To compensate for the absence of tonal progression, Stravinsky concentrates on manipulating small motivic units, mostly confined to the same pitch repertory, and enlivens the essentially motionless harmonic background through virtuosic instrumentation, anticipating tow of the most characteristic features of his later style." Morgan p90

he transcribed it for the English Hymnal in 1904.[31] The melody of the tune is found in the tenor part of the four voice setting for the second psalm of the Psalter and is written fully in the Phrygian mode.

Tenor line from Tallis' setting of Psalm Two



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Vaughan Williams wrote his *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* for double string orchestra with a solo section.[33] Its form is derived from the renaissance form of a fantasy, a loose type of form which was noted for its free flowing nature and varying texture.

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[31] There is an interesting point of debate brought about by Robert Illing's analysis of Vaughan Williams' transcription of Tallis' psalm tunes in the English Hymnal. With particular reference to the third tune, the basis of the Fantasia, Illing states that "Both in appearance (by the transposition and modification of key signatures) and in tonality (by the alteration of accidentals) the tunes lose their modal lines and confirm with the classical major-minor system", that "the modification regarding thirds and rhythmic features dispose of certain elements of Tallis' style; presumably either Vaughan Williams regarded these as unacceptable by early twentieth century choirs or did not like them" and that "the famous Third Tune escapes virtually in part (its pitch and signature, and even some bar thirds are returned) but suffers disaster tonally and rhythmically. Vaughan Williams worked on editing the English Hymnal in 1904, the Fantasia was written five years later and revised in 1920. In the intervening years between the transcription and even the initial composition Vaughan Williams' compositional style and musical knowledge developed considerably. It has been established the Fantasia shows a sophisticated understanding of the mode of the piece. Were his modifications in the Hymnal for the benefit of the choirs that would be using the book as Illing suggests or was it an issue of initial ignorance on Vaughan Williams part?

[32] This is the a copy of Vaughan Williams' transcription of the tune from the English Hymnal, reprinted in Pike, Lionel. "Tallis-Vaughan Williams-Howells: Reflections on Mode Three" in *Tempo* 149

This piece is an interesting case study as on first listening the lushness of the strings gives the impression of a *Romantic* composition. The use of Tallis' theme, in particularly in the sections of direct quotation, strongly evoke the atmosphere of a Renaissance work. However a close listening, combined with analysis of the score, demonstrates that significant elements of this piece are very firmly rooted in the twentieth century.

The first section of the piece, bars one through seventy-eight, present a good representation of Vaughan Williams' harmonic treatment of the Tallis theme. The theme is not stated in full until bar seventy-eight and the section preceding this uses only parts of the melodic material of the theme.

The piece opens in g minor, at least the two flats in the key signature and the use of g as the tonal center would indicate this. However the opening chords of the piece, played homophonically by entire ensemble, are G major, F major, g minor, A flat major, and G flat major. In bar three the piece moves to a D pedal point in the violin with a chord progression similar in character to the opening chords in the rest of the ensemble – D major, C major, d minor, E flat major, D major, C major, D major, E flat major, D major. This is answered a few bars later by D major, E flat major, C major, D major, E flat major, C major, and D major.

This is followed by the introduction of some of the theme material in g minor in bar thirteen. The Phrygian mode in g reads G-A flat-B flat-C-D-E flat-F-G and results in the following possible chords – g minor, A flat major, b flat minor, c minor, d diminished, E flat major, and f minor. In the section between bar thirteen and thirty the theme material is

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[33] The instrumentation is as follows:
Soloists: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violincello
Orchestra I: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violincello, Violincello (last desk), Contrabass
Orchestra II: Violin I (1 desk), Violin II (1desk), Viola (1 desk), Violincello (1 desk), Contrabass (1 player) --- players to be taken from the 3rd desk of each group and sit apart from Orchestra I
See Appendix C for the score.

exploited by the entire ensemble. The chords, for the most part, can be taken as being either g minor or g Phrygian with the exception of the tonic triad, which is sometimes made major through the naturalization of the B, the supertonic triad, which is made major through the use of A flat, and the dominant triad, the only occurrences of F sharp in this section are in this context. This is interesting because Vaughan Williams is neither adhering to the minor key or the Phrygian mode, rather he is borrowing from both for the sake of the harmony. However this harmony is not following traditional progressions, rather it is governed by the theme material. The result in this section is a seemingly Renaissance in style but the deviation from the mode gives it a more modern feel.

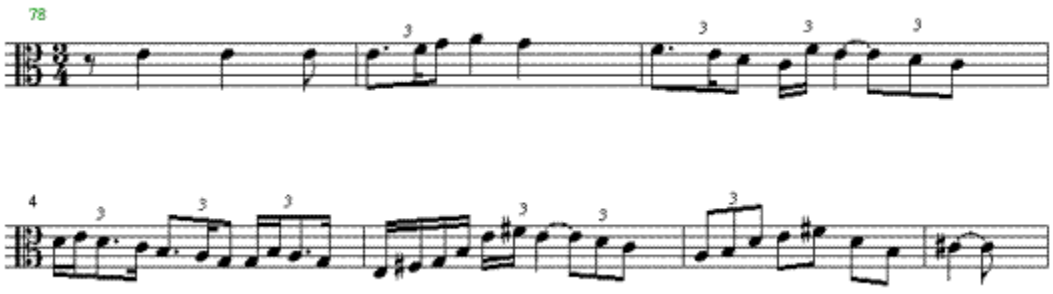
The section between bar thirty-one and forty-six the harmonic rhythm slows considerably as the first violin expands on the theme material. Vaughan Williams uses both B naturals and B flats in this line – which combined with the harmonization with G chords gives the impression of a shift between G major and g minor/Phrygian this, and the fact that the only other chord used in the section up to bar forty is A flat major, succeeds in giving neither an impression of a major/minor or a pure modal tonality. The second violin plays moving sixteenth note figures to decisively outline the harmony. The rest of the ensemble uses the rhythmic and some of the melodic elements of the theme but the realization of these details is purely secondary and harmonic in nature. The speed of the harmonic rhythm increases in bar forty-one, though the impression of g a the tonal center starts to shift through the progression of g minor, E flat major, b flat minor, c minor, g minor, A flat major, f minor, c minor, A flat major, and E flat major.

Bar forty-seven to fifty reintroduces the homophonic chord texture first seen in the opening bars with the two main progressions: f minor, E flat major, A flat major, f minor, and B major, e minor, c sharp minor, and D major. This prepares for the shift, though not

using a traditional technique of modulation, in key signature in bar fifty-one to no sharps or flats.

Bar fifty-one through seventy-eight continue the homophonic texture and combine it with some antiphonal sections. The use of accidentals in bars fifty-one through fifty-seven and the use of F sharp major, d minor, g sharp minor and E major chords ensures that the shift into e Phrygian is delayed in spite of the new key signature. By the end of bar fifty-seven there is a sense of c Phrygian with the introduction of D flat, E flat, A flat, and B flat. This continues through bar sixty-one where F major is introduced, moving through a chord progression of b minor, G major, f sharp minor, E major, D major, F major until it starts to center around E major in bar sixty-eight, the progression of chords till bar seventy-one being E major, B major, E major, a minor, E major, D major, e minor, F major, e minor, B flat major (with a sustained G), and back to E major. This section ends, from bars seventy-one to seventy-eight, with a very clear sense of E major. The E major chord is interspersed with non-chord tones on the second eighth notes of each beat which in the first three bars (seventy-two to seventy-four) are from B major and a minor and last three bars (seventy-five to seventy-seven) are from D major and F major, the use of second inversion in these last three bars servers to obscure the E as a tonal center thus setting up the piece for a shift into G for the full statement of the theme.

Viola Solo from Bar 78 in *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*



In bars seventy-eight to eighty-five we have the first full statement of the Tallis theme. Which, according to Lionel Pike, starts in the Phrygian Mode but shifts away with the introduction of the F sharp and C sharp.

Overall the opening section of the piece has some other interesting characteristics which are relevant in regards to its 'modernity'. The vast major of the chords are triads in root position, this serve to emphasize the root progression of the chords and their quality and to emphasize the point that the piece engaging in a traditional use of keys. This novelty in the harmonic progression however is offset and made more subtle by the fact that the voice leading used in the piece quite traditional. Motion is primarily by step and the leaps are moderate and usually a reflection of the use of theme material. There is also little dissonance in the piece in the vertical sense as the vertical sonorities almost always only consist of chord tones. There is one section where a series of parallel fifths occur in succession (namely bars eleven and twelve) but is not a governing trend in the piece. Overall the piece is not radical in most details of composition. It is more in its treatment of modal theme material and harmonization of that material that it is 'modern' than it being so as result of it explicitly breaking the rules of the 'common practice' period.

Generally the reception[34] of the piece was positive, the earlier perception of the work is that it was a traditional piece based on a combination of renaissance tonality and baroque forms. More recent analyses identify the more progressive elements of the work, particularly in the area of tonality.

Perhaps part of the explanation for the initial reception of the piece as a very traditional work is the attitude of its composer. Though very vocal about the social issues

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[34] See Appendix A for a collection of critical quotes on *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

It is of note that most of the available analysis is based on the revised version of the piece which Vaughan Williams did in 1919. Though the revisions only served to shorten the piece, the actual compositional style nor the melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic components were modified

and implications of music Vaughan Williams discussed little in the way of compositional technique beyond the idea of using folk song as a basis for national music. What he did say in this area in his lectures and writings[35] expressed a distain for music that was new for the sake of newness, what was different solely for the purpose of denoting individually, and composer who adopted the 'modern' vocabulary in an attempt to make 'modern' music. It is possible that these ideas could've been misconstrued as distain for progress. However these seem to be intended more as words of caution than of negativity. Vaughan Williams, fully aware of the potential downfalls of unlimited creative license, seemed to prefer the moderate approach to progress but was not content to merely rest in the realm of "common practice" tonality. It seems that to was to him it was preferable to push the bounds of the tonal system from the angle of modality and from within a context of traditional forms.

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis stands as an early testament to Vaughan Williams decidedly modern outlook on composition. Though perhaps not 'modern' in the Schoenberg tradition of intellectual composition, Vaughan Williams' style, which is demonstrated in its earliest form in the *Fantasia*, was not merely an extension of 'common practice' tonality. The piece is clearly a break from the major/minor system and a deviation from the late nineteenth century extreme chromaticism. Vaughan Williams demonstrates in his treatment of the Tallis theme an awareness of the modal implications of the melody but avoids a completely modal harmonic treatment of the melody, thus evading a pure Renaissance style realization of the piece.

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[35] See Appendix B for a collection of Vaughan Williams' thoughts on
The use of older forms and pre-existing materials in modern composition
The use of folk song as a basis for composing 'national' music
Modern Music

Appendix A – Commentary on *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*

Banfield, Stephen *Music in Britain: The Twentieth Century* (1995)

"Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (1910) was. ..pruned (in 1919), though it can still seem to tread the same ground once too often. The elaborate string textures are impressive and Tallis' tune offers flexibility of meter and Phrygian modality; in extrapolating from it Vaughan Williams essay neither the fertile cross-rhythms nor the impelling dissonances of Tudor polyphony. His archaisms are more extreme yet more approximate – a burgeoning rubato solo line, stemming ultimately from plainsong, and sifting triads as uniform colouring of melody" (p183)

Cross, Milton. *Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music.* (1962)

" The Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis, for double string orchestra, combines two old forms; the fantasia and the concerto grosso. The fantasia form provided Vaughan Williams with a mold in which a germinal idea could grow and change ecstatically without structural restrictions." (p816)

Day, James. *Vaughan Williams*

"There is nothing sensationally original about the Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis of the kind that might have been invented by Ravel, or even by RVW himself, on a keyboard. Yet it is unquestionably the first work by Vaughan Williams that is recognizably and unmistakably his and no one else's. The influences have all been absorbed and fused into a rich, warm, and powerful style. The textures, whether tenuous or full, have a radiance that was new even in a tradition that had recently absorbed such fine works for strings as Elgar's Introduction and Allegro; the craftsmanship and the uniquely convincing form of the piece were as the Elizabethan and Jacobean fantasias that RVW knew so well, yet as new and fresh today as they were when the solemnly passionate piece was presented to that first audience." (p35-36)

Grout, Donald Jay and Palisca, Claude V. *A History of Western Music* (1996)

"Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis for double string orchestra and string quartet, in which the antiphonal sonorities and the rich texture of aesthetic triads in parallel motion are heard within a modal framework that also characterized many of his later compositions." (p707)

Howes, Frank. *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams.* (1954)

"The Tallis Fantasia is quite another matter: in it is found one of the forces that have emancipated not only one composer but English music as a whole from continental influences." "The two revivals of folk-song and the Elizabethans, were in full swing and exercising to the maximum their beneficial fertilization influence in the first decade of the twentieth century. The most conspicuous technical feature common to both is their modality.

The ordinary tonality of the majo0minor key system seemed to be dissolving in extreme chromaticism or sheer exhaustion. Neo-modalism, if only a *reculement pour mieux sauter*, offered a way round the impasse of three centuries of harmonic development. All that had been learned of modulation could be applied to the other scales, over and above the Ionian and the Aeolian which had dominated the major-minor key system" (p87)

Morgan, Robert P. *Twentieth-Century Music.* (1991)

"Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis for strings, reflecting Vaughan William's growing interest in earlier English art music. Not only is the theme taken from the sixteenth-century English composer whose name it bears; the form of the one-movement piece bears close resemblances to the typical sectional structure of the Elizabethan fantasy (or "fancy"). On the other hand, the main textural idea, whereby the full string orchestra is pitted antiphonally against two smaller ensembles of four and nine players drawn from it, is derived from Baroque models. The overall formal conception, a freely evolving variational treatment of the basic melodic material, would consistently characterize Vaughan Williams' music from this point on" (p133)

Warburton, Annie Osborn. "Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis," in *Analysis of Musical Classics.* (1963)

"The music in not based on the modern tonalities of major and minor key, but goes back to the older modes. The theme itself is in the Phrygian mode: white notes of the piano E to E', transposed to G. However the fantasia does not keep to this scale, but is full of "false relations". Look, for example, at the first five chords. The first is a major chord on G (G, B natural, D), but the third is a minor triad of B flat, and is followed by a major triads of A flat and G flat, and then by a single D natural. This is neither modal nor in a major or minor key, though it is diatonic in the sense that g feels like the tonic through the Fantasia. The false relations surely owe something to Purcell, though they are more stringent than his would be. The rhythmic freedom of the Fantasia has a Tudor flavor, and the parallel triads, involving consecutive fifths and octaves, as in bars 6-8 go back to an even earlier tradition, that of organum" (p327)

Appendix B – Vaughan Williams on …

The use of older forms and pre-existing materials in modern composition

> "Sometimes of course the clock goes round full circle and the twentieth century comprehends what has ceased to have any meaning for the nineteenth" ("Should music be National" in *National Music* p8)

> "Many of the most revolutionary artistic thinkers are in externals most obedient to traditional forms. In contrast to the iconoclasts of today there stand out one or two truly original figures, such as Sibelius, who have something to say that no one has said before, but who are nevertheless satisfied with the technical content which has been handed down to them by their ancestors" ("Tradition" in *National Music* p59).

> "Why should music be 'original'? The object of art is to stretch out to the ultimate realities through the medium of beauty. The duty of the composer is to find the *mot juste*. It does not matter if this word has been said a thousand times before as long as it is the right thing to say at that moment. If it is not the right thing to say however unheard of it may be, it is of no artistic value. Music which is unoriginal is so, no simply because it has been said before, but because the composer has not taken the trouble to make sure that this was the right thing to say at the right moment." ("A Musical Autobiography" in *National Music* p190)

> Do we not perhaps lay too much stress on originality and personality in music? The object of the composer is to produce a beautiful work of art and as long as the result is beautiful it seems to me it matters very little how that result is brought about." ("The Evolution of the Folk Song" in *National Music* p44)

The use of folk song as a basis for composing 'national' music

> "I do hold that any school of national music must be fashioned on the basis of the raw material of its own national song" ("The Evolution of the Folk Song" in *National Music* p41)

> "On using folk songs …"but what are they doing with them when they have got them? It is of no use disguising them so that their fragrance is entirely lost or making them vehicles for mere cleverness" ("Some Conclusions" in *National Music* p66)

Modern Music

> "Life is very exciting for the young composer nowadays; he is free of all rules, the means at his disposal for making new effects are almost unlimited; he is taking part in a breathless race to produce what is more and more unheard of" ("Some Conclusions" in *National Music* p66)

> "The word 'modern' has been much abused, but I would point out that there is all the difference in the world between music which is modern and that which is 'in the modern idiom'. The 'modern idiom' consists of a handful of clichés of instrumentation coupled with a harmonic texture watered down from the writings of composers who flourished twenty-five years ago." ("Gustave Holst: an Essay and a Note" in *National Music* p129)

> "Modernity does not depend on certain tricks of diction but on the relationship between the mind that expresses and the means of expression. The modern mind needs a modern vocabulary, but the vocabulary will not make the modern mind. Some composers have the modern mind but have not found the idiom which suits it, many more have all the tricks of the diction but not the informing mind" ("Gustave Holst: an Essay and a Note" in *National Music* p129)

Appendix C – Score Analysis for *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*

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