

English Musical Renaissance

Week 9: Ralph Vaughan Williams (Part 2)

1. Vaughan Williams (1872- 1958)

- 1872: Born in Gloucestershire, privileged background (politically left-wing)
- Studied with:
 - Stanford (Royal College of Music)
 - Bruch (Berlin)
 - Ravel (Paris)
- In addition to composing:
 - Collector and editor of English folksong
 - **Co-editor of *The English Hymnal* (1906)**
 - **Writer and lecturer on music**
 - Choral conductor (both professional and amateur musicians)
 - Public figure
- 1958: Died

Wrote in a wide variety of genres:

- 9 symphonies
- Several operas
- Large- and small-scale choral works
- Film music

Influences:

- English music: Parry, Tudor and folksong
- French composers: Ravel & Debussy
- Sibelius

Stylistic traits

- Modal melody and harmony
- Pentatonicism
- Polyrhythmic writing
- Polymodality

2. Pastoralism in music

- A romanticised view of the rural past
- BUT, an irrecoverable past
 - Urbanisation
 - War
- Musical signifiers:
 - Folk song
 - Modes
- Listening: *The Lark Ascending* (1914)
 - Rhapsodic solo opening
 - Static strings beneath
 - Folk-like theme unfolds

3. A Pastoral Symphony (1921)

Background:

- 3rd Symphony: written 1916 -1921.
- The title ‘Pastoral’ created much misunderstanding
- In WW1: Vaughan Williams was stationed in Northern France
 - The symphony is about the battle fields of France

Musical elements:

- Four non-contrasting movements
- Abundance of modal language
- Limited dynamics much of the time.

Is there a programmatic element?

- Bugle call in second movement
- Vocalise in the final movement
- What did Vaughan Williams say about it?



4. A *Pastoral Symphony* described by Vaughan Williams in a letter to Ursula Wood

'It's really war-time music – a great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance wagon at Ecoives [sic] and we went up a steep hill and there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset – it's not really lambkins frisking at all as most people take for granted.'

Letter from Vaughan Williams to Ursula Wood, 4 October 1938; quoted in Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 121.

5. A Pastoral Symphony: listening

Listening: movement I

- opening: block parallel chords
- French influence of Debussy and Ravel.
- compare with *Nuages* (Debussy)
- VW's work less 'pastoral' and 'idyllic' and more unsettling?
- Therefore, more **dystopian** than utopian

6. Other movements

Listening: excerpt movement ii

- Opening theme on solo horn with static strings beneath
- Later in the movement a ‘bugle theme’ on natural trumpet again, over a static modal background - excerpt (and see score attached to email)

Listening : excerpt movement iv

- Wordless vocal part (for soprano or tenor)
 - a lament?
 - haunting
 - unexpected in a symphony

7. *Riders to the Sea* (1932)

Opera based on JM Synge's one-act play about a fishing community in the west of Ireland.

A stark subject matter:
equally stark musical setting

Vaughan Williams was drawn to the play's:

- subject
- style
- Synge's setting of language (realistic)

CHARACTERS

MAURYA (an old woman)	Contralto
BARTLEY (her son)	Baritone
CATHLEEN (her daughter)	Soprano
NORA (her younger daughter)	Soprano
A WOMAN	Mezzo-Soprano
CHORUS OF WOMEN (on stage)	
CHORUS OF WOMEN (off stage)	

(Each chorus contains parts for solo voices)

Men and Women (non-singing)

Scene: A cottage kitchen on an Island off the West Coast of Ireland.

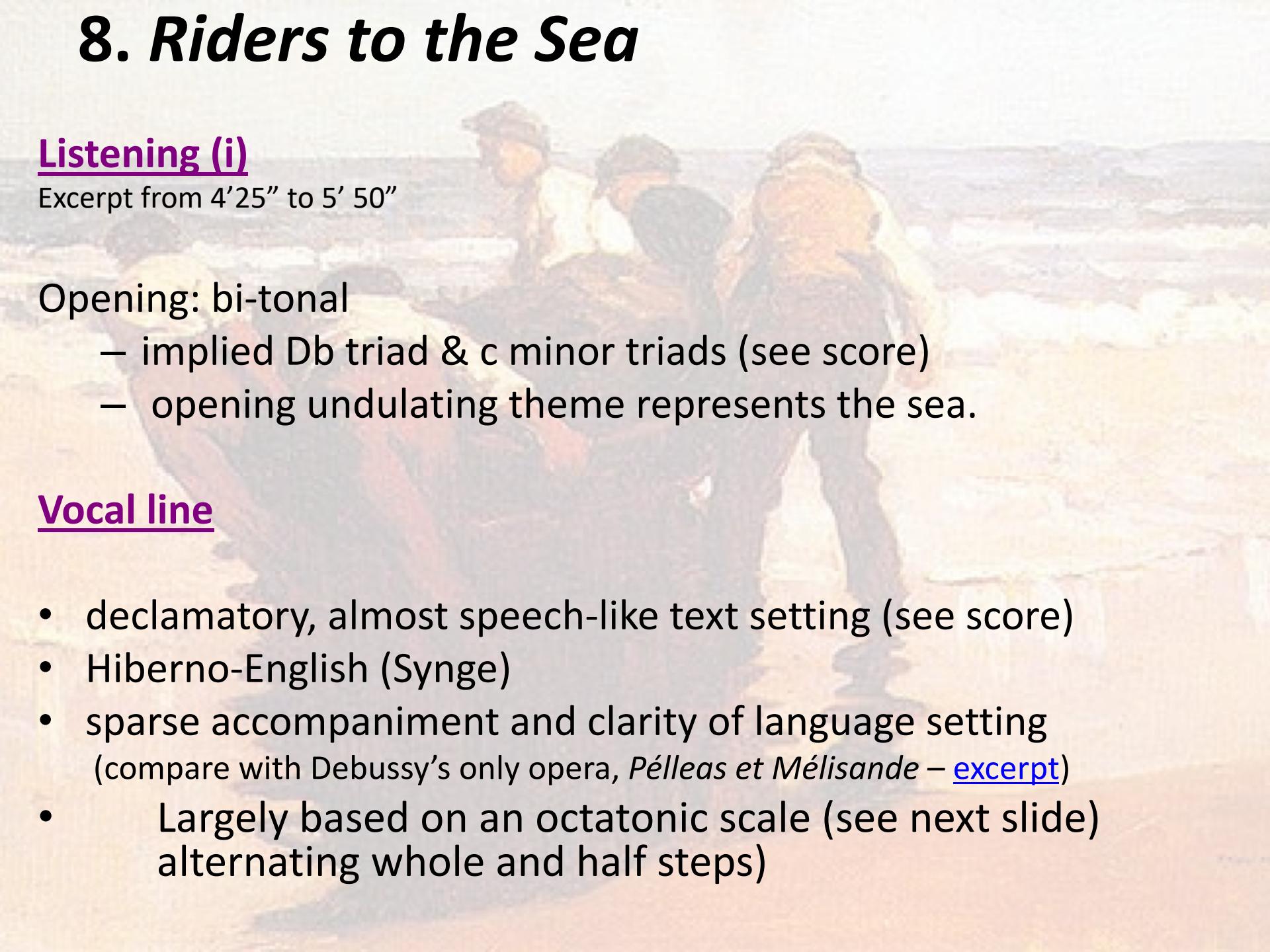
Time: Late afternoon.

ORCHESTRATION

2 flutes, 1 oboe, 1 cor anglais, 1 bass clarinet, 1 bassoon, 2 horns, 1 trumpet, timpani, bass drum, sea machine, strings (not more than 6, 6, 4, 4, 2). There are also parts for clarinet and bassoon 2, in lieu of bass clarinet.

Riders to the Sea – Vocal Score (Oxford University Press, 1964)

8. *Riders to the Sea*



Listening (i)

Excerpt from 4'25" to 5' 50"

Opening: bi-tonal

- implied Db triad & c minor triads (see score)
- opening undulating theme represents the sea.

Vocal line

- declamatory, almost speech-like text setting (see score)
- Hiberno-English (Synge)
- sparse accompaniment and clarity of language setting
(compare with Debussy's only opera, *Pélleas et Mélisande* – [excerpt](#))
- Largely based on an octatonic scale (see next slide)
alternating whole and half steps)

9. Octatonicism

Opening lines of *Riders to the Sea*

NORA CATHLEEN

Where is she? She's ly - ing down, God help her, and may-be sleep- ing; if she's a - ble.

Pitches arranged as an octatonic scale

st st st st

t t t t

10. Maurya: ‘They are all gone now’

Listening (ii)

- Use of consonant harmony (though still basically modal).
- Contrasts with the ‘harsh’ musical language earlier in the opera
- The keening women sing the ‘sea’ theme (a vocal lament).
- The sea can do no more damage to her family.
- Maurya’s acceptance captured in diatonic harmonic language.

Summary

Aspects and influences of VW's musical language:

Progressive/modernist harmonic idiom comes from:

- modality, polymodality
- folksong and Tudor elements

French influence of Debussy and Ravel (esp. harmony and sonority).

Sparse modernist setting of *Riders to the Sea*

- Bi-tonality
- Octatonicism
- But also, diatonicism

Listening: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis; The Lark Ascending; A Pastoral Symphony; Riders to the Sea*