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Ryan M. Ross

Mississippi State University, [rmr269@colled.msstate.edu](mailto:rmr269@colled.msstate.edu)

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# “Blaspheming Beethoven?": The Altered BACH Motive in Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony\*

Ryan Ross  
Starkville, MS

When it came to divulging the inspirations behind his symphonies, Vaughan Williams was notoriously coy. In the cases of the Third, Sixth, and Ninth, for instance, he made private and sometimes contradictory disclosures that were not widely known until long afterward. With the Fourth Symphony, we have an especially intriguing case of the composer's protracted equivocation. Initially, when he was asked about the work's meaning, he allegedly replied: "It is about F Minor."<sup>1</sup> Critical reactions were more pointed. Some early commentators remarked upon the work's harsh dissonances and other "modern" qualities, and one suggested that it failed to live up to continental standards of musical modernism.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Michael Kennedy reported the notion, which later circulated among some of the composer's friends, that the Fourth depicts fascism and/or the grim political state of Europe in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> But Vaughan Williams disavowed these extra-musical connections in a private letter to his friend, R. G. Longman, which was first printed in Kennedy's seminal volume, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*:

1. I am not at all sure that I like it myself *now*. All I know is that it is what I wanted to do at the time.
2. I wrote it not as a definite picture of anything external—e.g. the state of Europe—but simply because it occurred to me like this—I can't explain why.<sup>4</sup>

According to Ursula Vaughan Williams, however, there *was* more of an explanation:

His own story of the genesis of the Fourth Symphony was that he had read an account of one of the "Freak Festivals" in which a symphony, he couldn't remember who had written it, was described in some detail. Like the myth of Beethoven and *Fidelio*, his breakfast-time reaction

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\* The musical examples in this essay taken from Vaughan Williams's compositions are used with the kind permission of Oxford University Press (OUP). The full print score of the Fourth Symphony upon which this article's musical examples are based was published in London by OUP in 1935.

- 1 See Kennedy, "Fluctuations in the Response," 283.
- 2 See respectively: Howes, "B.B.C. Orchestra," 12; McNaught, "Vaughan Williams's Symphony," 452; and Cardus, "The New Vaughan Williams Symphony," 6d.
- 3 Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 245. Prominent examples include Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 137–38; and Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 3.
- 4 Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 247.

was an immediate “il faut que je compose cela.” So, without any philosophical, prophetic, or political germ, No. 4 took its life from a paragraph in *The Times*.<sup>5</sup>

A letter from Vaughan Williams to American music critic Olin Downes (dated September 25, 1943), the contents of which Allan W. Atlas published only recently, confirms Ursula’s story but adds some further, striking details:

I don’t think I like it any more than you do, but that does not mean I’m sorry I wrote it. I somehow had to at the time, for what reason I don’t know; not certainly for the reasons given by some of my kind friends in the press: e.g., that it represented the turmoil of Europe at the moment or that I was trying to go one better than the mid-Europeans. So far as I can remember it grew out of two things, one I had read a verbal description of some modern symphony, by whom I forget, and blaspheming Beethoven, I quoted him and said to myself “il faut que je compose cela.” Musically, I think also it grew from Beethoven, as it was first thought of at the time of the Beethoven centenary, and as I daresay you have noticed the opening chord is identical with the opening chord of the finale [of Beethoven’s Ninth]. That is all I can tell you about it, and I don’t think I ever wore my art on my sleeve as much as in this letter, so please keep it for your own ears only.<sup>6</sup>

These quoted texts show that, as with some of his other symphonies, Vaughan Williams confided different revelations about his Fourth Symphony to different people on different occasions. Two other points are noteworthy about the last quotation in particular. First, Vaughan Williams seems to confirm that with his Fourth Symphony he is responding to a “modern” model without attempting to outdo the continental modernists. This is discernible even in Ursula’s less detailed account, but there is some disagreement in the scholarly literature on this note. Some writings have argued that Vaughan Williams’s Fourth is congruent with, if not consciously modeling, a modernist aesthetic. Alain Frogley, for instance, remarked in his 1996 volume’s introductory essay that far “from being based on English folksong, the Fourth is notorious as a violent and convulsive work, dominated by grinding dissonances of an aggressively modernistic and, it might be argued, international kind. Furthermore, it is the culmination of a string of pieces written between the mid-1920s and mid-1930s that clearly suggest analogies with, if not the actual influence of, continental movements.”<sup>7</sup> More recently, Anthony Barone’s assessment of the Fourth’s manuscripts led him to view the work’s creative process as exhibiting “a peculiarly modernist struggle between organic unity and fragmentation,” and “Vaughan Williams’s own struggle to reconcile musical content with modernist intentions.”<sup>8</sup> However, in a 2010 essay J. P. E. Harper-Scott proposed a different view,

5 Vaughan Williams, *R. V. W.*, 190.

6 Atlas, “Ralph Vaughan Williams,” 7. This letter, and many others penned by the composer, have recently become available via *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams* database, which is hosted by the RVW Trust and, according to its editor, Hugh Cobbe, was launched in October 2017 to mark the tenth anniversary of the death of Ursula Vaughan Williams. It is a tremendous resource for Vaughan Williams research: <http://vaughanwilliams.uk>.

7 Frogley, “Constructing Englishness in Music,” 18.

8 Barone, “Modernist Rifts in a Pastoral Landscape,” 61, 83.

arguing that with his Fourth Symphony Vaughan Williams is playfully parodying modernism rather than genuinely projecting it.<sup>9</sup>

This leads to a second noteworthy point about Vaughan Williams's letter to Downes: he admits that the Fourth deliberately invokes Beethoven. (Indeed, Vaughan Williams had, in his musical autobiography, already acknowledged publicly the resemblance of his Fourth's opening with that of the finale in Beethoven's Ninth.<sup>10</sup>) Once again, this aspect of the work has received some attention in the secondary literature, most extensively in the form of Laura Gray's essay outlining musical links between Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony and Beethoven's Fifth. The former work, argues Gray, is the result of his struggle in reconciling the Beethovenian symphonic paradigm with recent trends in music. According to her, "the composer aligned the Fourth with the Beethovenian legacy, legitimizing the new work through references and allusions, and grappling with the genre's and his own place in the modern musical world."<sup>11</sup> In a shorter article, Geoff Brown seems to concur, noting the work's Beethoven parallels and dubbing it a "modern Beethovenian symphony."<sup>12</sup> However, Harper-Scott, in his earlier-quoted essay, suggests that Vaughan Williams's aesthetic in the finale "seems to refer to Beethoven in a deflated and at times sardonic spirit," and that the tone of his materials here is "parodistic."<sup>13</sup> Lionel Pike remarks along similar lines, suggesting that with his Fourth Symphony Vaughan Williams "apparently set out to twist the best-known elements of the Teutonic heritage."<sup>14</sup> Finally, in a 2013 essay, Frogley not only allows that the Fourth can be seen partially as "a barbed commentary on developments in modern music," but also that it "presents a bleakly parodistic and disturbing encounter" with the Beethovenian symphonic legacy, and that it twists "formal and gestural elements of Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies in a way that seems to repudiate the *per aspera ad astra* plot archetype of these works."<sup>15</sup>

While one could write at length about the ways in which Vaughan Williams's Fourth structurally subverts Beethovenian symphonism even as it appears to pay

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9 Harper-Scott, "Vaughan Williams's Antic Symphony." It is worth mentioning that Harper-Scott's views on musical modernism underwent a drastic revision soon after he published this essay, as is evidenced by the contents of his book, Harper-Scott, *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism*. Nonetheless, while the latter text may disavow some of his former views, I continue to find compelling the argument presented in the essay quoted here.

10 Vaughan Williams, "A Musical Autobiography," 190.

11 Gray, "I Don't Know Whether I Like It," 187.

12 Brown, "The Times," 15–16. This short writing is an interesting attempt to locate the article, concert, and work that Ursula Vaughan Williams refers to in her account of the Fourth's origins. Brown concludes that no specific work fit the bill, but that an August 1, 1931, *Times* report entitled "The New Music Festival: A Retrospect" was likely the article referenced, treating as it does overall trends in modern symphonic composition.

13 Harper-Scott, "Vaughan Williams's Antic Symphony," 192.

14 Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 108.

15 Frogley, "The Symphony in Britain," 387.

homage to it (and indeed, Anthony Barone’s article would be a good starting point in this endeavor), there is perhaps further reason to consider the Fourth in part as a display of Vaughan Williams’s strong ambivalence toward the German master. This concerns one of the two main recurring motives of the work, which may well invoke the name of Bach, being a transposition and slight alteration of the well-known BACH cipher (B $\flat$ -A-C-B). Examined against Vaughan Williams’s written criticisms of Beethoven, where multiple times Bach is mentioned in preference, this motive may be one indication that references to Beethoven’s music in the Fourth Symphony are mischievous as much as laudatory. In other words, what if this motive in the Fourth is a key musical means with which to “critique,” or maybe even “blaspheme,” Beethoven? If it is, why would Vaughan Williams do such a thing, even in jest? This essay considers these questions.

To gauge Vaughan Williams’s motivations for musically treating Beethoven in this manner, we must turn to his published prose, which is comprised mainly of letters, articles, and transcribed speech transcripts.<sup>16</sup> Of these, one writing substantially addresses Beethoven and his music, while some others are less (or less directly) concerned with them. Perhaps the first thing that strikes the reader about these texts taken together is their ambivalent tone. On the one hand, Vaughan Williams clearly believed that Beethoven was a great composer and readily praised him as such. For example, he thought of Beethoven as constituting a major point in the line of great Western composers, and as being one of those great figures in whom the entire classical era culminated.<sup>17</sup> He admired, and quoted on several occasions, Beethoven’s remark that his music “will please one day,” holding it up as a positive ideal wherein composers should want to be understood by their audiences rather than shock or alienate them.<sup>18</sup> He also acknowledged the greatness of Beethoven’s “musical sense” and symphonic form.<sup>19</sup> In his early article comparing Palestrina and Beethoven, he considers the latter to be the greater figure and praises both for delighting in beauty.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Vaughan Williams indicated repeatedly that he detested Beethoven’s idiom, and expressed his ongoing struggle to reconcile what he was compelled to admit was great about the music with a personal distaste for aspects

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16 For a comprehensive list of Vaughan Williams’s writings (including annotations for each), see Ross, *Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 247–79.

17 Vaughan Williams, “Ivor Gurney,” 256; “What Are the Social Foundations of Music?,” 232.

18 Vaughan Williams, “First Performances,” 4, “Sibelius at 90,” 6, “Hands off the Third,” 15; quoted in Manning, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 90, 177, 120; “The Evolution of the Folk-Song,” 45; and “Some Conclusions,” 67.

19 Vaughan Williams, “Fugue,” 121, quoted in *National Music and Other Essays*, 301; and Vaughan Williams, “The Words of Wagner’s Music Dramas,” quoted in Manning, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 135.

20 Vaughan Williams, “Palestrina and Beethoven,” 37, quoted in Manning, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 128.

of it. In multiple instances, he did so by using Bach as a favored point of comparison to Beethoven. For example, consider this excerpt from his autobiography, first published in 1950 for inclusion in Hubert Foss's monograph:

To this day the Beethoven idiom repels me, but I hope I have at last learnt to see the greatness that lies behind the idiom that I dislike, and at the same time to see an occasional weakness behind the Bach idiom which I love.<sup>21</sup>

He writes similarly in a 1956 letter to Kennedy, which again references Bach:

You ask if my likes and dislikes change as I get older: certainly they do. I could see no point in Beethoven when I was a boy,—and I am still temperamentally allergic to him. But I am beginning to find out that he is nevertheless a very great man. I used to enjoy Schumann's sentimental songs very much when I was young, but I can't bear them now. Schubert has also gone off the boil as far as I am concerned. But Bach remains!<sup>22</sup>

The most substantial record of Vaughan Williams's views on Beethoven and his music is his essay entitled "Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony," authored 1939 to 1940 (not many years after he had completed the Fourth Symphony) and published in 1953 within a volume that includes other writings.<sup>23</sup> His ambivalence toward Beethoven, which we see present across the body of his prose, is front-and-center here. In addition to two statements that he is "not a pious Beethovenite" and "not a loyal Beethovenite," there are multiple indications that this essay, in the words of Byron Adams, "tempers admiration with trenchant criticism."<sup>24</sup> Since analyzing its contents could constitute a substantial writing in and of itself, we will mainly concern ourselves with some key points relevant to the present thesis. With the very first sentence, Vaughan Williams informs us that this will not be a rigorous analysis, but rather more of a commentary on the work's structure—a series of "personal 'reactions' (as our American cousins say) to what I believe, together with the B Minor Mass and *St. Matthew Passion*, to be the greatest of choral music."<sup>25</sup> Once more, the reference to Bach's works is pointed, for in the next paragraph (worth quoting almost in full) he compares the idioms of Bach and Beethoven, strongly asserting his preference for the former:

I ought to explain that the nineteenth-century idiom is naturally repugnant to me. My natural love is much more the Gothic-Teutonic idiom of J.S. Bach and his predecessors—not

21 Vaughan Williams, "A Musical Autobiography," 181.

22 Vaughan Williams, letter to Michael Kennedy, dated July 1, 1956, quoted in Cobbe, *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 588.

23 Vaughan Williams, *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony*. This book was later wholly incorporated into *National Music and Other Essays*. It was authored around the time that he planned to conduct Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the 1940 Leith Hill Music Festival, a performance that never transpired. For more on this, see Vaughan Williams, *R. V. W.*, 226–30.

24 Adams, "Vaughan Williams's Musical Apprenticeship," 33. For the Vaughan Williams quotes, see Vaughan Williams, *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony*, 84, 87.

25 Vaughan Williams, *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony*, 83.

“Baroque,” by the way, as it is fashionable nowadays to stigmatize Bach’s music. Bach has nothing to do with the mechanical ornament of Baroque architecture, which is much more akin to Beethoven, but should be compared to the natural exfoliation of a Gothic cathedral. Thus it is, so to speak, in spite of myself, that I have to acknowledge the supremacy of the Ninth Symphony.<sup>26</sup>

This immediate comparison of Bach and Beethoven sets the tone for the entire essay, wherein, as with other writings we have seen, Bach again figures a preferred standard against which to measure Beethoven. Perhaps the most striking example of this occurs when Vaughan Williams juxtaposes the artistic outlooks of both composers in the course of his preliminary remarks on the whole of the Ninth Symphony. Once more, the passage is worth quoting at length:

In the first two movements, at all events, Beethoven transcends even himself. The music is like no other music, either before or since. It seems sometimes to have come straight from the eternal source of truth without human intervention. Standing on this ground, Beethoven, I have to admit, is in a different sphere from my beloved Bach. Beethoven lived in a time of greater intellectual expansion than Bach, whose theology was purely anthropomorphic, and whose music does not look for the Supreme Being beyond the stars, but see him humanly as the friend of souls, the Great King, the Bridegroom. Beethoven when he looks into eternity sees clearer and further than Bach; but Bach when he thinks of his very human deity has the richer and warmer consciousness. So on the human side Bach has Beethoven completely beaten. For example, when Beethoven touches the Crucifixion in the *Missa Solemnis*, he achieves none of the profound mystery of human piety and divine suffering, or the absolute quiet of death in Bach’s “Crucifixus.” He has to be content with a conventionally sentimental, El-Greco-like setting. It was not in these terms that Beethoven could express himself. For eternity we turn to Beethoven, for humanity to Bach.<sup>27</sup>

One other comparison to Bach in particular provides a backdrop for one of Vaughan Williams’s strongest criticisms of the Ninth Symphony—Beethoven’s manner of ornamenting his themes, especially (but not limited to) the third movement:

Perhaps it is Beethoven’s method of ornamenting his melodies which puzzles me the most. To start with, I cannot imagine why the melody of the slow movement, or of the “Joy” tune, wants ornament at all. Is this not gilding the lily? A great melody is for all time. When Beethoven, and often Mozart, start ornamenting their melodies they seem at once to make them if their period and there they remain. Surely if a melody is to be ornamented at all the ornament should grow naturally out of the original thought, and not be mechanically added to it by a stereotyped process. When Bach adds ornament to a melody I feel that this is the direct outcome of his overflowing emotion. When Haydn ornaments a melody it seems to me to be the natural childlike joy in a new anything. But with Beethoven the ornament seems introduced by a mechanical procedure.<sup>28</sup>

Vaughan Williams also describes the third movement as “the most Beethovenish” and therefore his least favorite, connecting it with a “nineteenth-century sublime”

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 90.

28 Ibid., 85.

idiom he despises.<sup>29</sup> He adds that the second subject and its added counterpoint “always tastes . . . a little of the Viennese drawing room,” pointing to the unaltered version of the first theme, and later junctures where the trumpets briefly interrupt with a new idea, as attractive contrasts.<sup>30</sup>

As we see from this essay and the other writings quoted, which span multiple decades, Vaughan Williams sometimes expressed his deeply ambivalent feelings toward Beethoven with the help of references to Johann Sebastian Bach. By holding Bach up as the embodiment of what he admired in a composer, he could better articulate his admiration for Beethoven’s achievement while at the same time expressing antipathy toward his aesthetic. Additionally, reconsidering these excerpts provides occasion to ask new questions about Vaughan Williams’s Fourth Symphony and its relationship to Beethoven. Can we be confident that Vaughan Williams was simply “[aligning] the Fourth with the Beethovenian legacy” by way of its references to Beethoven’s Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, as Gray suggests?<sup>31</sup> Does not his consistently expressed attitude on this matter make it more likely that the Fourth’s “nods” to Beethoven are at least somewhat sardonic in intent? Moreover, the presence of Bach in Vaughan Williams’s written criticisms of Beethoven also prompts questions about the altered BACH motive in the context of a symphony that the Englishman explicitly connected with Beethoven. Is the name of Bach, albeit thinly disguised, partially a stick with which to beat Beethoven in his Fourth Symphony, as in his prose? Let us now turn to this question.

Immediately after the dissonant opening in the Fourth Symphony, which pits C and D $\flat$  octaves against one another and constitutes Vaughan Williams’s acknowledged “cribbing” from the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, we encounter two motives that the composer himself recognized in his program note for the work’s premiere as major recurring ideas.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 1.** Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 4 in F Minor, first main motive.



**Figure 2.** Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 4 in F Minor, second main motive.

29 Very likely, Vaughan Williams was referring to this “nineteenth-century sublime” idiom when he referred to the “Beethoven idiom” in the Foss excerpt quoted above.

30 Vaughan Williams, *Some Thoughts on Beethoven’s Choral Symphony*, 91.

31 Gray, “I Don’t Know Whether I Like It,” 187.

32 Vaughan Williams, Program note for the premiere of the Fourth Symphony, quoted in Manning, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 355 (the composer spelled these pitches out in whole-note values).



After providing musical examples for these motives in his program note, Vaughan Williams points out that the first is not the BACH theme, showing that the intervals are not an exact representation of it (which he then provides).<sup>33</sup> On face, this is true. However, there are several reasons to believe that this explanation is disingenuous. First, it is somewhat curious for Vaughan Williams to mention the “BACH theme” at all if it has nothing to do with the main motive. Why offer this denial “out of the blue” except for the purpose of subterfuge? (He could be responding to listener remarks during rehearsals about the motive’s similarity to BACH, but he does not mention this if so.) Second, and even more suspiciously, Vaughan Williams’s statement ignores, as if deliberately, the following in the symphony’s opening measures: a transposed but otherwise unaltered BACH statement placed (almost hidden) between the opening minor-second oscillations and a single D $\flat$  pitch directly preceding the very first statement of the altered BACH motive (in this instance spelled E–E $\flat$ –F–E). In fact, this statement is also echoed in the lower voices almost simultaneously. Here is the opening sequence of pitches, with both the unaltered (i.e., correctly transposed) and altered BACH motives labeled in the treble:



Figure 3. Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 4 in F Minor, mvt. 1, mm 1–7 (reduction).

As Pike points out, although we find the altered version of the BACH motive in this symphony more often than the unaltered one, the manner in which both motives occur at the very beginning seems to suggest a deliberate twisting of the former.<sup>34</sup> He was not the first to notice. As early as 1963, A. E. F. Dickinson remarked upon this sequence, writing the following: “Indeed, it might almost be suspected that in his spontaneous opening the composer found himself treading on and jumping off the ‘Bach’ wire, and then decided to outdo B-A-C-H with the discipline of the monotonous B-A-H-B variant.”<sup>35</sup> Anthony Barone writes that the alteration of the BACH motive in this symphony is “a parody” of its archetype, and “both homage and impish subversion.”<sup>36</sup> Third, and perhaps most crucially, Vaughan Williams’s opening reference to Beethoven’s Ninth is itself inexact, despite his claim to the

33 Ibid.

34 Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 113.

35 Dickinson, *Vaughan Williams*, 294.

36 Barone, “Modernist Rifts in a Pastoral Landscape,” 81.

contrary. Again as Pike points out, Beethoven's opening chord in his finale has a B $\flat$  over a D Minor chord resolving briefly to A, while Vaughan Williams's opening D $\flat$  resolves to C in a slightly different figuration.<sup>37</sup> But the gesture is unmistakably similar. This demonstrates that a reference does not need to be precisely identical to its source material to be legitimately recognized as derivative of said material. Weighed against Vaughan Williams's denial that the altered BACH motive refers to its ostensible namesake, these observations add to our suspicion both of his prevarication on this point and of a suggestion that this motive stems from mischievous intent.

Beyond the fact that this motive appears at the beginning of a symphony that opens with an admitted Beethoven reference, and in a work Vaughan Williams explicitly connected in part with the latter composer, there are two other reasons why we might view it as an agent of mischief. First, as Gray has pointed out, it seems to refer to Beethoven's "Fate" motive as much as it does Bach through its prominent presence amid other, acknowledged Beethoven references, and also through its obvious similarities of pitches and rhythms.<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 4a.** Beethoven, Symphony no. 5 in C Minor, op. 67, opening "Fate" motive.



**Figure 4b.** Beethoven, Symphony no. 5 in C Minor, op. 67, opening "Fate" motive (simplified).

Gray also points out that the altered BACH motive (she refers to it as the "motive x") is "pervasive" in Vaughan Williams's Fourth, as is the "Fate" motive in Beethoven's Fifth, and likewise generates much of its work's materials. In her words, "the insistence of motive x is only matched by the obstinacy of Beethoven's four-note motive" in their respective works.<sup>39</sup> Almost the same could be said for the other major motive given in figure 1. But Gray is surely correct to state that the altered BACH motive is the work's most recognizable.<sup>40</sup> It appears in its basic form in each of the movements, including a rather subtle emergence at the end of a second movement otherwise dominated by the motive in figure 1. What is the purpose of this latter statement except to prepare the altered BACH motive's forceful presence in the third movement (discussed below), or to help establish the motive's full cyclicism (its appearance in all the movements)? Moreover, beyond directly or immediately reminding the listener of the "Fate" motive, the altered BACH motive's very prominence in

37 Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 112.

38 Gray, "I Don't Know Whether I Like It," 188.

39 *Ibid.*, 189.

40 *Ibid.*

its work secondarily provides the thoughtful listener with a further corollary to the “Fate” motive and how it behaves in Beethoven’s Fifth.

Second, the notion that the altered BACH motive is a smirk-wearing stand-in for Beethoven’s “Fate” motive strengthens when we consider its appearances in the symphony’s later movements, precisely where references to Beethoven’s Fifth are overt. Consider first the third movement of Vaughan Williams’s Fourth, which discernibly echoes the scherzo of Beethoven’s Fifth. Again, Gray has already outlined these connections in detail—prominent examples being the opening ascending “arpeggiated sweeps” and the fugal trios in both.<sup>41</sup> Noteworthy for our purposes is not only that this borrowing begins with the use of the altered BACH motive at measure 5, but also that the composer uses it as the starting point for an accompaniment pattern which forms the backdrop of the introductory figure’s second statement.



Figure 5. Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 4 in F Minor, mvt. 3, mm. 8–13 (reduction).



Figure 6. Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 4 in F Minor, mvt. 3, mm. 37–44 (reduction).

41 Ibid.

At rehearsal 4, a whirling figure shared by the strings and woodwinds prepares a new idea that recalls, even if it is not consciously based upon, the narrow, chromatic motion of the altered BACH motive.

By this point, the music may be prompting the listener to recall other works apart from merely Beethoven's scherzo. James Day and Pike have already made connections between aspects of "Satan's Dance of Triumph" in the masque *Job* (1931), and the Fourth.<sup>42</sup> Although neither specifically mentions connections involving the third movement of the latter, some are perhaps discernible here. For instance, the whirling figure (Elliot Schwartz uses the term *swirling*)<sup>43</sup> and the chromatic-octatonic undulating figure beginning four measures later and forming the accompaniment to the theme at rehearsal 5 in the scherzo (both seen in figure 6), and the feeling of a dotted rhythm in the treble theme beginning at rehearsal 5 (see figure 7), all of which comprise the second subject, according to Pike,<sup>44</sup> arguably recall characteristics of the accompaniments and melodies at rehearsal P (and following) in *Job*.

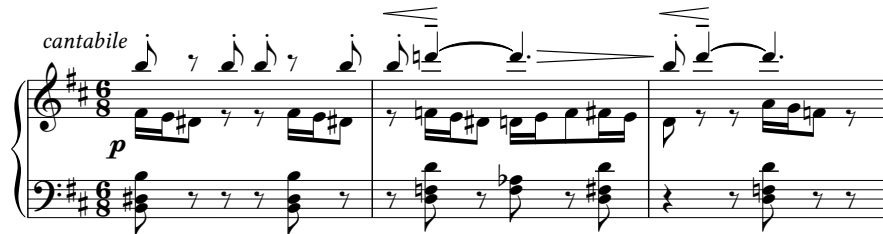


Figure 7. Vaughan Williams, *Symphony no. 4 in F Minor*, mvt. 3, mm. 48–50 (reduction).

Figure 8. Vaughan Williams, *Job* ("Satan's Dance of Triumph"), mm. 31–37 (reduction).

42 Day writes that the "cross-rhythmed hemiola" has "a distinct feel of 'Satan's Dance of Triumph' about it" (Day, *Vaughan Williams*, 201). Pike cites Dickinson's comment about leaping fourths being used for Satan in *Job* (Dickinson, *Vaughan Williams*, 283) and suggests that "the similar leaping fourths in the Fourth Symphony are also to be equated with evil." See Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 114.

43 Schwartz, *The Symphonies of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 81.

44 Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 134.

Furthermore, the dance is yet another Vaughan Williams-acknowledged Beethoven “cribbing”—in this case from the scherzo of the final string quartet (F Major, op. 135).<sup>45</sup> The dotted melodic rhythms and undulating accompaniment figures in “Satan’s Dance of Triumph” once more find plausible parallels in Beethoven’s scherzo (see figure 11).

The musical score is for the second movement of Beethoven's String Quartet no. 16 in F Major, op. 135, measures 32-41. It is marked 'Vivace' and is in 3/4 time with one flat in the key signature. The score is arranged for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Violoncello. The first system shows the Violin 1 and 2 parts starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic, while the Viola and Violoncello parts also start with *f*. The second system shows the Violin 1 and 2 parts moving to a piano (*pp*) dynamic, with a 'div.' (diviso) marking for the strings. The Viola and Violoncello parts also move to *pp*. The score includes various dynamics such as *dim.* (diminuendo) and *pp* (pianissimo).

Figure 9. Beethoven, String Quartet no. 16 in F Major, op. 135, mvt. 2, mm. 32–41.

This movement of Beethoven’s quartet may have another echo in the scherzo of Vaughan Williams’s Fourth Symphony. If we re-examine the undulating figure in figure 6, as well as the measures leading up to it, we notice that the former appears suddenly with fortissimo dynamics and a powerfully accented, disruptive rhythmic pattern. This may recall the odd but humorous intrusion sixteen measures into Beethoven’s scherzo, where a series of E<sub>b</sub> octaves momentarily disrupt both the rhythm and tonality of the opening phrase. The interruption in the Beethoven quartet, as in Vaughan Williams’s scherzo, is initially loud before quieting down.

45 Vaughan Williams, “A Musical Autobiography,” 190.

**Vivace**

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Violoncello

*ff*

*sf*

*ff*

*ff*

*sf*

*sf*

*sf*

Figure 10. Beethoven, String Quartet no. 16 in F Major, op. 135, mvt. 2, mm. 142–48.

Kennedy describes the scherzo of Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony as "truly Beethovenian" and "full of brusque, noisy jests."<sup>46</sup> Perhaps he was more right than he knew. What we have considered here may indicate that this scherzo's humor (Kennedy prefaces his remark by reminding us that "scherzo" means "joke") comes at Beethoven's posthumous expense. Another statement Vaughan Williams makes in his essay on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is significant in this context: "I usually dislike Beethoven's jokes immensely." This, interestingly, comes in the course of his discussion of the work's scherzo, for which Vaughan Williams expresses admiration in contrast to other scherzi by Beethoven. (He specifically singles out that of the Eighth Symphony for praise.)<sup>47</sup> Is what we hear in the scherzo of the Englishman's Fourth Symphony in part a critique not only of that in Beethoven's Fifth, but also of the latter's humor in general, aided by subtle references (or manners similar) to "Satan's Dance of Triumph" to provide a further, darker layer of comedy beyond the altered BACH motive's stand-in for the famous Fate motive?

46 Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 267.

47 Vaughan Williams, *Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Choral Symphony*, 107.

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet. It consists of four staves: Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Violoncello. The tempo is marked 'Vivace' and the dynamics are 'pp' (pianissimo). The music is in 3/4 time and F major. The score shows a rhythmic figure in the upper strings and a sustained ostinato pedal in the lower strings. The score ends with a double bar line and a 'dim.' (diminuendo) marking.

Figure 11. Beethoven, String Quartet no. 16 in F Major, op. 135, mvt. 2, mm. 8–20.

Equally noteworthy are the altered BACH motive’s roles in both the transition to the finale and the finale itself. In her analysis, Gray points out that the composer refers to the transition of the finale of Beethoven’s Fifth in his essay, “What Is Music?”<sup>48</sup> She then paints in broad strokes what transpires in the corresponding transition in the Englishman’s Fourth Symphony, noting its keen similarities to Beethoven’s transition, including the sustained ostinato pedal in the low strings and timpani, and the soft dynamics which gradually crescendo to the loud opening of the finale.<sup>49</sup> She does not discuss the repeated use of the altered BACH motive here, nor how it is prepared and undergirded by a rhythmic figure derived from the undulating theme in figure 6.

However, Gray does argue for one important difference at the following juncture from Beethoven’s Fifth—Vaughan Williams chooses a path of tonal ambiguity in his finale while Beethoven’s finale strongly affirms a C major end arrival. At the very least this indicates that Vaughan Williams’s symphonic outcome differs from the

48 Vaughan Williams, “What Is Music?,” 212.

49 Gray, “I Don’t Know Whether I Like It’,” 189–95.

**Figure 12.** Vaughan Williams, *Symphony no. 4 in F Minor*, mvt. 3, mm. 320–23  
(reduction, upper woodwinds and strings).

apotheosis of Beethoven's Fifth. In a reading of the Fourth as Beethovenian critique, this is but another reason for doubting the notion of the work as unalloyed homage. The final evidence comes with the coda (the fugal epilogue) of the finale, where the altered BACH motive makes its most pointed and prolonged appearance.

Multiple commentators have already analyzed the fugal epilogue, wherein the altered BACH motive makes repeated appearances leading up to the dissonant opening chords that reappear to close the work. The notion of this fugato as a closing disruptive gesture that prolongs and fails to resolve the symphony's harmonic tensions has also received considerable attention, as has the fact that this is the opposite of what occurs at the corresponding point of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.<sup>50</sup> However, if we view the altered BACH motive as an antagonistic element, its role in the fugal epilogue takes on special significance in how it colors these features and events. Not only does Vaughan Williams seem to be referring to the finale of Beethoven's Fifth and then rejecting its affirmative, heroic outcome, but he does so with an altered BACH motive as one of two fugal subjects (the main subject being the finale's secondary theme), emphasized through repeated statements, variations, and even inversions (e.g., mm. 375–77 and 425–26 in the trumpet, and mm. 428–30 in the strings). Additionally, Vaughan Williams's choice of a fugato to close the symphony may add to the argument that the altered BACH motive really is a veiled reference to Bach. One of Bach's trademarks, of course, was his mastery of and frequent recourse to the fugue. (The same could be said for Beethoven's later style, but this tendency is generally associated with works postdating the Fifth Symphony.) In the words of Pike, "To write a fugue on a theme that, though it may actually be B-A-H-B, is so close to the B-A-C-H shape that it reminds everyone of the B-A-C-H theme, is to invite all listeners to conclude that this is really another B-A-C-H fugue."<sup>51</sup> By re-

50 I point once more to Pike's analysis.

51 Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 149.



peatedly, if slyly, referencing not only the name of Bach to close this symphony, but also a chief trademark of his art, it strongly seems as if Vaughan Williams ends the work with a final mischievous gesture. This could signal not only that he is avoiding genuine Beethovenian apotheosis, but that he is both using humor in playful mockery of it and making one final expression of defiance using a thinly veiled reference to his preferred German master.

To conclude, let us briefly consider two possible objections to this article compound hypothesis, that is, Vaughan Williams’s main motive in his Fourth Symphony is a slightly surreptitious reference to Bach, that this motive assumes a prominent role in a work partially intended as a put-down of the Beethovenian aesthetic, and that these things both conspicuously mirror the tendency in his prose of praising Bach at the expense of Beethoven. First, would Vaughan Williams really conceal such aspects if he intended them, even to the point of denying that the main motive relates to BACH? Revisiting and expanding upon this article’s opening sentences, we see that there is strong precedence for believing so. After the Sixth Symphony (1944–46) was premiered, for instance, Vaughan Williams angrily denied the remarks of Frank Howes that the work relates to “the experience of war, its challenges, its sinister import for ultimate values, its physical bombardment even.”<sup>52</sup> The following year, Howes referred to the Sixth as “the War Symphony” in a *Times* notice for its recording and score publication, which elicited a stern letter of rebuke from the composer the very next day.<sup>53</sup> However, Vaughan Williams apparently referred to the Sixth as “The Big Three” during a private conversation (a reference to Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin, who were, of course, the Allies’ primary political leaders during World War II), signaling that war was, at least to some extent, connected with the work in his mind.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, as Jeffrey Richards points out, portions of the Sixth Symphony had their origin in music composed for the war propaganda film *The Flemish Farm* (1943), lending further credence to this extra-musical connection.<sup>55</sup> On yet another occasion, Vaughan Williams contradicted himself within a single sentence when he offered to Michael Kennedy the following Shakespearean association for the Sixth Symphony’s finale: “I do NOT BELIEVE IN meanings and mottoes, as you know, but I think we can get in words nearest to the substance of my last movement in ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life

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52 Howes, “Vaughan Williams’s New Symphony,” 7. For more on this denial, see Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 301–2; and Douglas, *Working with Vaughan Williams*, 16.

53 See Howes, “Vaughan Williams’s Last Symphony,” 8. Vaughan Williams’s letter in the following issue is printed in Cobbe, *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 453. Howes maintained his stance that the Sixth is a war symphony in Howes, *The Music of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 52–54. For a brief discussion on this, see Adams, “The Stages of Revision of the Sixth Symphony,” 1.

54 See Neighbour, “The Place of the Eighth,” 224. Neighbour cites a letter written to him by English composer Howard Ferguson, to whom Vaughan Williams made the remark after a run-through of the work at the Maida Vale recording studio no. 1 in London.

55 Richards, “Vaughan Williams and British Wartime Cinema,” 156.

is rounded by a sleep'.<sup>56</sup> A further point is the fact that Vaughan Williams confided to Ursula Vaughan Williams (once more via private correspondence) that his Third Symphony—the *Pastoral* (1916–21)—was inspired by his service in Great War France, and that “it is really war time music,” rather than the “Lambkins frisking” that “most people take for granted.”<sup>57</sup> This came after more than fifteen years of apparent public silence on the composer’s part about the work’s inspirations. Finally, there is the interesting case of the Ninth Symphony (1957, rev. 1958). In his program note for this work, Vaughan Williams was downright flippant about its extra-musical associations:

The second movement, *Andante Sostenuto*, seems to have no logical connections between its various themes. This has led some people to think it must have a programme since apparently programme music need not be logical. It is quite true that this movement started off with a programme, but it got lost on the journey—so now, oh no, we never mention it—and the music must be left to speak for itself—whatever that may mean.<sup>58</sup>

Nearly half a century later, Frogley revealed the extent of the Ninth’s links to Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in a detailed study of the manuscripts, which seem to indicate that the composer had held onto these extra-musical connections for far longer than he let on in his program note.<sup>59</sup> (It is also worth noting that, although it was not initially his idea to do so, Vaughan Williams deliberately preserved for later study a substantial amount of manuscript materials for his Ninth.<sup>60</sup> He must have realized that its programmatic origins and overtones would one day be discovered and discussed.)

The above circumstances together rehearse the composer’s famous duplicity with regard to meanings and motivations behind his works. Such duplicity, of course, serves as a caution against taking any position on Vaughan Williams’s extra-musical intentions too far, including arguing for it to the exclusion of other important considerations. One such possible over-extension is to reduce the Fourth Symphony to being mainly a large-scale satire or parody of Beethoven, instead of recognizing that it *contains* expressions of critique and humor. Indeed, Ursula Vaughan Williams on one occasion indicated that this was out of character for her husband. Pike divulges the following insight from a letter sent by her to him:

In her letter of 7 October 1989, Ursula Vaughan Williams assured me that “In no circumstances would he ever have used parody in his own works, of anyone else’s.” To my observation that the ground plans of the Beethoven [Fifth Symphony] and Vaughan Williams [Fourth Symphony] passages were so similar as to create the impression that one was based on the other,

56 This appears in a short personal letter. See Cobbe, *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 573.

57 See *ibid.*, 265.

58 See Vaughan Williams, “The Music of My New Ninth Symphony,” 12, quoted in Manning, *Vaughan Williams on Music*, 393.

59 See Frogley, *Vaughan Williams’s Ninth Symphony*, 256–94; and Frogley, “Vaughan Williams and Thomas Hardy.”

60 Frogley, *Vaughan Williams’s Ninth Symphony*.

Mrs. Vaughan Williams generously remarked, “You must, of course, write your own book: but perhaps the word ‘parody’ is wrong.” I agreed, but I have still not found a proper substitute.<sup>61</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Ursula’s biography of her husband divulges that he had plans to conduct Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony at the Leith Hill Festival in 1940. She cites correspondence that reveals he contacted Hermann Fiedler, whom he had recently befriended on the occasion of receiving the Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg, in preparation for this performance. This correspondence indicates that he sought advice on a small change he wanted to make for the text in the finale.<sup>62</sup> Although plans for this performance did not come to fruition, they and Vaughan Williams’s essay quoted above (and written at precisely this time, 1939–40) would both seem to indicate that his respect for Beethoven, while not unblemished like his regard for Bach, was nonetheless genuine enough to preclude full-fledged satire.

In conclusion, the reading of Vaughan Williams’s musical treatment of Beethoven argued for here suggests another layer of ambivalence in a Fourth Symphony already iconic for its conflicts. Such ambivalence would seem to find a fitting home in a symphony noted as being perhaps the clearest nod of the composer’s nine toward a classical aesthetic even as it ultimately fails to resolve its tensions,<sup>63</sup> and which finds him exhibiting modern musical tendencies even as he was known consistently to scorn certain continental varieties of modernism.<sup>64</sup> Multiple commentators have noted the Fourth’s pivotal place both in Vaughan Williams’s symphonic oeuvre and in English symphonic history at large. Hugh Ottaway points out that the Fourth ended the largest gap between one symphony and another in the composer’s cycle, and began a group of middle symphonies (4–6) that, while notoriously difficult to pin down with regard to extra-musical meaning, are “fundamentally an expression of the composer’s perception of reality.”<sup>65</sup> Frogley, as we

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61 Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 149.

62 Vaughan Williams asked Fiedler if Schiller had originally intended the word “Freude” to be “Freiheit,” and was interested in making the change for the sake of its being easier for his English choir to sing. See Vaughan Williams, *R. V. W.*, 226–28.

63 J. P. E. Harper-Scott considers the symphony to be essentially classical in outlook, and, “despite its superficial ‘failure’ to attain the Beethovenian heroic style,” argues that the finale offers “a satisfactorily tonal closure” for the entire symphony. See Harper-Scott, “Vaughan Williams’s Antic Symphony,” 187–92. Pike likewise describes the work in explicitly classical terms but places greater importance than Harper-Scott upon its lingering harmonic friction. See Pike, *Vaughan Williams*, 107, 151–52.

64 A favorite term of Vaughan Williams for composers or music of non-tonal and other ultra-dissonant proclivities was the “wrong note school” or “wrong note music.” For examples, see Cobbe, *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 270–71, 358–59, 422, and 589–90. On a related topic, although I have found no evidence that Vaughan Williams’s use of the altered BACH motive at all sprang from any modernist impulse or point of reference, it would be a fascinating future research project to compare it to well-known uses of BACH by contemporaneous modernists such as Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Ernst Krenek (who used the same altered version of it in his First String Quartet as Vaughan Williams’s does here), among others.

65 Ottaway, *Vaughan Williams Symphonies*, 28–29.

have already seen, argues that the work confronts and even twists elements of the Beethovenian symphonic paradigm. In light of these considerations, perhaps it is not too far-fetched that Vaughan Williams's use of an altered BACH motive as an agent of Beethovenian critique, consistent with his prose at the time and thereafter, constitutes part of that confrontation in this symphony. More broadly, perhaps this is another indication that, while he considered Beethoven a great figure and would continue to compose symphonies of monumental scale reflecting (however complexly) the inner mind of the artist and the world as he experienced it (much in the Beethovenian tradition), he was also signaling his freedom from strict adherence to this symphonic paradigm, and subtly inviting other British symphonists to be similarly free.

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