Mississippi State University
Scholars Junction

College of Education Publications and Scholarship

College of Education

Winter 2015

"There, in the fastness of Rural England": Vaughan Williams, folk song and George Borrow’s 'Lavengro'

Ryan M. Ross
Mississippi State University, rmr269@colled.msstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/coe-publications

Part of the Musicology Commons

Recommended Citation
Ross, Ryan M., ""There, in the fastness of Rural England": Vaughan Williams, folk song and George Borrow’s 'Lavengro'" (2015). *College of Education Publications and Scholarship*. 25.
https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/coe-publications/25

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education Publications and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

RYAN ROSS

'There, in the fastness of Rural England': Vaughan Williams, folk song and George Borrow's *Lavengro*

This article is a revised and condensed version of the second chapter of my doctoral dissertation, 'Ralph Vaughan Williams and the pastoral mode', submitted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign early in 2012. While my broader conclusions remain the same or similar, I have reworked much of the material. *I thank my dissertation committee, including Christina Bashford, William Kinderman, Gayle Magee and Nicholas Temperley, for their helpful assistance at that stage. I also thank members of the musicology and music theory faculty at the University of Alabama, who offered gracious feedback and collegiality when I presented an earlier version of this article for their colloquium series on 15 November 2013. For more recent advice, I am grateful to Renée Chérie Clark, Robert Damm, Julian Onderdonk, James Sobaskie and Aaron Ziegel. Any errors or omissions are, of course, entirely my own.*

English folk music and rural landscape have long stood among Ralph Vaughan Williams's strongest associations. A remark made by Alain Frogley in 1996 seems as true today as it was then: 'Mention the name Ralph Vaughan Williams, and into most people's minds come immediately three words: English, pastoral, and folksong'.[1] This statement comes from a chapter which critiques longstanding myths and oversimplifications that had long dogged Vaughan Williams's critical reception. These include false notions that he was something of a country bumpkin (he was born into a privileged class and relished city life), that he was a 'provincial' and therefore reactionary composer, and that his interest and involvement with folk song and English nationalism are at all monolithic in these and other respects.[2] Indeed, Julian Onderdonk has examined both Vaughan Williams's conception and collection of English folk song, while critiquing unflattering appraisals of the composer and his practices. He argues that while Vaughan Williams theorised folk song as

1. Alain Frogley: 'Constructing Englishness in music: national character and the reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in Alain Frogley, ed.: *Vaughan Williams studies* (Cambridge, 1996), pp.1–22, at p.1. Evidence of persistent Vaughan Williams-rural associations may be gleaned from non-scholarly print and video offerings marking the 50th anniversary of the composer's death in 2008. These reassess the nature of this connection and include content in the July 2008 issues of *BBC Music Magazine* and *Gramophone*, Steven Smith's article in the 18 July 2008 issue of *International Herald Tribune* entitled 'Beyond "cow pat": Ralph Vaughan Williams's complex legacy' (Finance section, p.10), and Tony Palmer's 2008 documentary film *O thou transcendent: the life of Ralph Vaughan Williams*.

2. Such pronouncements on the composer both during and shortly after his life set the tone for persistent misunderstanding. One example comes from Aaron Copland who, while writing about the London musical scene in 1931, likened Vaughan Williams to 'a gentleman farmer' whose works had small place on the international scene. In fairness, Copland later amended his earlier stance after hearing the Englishman's Fourth Symphony. See Copland: *Copland on music*, New York, 1960, p.197). More immediately relevant to Vaughan Williams's reception in England are Donald Mitchell's cool assessments of him in 1955 (*Musical Opinion* vol.78, pp.409, 411 & 471) and in a printed version of a 1965 BBC broadcast (*Cradles of the new: writings on music 1951–1991*, London, 1995, pp.87–97). Together these writings repeat the charges of, among others, deficient technique, restricted idiom and parochialism. For more on this, see Julian Horton: 'The later symphonies', in Alain Frogley & Aidan J. Thomson, edd.: *The Cambridge companion to Vaughan Williams* (Cambridge, 2013), p.226; and Michael Kennedy: 'Fluctuations in the response to the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams', in *The Cambridge companion to Vaughan Williams*, pp.281–82 & 291–92.

belonging to rural communities, and obtainable at the hands of 'unlettered' country singers, he was often able to see past these preconceptions in his actual collecting and transcribing.[3] The composer's second wife, Ursula, has similarly acknowledged that Vaughan Williams collected folk songs in non-urban areas. However, she discourages reading too much into this fact. According to organist and scholar Lionel Pike, she wrote the following in a 1989 letter addressed to him:

> I do think that it is a mistake to think of Ralph as a countryman – he wasn't. Certainly born in Gloucestershire – but who can choose where they're born? Brought up in his grandparents' house at Leith Hill – but he escaped to London as soon as he could, and lived there till [his first wife] Adeline's ill health made their tall Cheyne Walk home impossible. He was enchanted to return to London in 1953. He said that his London Symphony should be called 'Symphony by a Londoner'. He certainly loved some country places, and walking, but he had no other country pastimes. (War-time vegetable growing doesn't really count, I think.) And if you look at his hands you will see that they are not at all country hands – I think that this is very important to remember. Of course folk songs are (were?) much found in country places, but he collected them because they were about to be lost ... *not because* they came from the country.[4]

These and other writings have helped to cast Vaughan Williams, and his relationship with folk song and the countryside, in a more nuanced light. They are in stark contrast to the unflattering reception he had long suffered among earlier, modernist-sympathising critics.[5] Accepting that Vaughan Williams was not a blinkered nationalist, and that his folk song and pastoral associations were more complex than has often been supposed, there is nonetheless plenty left to explore.[6] Mrs Vaughan Williams may have claimed that her husband did not collect folk songs just because they came from the countryside. But, then, why did he seem convinced that the rural regions were the ideal places to look for them? This is a complicated issue that has already received some thoughtful treatment. More recent work by Onderdonk, for example, ties Vaughan Williams's rural conception of folk song into particular late 19th- and early 20th-century cultural and political attitudes. These advocated egalitarian social reforms, and a return

3. See Julian Onderdonk: 'Vaughan Williams's folksong transcriptions: a case of idealization?', in Frogley, ed.: *Vaughan Williams studies*, pp.118–38; 'Ralph Vaughan Williams' folksong collecting: English nationalism and the rise of professional society', PhD dissertation, New York University, 1998; and 'Vaughan Williams and the modes', in *Folk Music Journal* vol.7 no.5 (1999), pp.609–26. It is worth noting Onderdonk's repeated statements regarding the contradictions of Vaughan Williams's work with folk song. See, for example, 'Vaughan Williams and the modes', p.610).

4. Quoted in Lionel Pike: *Vaughan Williams and the symphony* (London, 2003), p.7.

5. Recent scholarship has proposed multiple expansions and sub-definitions for the term 'modernism' (or 'modernist') for early and middle 20th-century music, so that a brief explanation of my usage is necessary. I employ it in its widely-understood sense of radical, transgressive experimentation or, in the words of Mark Evan Bonds, 'the self-conscious striving for novelty at any cost, based on a conviction that the new must be as different as possible from the old'. See Bonds: *A history of music in western culture*, 4th edition, New York, 2013, p.495).

6. Vaughan Williams's relationship with pastoralism has only recently begun to receive in-depth, focused attention. My dissertation (see n.1) is among the latest work in this area. Two other writings, which highlight the harsher aspects of the composer's pastoral music, include Eric Saylor: '"It's not lambkins frisking at all": English pastoral music and the Great War', in *The Musical Quarterly* vol.91 nos.1–2 (Summer, 2008), pp.39–59; and Daniel M. Grimley: 'Landscape and distance: Vaughan Williams, modernism and the symphonic pastoral', in Matthew Riley, ed.: *British music and modernism, 1895–1960* (Farnham, 2010), pp.147–74.

to perceived values of a rural people who were viewed as non-complicit in the dehumanising and commercialist effects of urban capitalism.[7]

Onderdonk has clearly demonstrated that Vaughan Williams's relationship with English folk song is impossible to discuss in-depth without confronting relevant political and cultural issues. Such issues will resurface throughout this writing. They, in turn, relate closely to another possible connection to Vaughan Williams's conception of folk song that, to my knowledge, has not been explored. It involves his well-known relationship with literature.[8] Specifically, some prominent themes of his alleged favorite novel, George Henry Borrow's *Lavengro*,[9] bear striking similarities to the composer's views on the nature and collection of folk song as expressed in some of the latter's writings, particularly Borrow's philological and evolutionary perspectives on languages. Was Vaughan Williams's rural idealisation of folk song, however complex or qualified in practice, influenced at all by *Lavengro*? Short of providing a definite answer to this question, I aim to show that their parallels are well worth considering. Furthermore, I hope that this discussion encourages readers both to explore Borrow's intriguing book for themselves, and to further ponder Vaughan Williams's relationship with it.

TO BEGIN, some key background information is necessary. Vaughan Williams began his folk song collecting in 1903 and continued the activity into 1913, by which time he believed that either all pre-industrial folk singers had died out or that their 'authentic' folk songs had already been collected.[10] Two principal records of his first direct experience with folk song late in 1903 come from Vaughan Williams himself via a lecture he gave in 1912, and from Ursula Vaughan Williams in her seminal biography of her late husband.[11] In a chapter in Lewis Foreman's *Vaughan Williams perspectives*, Tony Kendall weighs these two accounts, deciding that

7. See Julian Onderdonk: 'The composer and society: family, politics, nation', in Frogley & Thomson, edd.: *The Cambridge companion to Vaughan Williams*, pp.9–28, at p.17. In addition to citing abundant secondary literature on *fin-de-siècle* English ruralist politics, the author quotes Vaughan Williams's statement about folk song being music made 'by the people' and urban popular song being made 'for the people'. See Vaughan Williams: 'British music', in *The Music Student* vol.7 nos.1–4 (1914), pp.5–7, 25–27, 47–48 & 63–64, in David Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music* (Oxford, 2008), p.46.

8. There is much available writing addressing Vaughan Williams and literature. Interested readers may begin with the following incomplete list: Michael Kennedy: *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1980), pp.116–17; Ursula Vaughan Williams: 'Vaughan Williams and his choice of words for music', in *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* vol.99 (1972–1973), pp.81–89; Hugh Cobbe: '"The full juiced apple": literary furniture in Vaughan Williams's letters', in Julian Rushton, ed.: *Let beauty awake: Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and literature based on the Proceedings of an International Symposium jointly organized by the Elgar and RVW Societies held at the British Library, London 22 and 23 November 2008* (London, 2010), pp.65–76; and Roger Savage: '"While the moon shines gold": Vaughan Williams and literature: an overview', in Rushton, ed.: *Let beauty awake*, pp.43–64.

9. This is according to the principal texts on the composer. See Kennedy: *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, p.309; and Ursula Vaughan Williams: *R.V.W.: a biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford, 1964), p.393. These volumes have long stood as the authoritative accounts of the composer's works and life respectively.

10. See Vaughan Williams: 'English folk-songs', in *The Music Student* vol.4 nos.6–11 (1912), pp.247–48, 283–84, 317–18, 347, 387 & 413–14; revised version in Percy M. Young: *Vaughan Williams* (London, 1953), pp.200–17, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.198.

11. See 'English folk-songs', quoted in Manning: *Vaughan Williams on music*, pp.185–200 (as Manning notes, a similar lecture text may be found in *The Musical Times* vol.52 no.816, February 1911, pp.101–04); and Ursula Vaughan Williams: *R.V.W*, p.66. Michael Kennedy gives a brief account of the event in *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (p.29), but explicitly bases it on Vaughan Williams's lecture.

Ursula's is probably more accurate.[12] Perhaps it is, but Vaughan Williams's own testimony dating from the time he was still collecting folk songs is crucial for his professed perceptions at that point. Consider this excerpt:

I was at that time entirely without first-hand evidence on the subject. I knew and loved the few English folk-songs which were then available in printed collections, but I only believed in them vaguely, just as the layman believes in the facts of astronomy; my faith was not yet active. I was invited to a tea-party given to the old people of a village in Essex, only twenty miles from London; after tea we asked if any of them knew any of the old songs, whereupon an old man, a shepherd, began to sing a song which set all my doubts about folksong at rest. The song he sang was *Bushes and Briars*.[13]

In Ursula's account the village is named as Ingrave, the shepherd (identified as 'Mr Pottipher'[14]) is recast as an 'elderly labourer', and the song's performance was not at the tea party itself (an improper setting for the lyrics, according to Mr Potiphar) but at the elderly man's own residence during the following day. A short monograph by Frank Dineen, entitled *Ralph's people: the Ingrave secret*, explores Charles Potiphar's background and describes his encounter with Vaughan Williams in more detail. It suggests that the white smock-like garment worn by Mr Potiphar as he welcomed Vaughan Williams lent to the latter's recollection of him as a shepherd.[15] Whether or not one believes this supposition, Vaughan Williams's 'shepherd' label (which Kennedy uses in his account) is worth remembering in this context. Vaughan Williams himself likened his first direct experience of folk song to 'seeing a ghost walk', citing it as a crucial point of awakening both as collector and as a composer.[16]

Another key takeaway from Vaughan Williams's 1912 testimony is his mention of having doubts about folk song prior to first directly experiencing it in 1903. What were these doubts? We can rule out that they involved a lack of interest in and affection for folk song. In a 1942 article Vaughan Williams recalls his earliest second-hand experiences via 19th-century volumes such as Brinley Richards's *Songs of Wales* (first published by Boosey in 1873) and Lucy Broadwood's *English county songs* (1893). The latter book prompted something of an earlier epiphany for Vaughan Williams. He writes:

But my real awakening to folk song did not come until 1898 when *English County Songs* came into my hands and I lighted on the 'Lazarus' tune as it is given there. When one comes across something great and new, if it is great enough, one's attitude is not of surprise but of recognition, 'but I have known this all my life'. I felt like this when I heard later Wagner, when I first saw Michael Angelo's *Night and Day*, [and] when I first visited Stonehenge. I immediately recognized these things which had always been in my unconscious self.

Vaughan Williams subsequently mentions how he went 'berserk' on the flattened seventh while writing student works under his later RCM teacher, Charles Villiers Stanford. Returning to his doubts about folk song, he

12. See Tony Kendall: 'Through bushes and through briars: Vaughan Williams's earliest folk-song collecting', in Lewis Foreman, ed.: *Vaughan Williams in perspective* (Ilminster, 1998), pp.48–68, at pp.57–58. It seems likely that Ursula based her account upon what Vaughan Williams himself told her, and that he was ultimately, and perhaps unwittingly, responsible for the stories' discrepancies.

13. Vaughan Williams: 'English folk-songs', in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.188.

14. As Kendall notes, this name often erroneously appears as 'Pottipher'. The correct spelling is 'Potiphar' and is what will be used in this article.

15. See Frank Dineen: *Ralph's people: the Ingrave secret* (Ilminster, 2001), p.36.

16. Vaughan Williams: 'Let us remember ... early days', in *English Dance and Song* vol.6 no.3 (1942), pp.27–28, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.253.

writes: 'All the same, I felt that I was right, but I had no proof. How was I to get it? Then, one day about 1900, Miss Lucy Broadwood asked me to see the songs she had collected in Sussex. Then I indeed saw the flattened cadence in all its glory but I was still a doubting Thomas and I wanted first-hand evidence.' At this point Vaughan Williams once more recounts the 1903 encounter with Mr Potiphar as having received such evidence.[17]

We learn two relevant things from this testimony. First, Vaughan Williams harboured ample enthusiasm for, and even some Romanticised notions toward, folk song long before he had ever heard examples firsthand.[18] Second, older members of what is now called the English Folk Song Revival, among them Lucy Broadwood, were instilling in Vaughan Williams the sense that folk song was to be found in rural areas at the hands of locals. That he was skeptical of folk song owed more to having no direct experiences than to rejecting outright what he, in his words, 'learned from books'. Indeed, it is ironic that his original purpose for visiting Essex late in 1903 was to give community lectures on folk song based upon his prior indirect knowledge. So it comes as little surprise that in 1954, almost at the end of his long life and career, Vaughan Williams was confirming his early perceptions in a tribute to another key English Folk Song Revival figure, Cecil Sharp. In this excerpt, from which I took the title of my article, Vaughan Williams equates rural folk singers with countryside dwellers who held special knowledge:

> But Sharp believed, and we believe, that there, in the fastness of rural England, was the well-spring of English music; tunes of classical beauty which vied with all the most beautiful melody in the world, and traceable to no source other than the minds of unlettered country men, who unknown to the squire or parson were singing their own songs, and as Hubert Parry says, 'like what they made and made what they liked'.[19]

One other relevant statement, authored in 1906 when his collecting activities were well underway, comes from a preface to a folk song collection in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society*:

> I could imagine a much less profitable way of spending a long winter evening than in the parlour of a country inn taking one's turn at the mug of 'four-ale' – (surely the most *innocuous of all beverages), in the rare company of minds imbued with that fine sense which comes from advancing years and a life-long communion with nature* – and with the ever-present chance of picking up some rare old ballad or an exquisitely beautiful melody, worthy, within its smaller compass, of a place beside the finest compositions of the greatest composers.[20]

Before turning to *Lavengro*, it is necessary to dwell briefly upon one more facet of Vaughan Williams's folk song conception – his belief that this music falls within an evolutionary continuum. Here his quotations of Parry are significant. Apart from being Vaughan Williams's close teacher at the Royal College of Music in the early 1890s, Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry was an important English composer in his own right

17. Vaughan Williams: 'Let us remember', pp.27–28, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, pp.251–53 (at pp.252–53).

18. Onderdonk has remarked that 'Vaughan Williams never rid himself of certain romanticized notions about traditional music'. See 'Vaughan Williams's folksong transcriptions: a case of idealization?', in Frogley: *Vaughan Williams studies*, p.138.

19. Vaughan Williams: 'Cecil Sharp: an appreciation', in Cecil Sharp: *English folk song: some conclusions*, rev. Maud Karpeles, 3rd edition (London, 1954), pp.v–vi, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, pp.269–71 (at p.269).

20. Vaughan Williams: Preface [to a folk song collection], in *Journal of the Folk Song Society* vol.2 no.8 (1906), pp.141–42, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, pp.181–82 (at p.182), emphasis mine.

who took an interest in the English folk song. Indeed, he was one of the founding members of the English Folk Song Society and gave its inaugural address when it launched in 1898, only a few years after Vaughan Williams left the RCM. A printed version of the address appeared in *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* the following year. In it, Parry argues for a clear distinction between urban 'popular song' and what he and other revivalists considered to be 'true' folk music from the countryside. After describing the latter as 'characteristic of the race – of the quiet reticence of our country districts – of the contented and patient and courageous folk, always ready to meet what chance shall bring with a cheery heart', Parry characterises urban popular music as follows (I quote one particular passage at length):

> Moreover, there is an enemy at the door of folk-music which is driving it out – namely the popular songs of the day – and if we compare the genuine old folk-music with the songs that are driving it out, what an awful abyss appears! The modern popular song reminds me of the out circumference of our terribly overgrown towns, where the jerry-builder holds sway, and where one sees all around the tawdriness of sham jewelry and shoddy clothes, the dregs of stale fish, and pawn-shops, set off by the flaming gin-palaces at the corners of the streets. All these things suggest to one's mind the boundless regions of sham. It is for the people who live in these unhealthy regions, people who have the most false ideals, who are always scrambling for subsistence, who think that the commonest rowdyism is the highest expression of human emotion; for them popular music is made, and it is made, with a commercial object, of snippets of musical slang. This is what will drive out folk music if we do not save it. The old folk-music is among the purest products of the human mind. It grew in the hearts of the people before they devoted themselves assiduously to the making of quick returns. In the old days they produced music because it pleased them to make it, and because what they made pleased them mightily, and that is the only way in which good music is ever made.[21]

One immediately sees the disparaging light in which Parry casts urban popular song singers, and the idyllic language with which he describes rural singers and their supposedly superior, non-commercial values. Such a distinction likely influenced Vaughan Williams's own conception of a rural-urban divide in terms of music and repertoire, even though there are signs that he was often more shrewd concerning the matter than either Parry or Sharp.[22] (However, like Parry, Vaughan Williams believed before the war that quick work was to be done if the last remnants of a rural folk repertoire

21. Parry: 'A folk-song function', in *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* vol.40 no.673 (March 1899), pp.168–69.

22. There are indications that these issues were murkier for Vaughan Williams than they were for Parry or Sharp. I mentioned in an earlier footnote how Onderdonk used Vaughan Williams's own words to illustrate that the composer differentiated between urban popular and rural folk music. See 'British music', in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.46). Other remarks from the composer complicate the issue. In *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* Kennedy cites a letter that Vaughan Williams had written to Cecil Sharp in 1913 upon the latter's submission of his pamphlet *Folk-singing in schools* to the composer for criticism. Among various suggestions, Vaughan Williams writes the following: 'Folk-singers are most usually found in small *country towns*. They have doubtless migrated there from the country, but the fact remains. Indeed I think the whole distinction between "town" and "country" song is misleading. The distinction was not there, probably, in olden times, and is not now. The distinction is between spontaneous, traditional, oral music and deliberate, written conscious music' (quoted in Kennedy: *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, p.102, emphasis Vaughan Williams's).

were to be collected.[23]) Even before his address to the Folk Song Society, Parry had articulated a theory of folk song according to an evolutionary framework. Consider the following statement from his 1896 book *The evolution of the art of music*:

> So far the process of development is easily followed. The savage indicates a taste for design, but an incapacity for making the designs consistent and logical; in the lowest intelligent stage the capacity for disposing short contrasting figures in an orderly and intelligent way is shown; in the highest phase of the pattern-type of folk-tune the instinct for knitting things closely together is shown to be very remarkable; and the organization of the tunes becomes completely consistent from every point of view. A still higher phase is that which the skill in distributing the figures in symmetrical patterns is applied to the ends of emotional expression.[24]

How far did Vaughan Williams subscribe to this theory? We know that he knew Parry's book and affirmed its worth.[25] Quoting his appreciation of Sharp once more, we see this plainly: 'In the domain of theory, Parry applied the Darwinian theory of evolution to music, and had proved the necessity of folk song. It remained for the big man [Cecil Sharp] to come along and combine theory and practice into one [...] Parry had theoretically traced the evolution of music from the primitive to the elaborate symphony.'[26] Against the backdrop of this ostensible influence, and that of a Victorian antiquarian climate which widely held the present to be the key to the past (more on this later), Vaughan Williams formulated his own evolutionary theory of folk song. (It is worth remembering that he was the great nephew of Charles Darwin.) He describes it thus in one of his 1953 'National music' lectures-turned essays:

> This then is the evolution of the folk-song. One man invents a tune. (I repeat that I grant this much only for the sake of argument.) He sings it to his neighbours and his children. After he is dead the next generation carry it on. Perhaps by this time a new set of words have appeared in a different metre for which no tune is available. What more natural than to adapt some already existing tune to the new words? Now where will that tune be after three or four generations? There will indeed by that time not be one tune but many quite distinct tunes, nevertheless, all traceable to the parent stem.[27]

This confirms what Onderdonk has discussed in his dissertation: Vaughan Williams embraced the concept of an 'Ur' set of folk songs that were to

23. See Kennedy: *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, pp.35–36, and Ursula Vaughan Williams: *R.V.W.*, pp. 69–70. Kennedy cites a 2 December 1903 letter written to *The Morning Post* in which Vaughan Williams urges for efforts to collect and preserve folk songs on account of their singers rapidly passing way. The entire letter is reprinted in Kendall: 'Through bushes and briars', in Foreman: *Vaughan Williams in perspective*, p.62.

24. C, Hubert H. Parry: *The evolution of the art of music* (New York & London, 1920), pp.76–77. For more on Parry's cultural and historical views, see Jeremy Dibble: 'Parry as historiographer', in Bennett Zon, ed.: *Nineteenth-century British music studies*, vol.1 (Aldershot 1999), pp.37–51.

25. As late as 1948 Vaughan Williams advised someone who had written to him wanting more information on folk song to read the opening chapters of Parry's book. See Vaughan Williams: letter to Derek G. Smith, in Hugh Cobbe, ed.: *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895–1958* (Oxford, 2010), pp.435–36.

26. Vaughan Williams: 'Cecil Sharp: an appreciation', quoted in Manning: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.270.

27. Vaughan Williams: 'The evolution of the folk-song', in *National Music and other essays*, 2nd edition, ed. Michael Kennedy (Oxford, 1986), p.31.

be found by the careful collector. He was after the 'original' tune that he believed lied behind every singer's rendition, even though in practice he sometimes prioritised performers' renditions.[28] He held that folk songs were timeless artifacts that transcended individual people and that could link contemporary English culture with its musical and national heritage.[29]

When one considers George Borrow's *Lavengro*, which Ursula Vaughan Williams re-read with her husband during his last years, and which she along with Michael Kennedy alleged to be his favorite novel, one is struck by its strong thematic similarities with the composer's rural and evolutionary conceptions of folk song. First published in 1851, *Lavengro: the scholar, the gypsy, the priest* (to give its full title) is a quirky hybrid, being part memoir, part philosophical testament, and part adventure novel. No one seems sure where and to what degree Borrow is describing actual people and events from his own past, or merely spinning fictional material.[30] The story relays in first person significant stages and events of the protagonist's youth. (Borrow declines to name himself throughout the book.) While still a child, he comes to know various regions and peoples of Britain as he follows his father through sequential military postings, often wandering off by himself in search of adventure in various nooks and rural byways. The author later recounts his disappointing first adult years in London, following the death of his father, as a translator and copier prior to setting out on the road once more as a self-taught tinker. Almost immediately in the novel, he develops a passion for exotic, 'lost' languages. This is how he meets and befriends the mysterious Romany people – the gypsies – who at the time the story is set (the first decades of the 19th century) are wandering throughout Britain practising their traditional customs and language. It is these people, and in particular a man by the name of Jasper Petulengro, who give the author the name 'Lavengro', meaning 'word master' in the Romany tongue.

The glorification of the vagabond life, to borrow words from the author's first biographer, Herbert Jenkins, and the pursuit of philology, the study of historical linguistics, are thus the main themes of *Lavengro*.[31] Taken together with a third current, Borrow's fervent patriotism, these strands support a larger angle that informs most of the events and encounters in the book: that Britain has been the scene of many exotic and fascinating peoples

28. The matter of Vaughan Williams choosing what he felt was an original tune versus a singer's individual performance or variation on it is a complicated one that involved his own personal taste for uniqueness. For more on this, see Onderdonk: 'Vaughan Williams's folksong transcriptions, pp.133–38.

29. Here we encounter another seeming contradiction in Vaughan Williams's conception of folk song. In 'The evolution of the folk song' and elsewhere, he denies that there is such a thing as an original folk tune. But in the next breath he grants that there have to be originals in order for them to have variants. See also 'Dance tunes', in *The Music Student* vol.11 no.12 [1919], pp.453–57, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.206). Readers may notice, however, that both of these writings postdate his collecting years. During those former times, and even as late as 1912, Vaughan Williams seemed to be freely embracing the idea of originals, making statements such as 'If ['Bushes and briars'] is merely a corruption, what must the original have been?' See Vaughan Williams: 'English folk-songs', in Manning: *Vaughan Williams on music*, pp.185–200, at p.188, and Kennedy: *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, pp.27–28).

30. Borrow's first biographer, Herbert Jenkins, offers the following assessment on the matter: 'In the main *Lavengro* would appear to be autobiographical up to the period of Borrow's coming to London. After this he begins to indulge somewhat in the dramatic. See Herbert Jenkins: *The life of George Borrow* (New York, 1912), p.397).

31. ibid., p.398.

who have formed the identity of the region in ways scarcely remembered or imagined by many. Consider some of the author's words from the preface to *Lavengro*'s first edition:

> The scenes of action lie in the British Islands. Pray be not displeased, gentle reader, if perchance thou hast imagined that I was about to conduct thee to distant islands, and didst promise thyself much instruction and entertainment from what I might tell thee of them. I do assure thee that thou hast no reason to be displeased, inasmuch as there are no countries in the world less known by the British than these selfsame British Islands, or where more strange things are every day occurring, whether in road, street, house or dingle.[32]

The philological dimension in *Lavengro* holds some distinctive patterns that recall Vaughan Williams's attitudes on folk song collecting. Early in his narrative, Borrow learns Irish and Welsh. This reflects his exposure to both peoples and their cultures, partially through his father's posting in Ireland. He writes of the latter language: 'If I remember right, I found [it] a difficult one; in mastering it, however, I derived unexpected assistance from what of Irish remained in my head, and I soon found that they were cognate dialects springing from some old tongue which itself, perhaps, had sprung from one much older.' He further refers to Welsh words as 'precious relics of the first speech in Britain, perhaps of the world'.[33] Hence, for this protagonist, languages become a way of investigating origins, of seeking to understand cultures by probing their historical roots.

It is worth pausing here to mark the strong similarities between this passage and already discussed comments of Vaughan Williams concerning folk song collecting, particularly those relating to discerning original tunes behind contemporary performances of them. Perhaps an equally strong similarity exists between the profound effect upon Vaughan Williams of his 1903 meeting with Mr Potiphar, and Borrow's first meeting and befriending of the gypsies. Once more, I quote at length to illustrate:

> I soon found that I became acquainted with a most singular people, whose habits and pursuits awakened within me the highest interest. Of all connected with them, however, their language was doubtless that which exercised the greatest influence over my imagination. I had at first some suspicion that it would prove a mere made-up gibberish. But I was soon undeceived. Broken, corrupted, and half in ruins as it was, it was not long before I found that it was an original speech, far more so, indeed, than one or two others of high name and celebrity, which, up to that time, I had been in the habit of regarding with respect and veneration. Indeed, many obscure points connected with the vocabulary of these languages, and to which neither classic nor modern lore afforded any clue, I thought I could now clear up by means of this strange broken tongue, spoken by people who dwelt among thickets and furze bushes, in tents as tawny as their faces, and whom the generality of mankind designated, and with much semblance of justice, as thieves and vagabonds. But where did this speech come from, and who were they who spoke it? These were the questions which I could not solve.[34]

After an initial period of uncertain press reception, *Lavengro*'s stock rose considerably to the point where it was widely admired in England in the

32. Borrow: preface to the first edition of *Lavengro* (London, 1851), p.vii.

33. Borrow: *Lavengro*, p.248.

34. ibid., pp.227.

late 19th and early 20th centuries.[35] Roger Savage mentions some painters and composers, including Vaughan Williams's younger friend Ivor Gurney, who were enthusiastic about this and other books by Borrow.[36] Vaughan Williams's Cambridge friend, the historian George Macaulay Trevelyan, went so far as to dub it 'a book that breathes the spirit of that period of strong and eccentric characters'.[37] In her monograph, *Gypsies and the British imagination, 1807–1930*, Deborah Epstein Nord describes how *Lavengro* mesmerised readers with its emphasis on questions of exotic languages and what they could reveal about humankind's 'ultimate origins'.[38] MA Crowther writes that *Lavengro* was the book 'chiefly responsible for romanticizing the vagrant life' and summarises its history as such: 'Borrow's reception by the reading public was curious: neither of his gypsy books [*Lavengro* and its 1857 sequel *The Romany Rye*] sold well at the time of publication, but by the late nineteenth century they were esteemed by literary men, and were being produced in numerous cheap reprints, recommended especially to the young.'[39] In a 1899 piece praising Borrow, Lionel Johnson offered views that align with the cultural values of Parry and other Folk Song Revivalists concerning the city and the country:

> Written by a man of intense personality, irresistible in his hold on your attention, [Borrow's books] take you far afield from weary cares and business into the enamouring airs of the open world, and into days when the countryside was uncontaminated by the vulgar conventions which form the worst side of 'civilized' life in the cities. They give you the sense of emancipation, of manumission, into the liberty of the winding road and fragrant forest, into the freshness of ancient country-life, into the *milieu* where men are not copies of each other.[40]

Such words recall Ian Duncan's remark that Borrow's work presents 'a revitalization of pastoral with the anthropological trope of nomadism'.[41]

But what of Vaughan Williams's connection to *Lavengro*? What was his actual relationship with the book, and what did he himself say about it? Surprisingly, the record is rather sparse. Apart from the attestations of Kennedy and Ursula Vaughan Williams that it was indeed his favourite

35. *Lavengro*'s initial critical reception is an interesting subject in its own right. According to Borrow himself, in appendices to subsequent printings of the book, he was abused by critics on account of it. Borrow's wife, Mary, wrote a letter to the publisher, John Murray, claiming that 'if ever a book experienced infamous and undeserved treatment, it was that book'. See Jenkins: *The life of George Borrow*, p.430. According to one study, however, the book was not as widely panned by early critics, as Borrow, his wife, and later 19th-century writers lead one to believe, with only six of its first 18 reviews having been outright negative. The same study further argues that much of the negativity was directed toward the book's uncertain genre designation more than toward the content itself. See JE Tilford Jr.: 'Contemporary criticism of "Lavengro": a re-examination', in *Studies in Philology* vol.41 no.3 (July 1944), pp.442–56.

36. See Roger Savage: 'Vaughan Williams, the Romany Ryes, and the Cambridge ritualists', in *Music & Letters* vol.83 no.3 (August 2002), pp.407–08.

37. GM Trevelyan: *British history in the nineteenth century and after (1782–1919)*, new edition (New York, 1962), p.171 n.1. This book was first published in the new edition by Longmans in 1937.

38. Deborah Epstein Nord: *Gypsies and the British imagination, 1807–1930* (New York, 2006), pp.71–97, at p.72.

39. MA Crowther: 'The tramp', in Roy Porter, ed.: *Myths of the English* (Cambridge, 1992), p.106.

40. Lionel Pigot Johnson: 'O rare George Borrow!', in *The Outlook* (1 April 1899), quoted in Thomas Whittemore, ed.: *Post liminium: essays and critical papers* (London, 1911), p.203. See also Crowther: 'The tramp', p.106).

41. See Ian Duncan: 'Wild England: George Borrow's nomadology', in *Victorian Studies* vol.41 no.3 (Spring 1998), pp.381–403, at p.382. This article shows how Borrow's brands of nomadology and philology embody unique and significant forms of Englishness. These asserted themselves as fodder for cultural nostalgia during a time when industrialisation and other modernising efforts were underway in Britain.

novel, and the latter's testimony that he re-read it with her in the early 1950s and again in 1958, the book has until very recently received little mention in the primary or secondary Vaughan Williams literature.[42] However, the available testimony is tantalising, and some examples are in order. First, Ursula describes how, following his service in World War 1, Vaughan Williams returned to England and resumed a favourite habit of taking long bicycling trips in and around the countryside. While describing one such occasion, and the lush rural landscape that formed its backdrop, Ursula writes that it was 'still almost the world Borrow had known'. She then describes how Vaughan Williams unexpectedly came upon a cottage where he stopped for refreshment. It turned out to be the home of a wartime acquaintance, and the two delighted comrades sat up talking late into the night.[43] Such a chance meeting during a rural excursion strongly recalls multiple events in *Lavengro*. Since Ursula did not meet Vaughan Williams until 1938, her story (which allegedly took place in 1927) must have come from what he told her. In that case, it is possible that Vaughan Williams had Borrow's book in his mind as he pondered his own rural activities. Elsewhere, and in ways similarly reminiscent of events in *Lavengro*, Ursula describes certain episodes of folk song collecting in terms of Vaughan Williams's adventures in and around country inns and other places, meeting various folk singers.[44] The composer himself occasionally even collected songs from gypsy singers, particularly in Herefordshire in the company of Ella Mary Leather.[45]

Vaughan Williams himself rarely made direct reference to *Lavengro* in surviving sources. One case, however, is significant. As Savage has recounted, Vaughan Williams professed in his correspondence to librettist Harold Child that he had always had it in his mind to write an opera based upon *Lavengro*. While this never materialised, he did divulge that the boxing scene in his ballad opera, *Hugh the drover* (essentially completed in 1914 but revised and premiered after the war), which includes multiple folk songs in the early going, was to incorporate certain elements from Borrow's *The Zincali: an account of the gypsies in Spain*.[46] Since Vaughan Williams

42. Apart from my own dissertation, and that of Renée Chérie Clark (see n.50), some notable references to Borrow and *Lavengro* as they relate to Vaughan Williams, and to which I am indebted, come from Roger Savage. See 'Vaughan Williams, the Romany Ryes' (n.36), and 'Three glorious Johns', in *Journal of the RVW Society* no.32 (February 2005), pp.5–6. Savage also briefly treats Borrow in a presentation-turned-article that proposes different categories (or 'circles') of authors relevant to Vaughan Williams's work. See Savage: '"While the moon shines gold": Vaughan Williams and literature: an overview', in Rushton, ed.: *Let beauty awake*, pp.43–64). Note: Savage's recent book, *Masques, Mayings and music-dramas: Vaughan Williams and the early twentieth-century stage*, Woodbridge, 2014, reprints his 2002 *Music & Letters* article (n.36) with some alterations and revisions. However, since book and article scarcely differ for my purposes, I have decided to keep the references to the first version here intact.

43. Ursula Vaughan Williams: *R.V.W.*, p.168.

44. ibid., pp.72 & 83–84

45. See Vaughan Williams: 'Ella Mary Leather', in *Journal of the Folk Song* Society, part 8 2/32 (1928), p.102, in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, pp.227–28. See also Lavender M. Jones: 'The song seekers: Herefordshire', in *Journal of the English Song and Dance Society* vol.27 nos.1–2 (1964), pp.4–6 & 83–84; Roy Palmer, ed.: *Folk songs collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London, 1983), introduction; Palmer: 'Ralph Vaughan Williams: traditional carols from Herefordshire', in *The Organ* vol.91 no.362 (Autumn 2012), pp.30–33; and Savage: 'Vaughan Williams, the Romany Ryes', p.384.

46. Savage: 'Vaughan Williams, the Romany Ryes', pp.402ff. Vaughan Williams's letter is reprinted in Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, pp.404–06. Reasons for the *Lavengro* project's failure to be realised likely involved the story's unsuitability for the operatic genre. It is difficult to think of the book's events in terms conducive to staged drama of any sort. Indeed, dramatically problematic libretto choices is a problem that critics have often identified with multiple completed operas by Vaughan Williams. For more on this subject, see Eric Saylor: 'Music for stage and film', in *The Cambridge companion to Vaughan Williams*, pp.157–78.

claims to have always had a *Lavengro* project in his mind in 1910, and the appeal of the book was at its height prior to and around 1900, we can safely deduce that he knew it from practically childhood, when he started reading voraciously as befitted a well-to-do Victorian. Indeed, Wilfrid Mellers seems certain of this, though he doesn't cite any supporting source.[47] Clearly the trope of the wandering life, which relates strongly to Lavengro, interested the composer early in his career, with the *Songs of travel* and arguably *A sea symphony* joining *Hugh the drover* in that category.[48] Additionally, and as Savage has also touched upon, in 1957 Vaughan Williams composed a small brass ensemble piece entitled *Flourish for glorious John*, dedicated to the conductor Sir John Barbirolli. The title carries a double meaning – 'Glorious John' was Borrow's affectionate term for his publisher, John Murray, who receives mention in chapter 43 of *Lavengro*.[49] The work seems to be the only completed composition by Vaughan Williams with an explicit connection to Borrow and his novel.[50]

In gauging Vaughan Williams's relationship with *Lavengro*, one must not neglect to consider how the novel's themes relate to his formative culture. In Onderdonk's words, 'at the time Vaughan Williams was collecting there was a strong climate of scholarly opinion that sought an "Ur-text" for cultural artifacts that had been transmitted over time'.[51] This was particularly true of the academic study of comparative philology.[52] In words that recall both Borrow's and the composer's remarks, Dennis Taylor writes: 'The Victorian period represents the climax of the once widely held commonplace that the function of history is to help us understand the present [...] The 1860s in particular was [*sic*] intensely caught up in the quest for origins as a key to self-knowledge and general understanding.'[53] In the same study, Taylor further discusses how English philologists in the 19th century, despite wanting to adopt more empirical, historicist research methods than had been formerly in use, often could not resist the urge to speculate as to languages' remote origins. While tracing linguistic lines to an 'Ur-language' was hopelessly out of reach, the idea continued to tantalise researchers.[54] What prompted such seemingly irresistible biases in these scholars? According to linguist Roy Harris, politics was at the heart of 19th-century comparative philology. To not only England, but also to other European nations (including Germany and France) looking to justify their influence and expansion, the idea of establishing a language's ancient roots, and by extension historical racial ties, looked very attractive and fitted snugly within nationalist agendas.[55]

47. Wilfrid Mellers: *Vaughan Williams and the vision of Albion*, 2nd edition (London, 2009), p.32.

48. An essay by Rufus Hallmark on Vaughan Williams's *Songs of travel* touches upon this theme as it pertains to these songs and other works. He even mentions George Borrow's *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye* in connection with them. See Rufus Hallmark: 'Robert Louis Stevenson, Vaughan Williams and their *Songs of travel*', in Byron Adams & Robin Wells, edd.: *Vaughan Williams essays* (Aldershot, 2003), pp.129–56, at pp.133–34.

49. See Savage: 'Vaughan Williams, the Romany Ryes', p.408, and 'Three glorious Johns', pp.5–6.

50. I should mention that the third chapter of Renée Chérie Clark's very recent doctoral dissertation has identified thematic similarities between *Lavengro*, the *Songs of travel*, and the gypsy wanderer trope appearing in other 19th-century British literature. See Renée Chérie Clark: 'Aspects of national identity in the art songs of Ralph Vaughan Williams before the Great War', PhD dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014, pp.105ff). I thank her for sharing her work with me.

51. Onderdonk: 'Ralph Vaughan Williams's folksong collecting', p.325.

52. As far as I can determine, the term 'comparative philology' simply refers to the comparison of different languages to determine their historical relatedness. In modern academic studies, the term 'comparative linguistics' has largely supplanted it.

53. Dennis Taylor: *Hardy's literary language and Victorian philology* (Oxford, 1993), pp.207–08.

54. ibid., pp.242–47.

55. See Roy Harris: 'History and comparative philology', in Nigel Love, ed.: *Language and history: integrationist perspectives* (New York, 2006), pp.57–59.

JW Burrow shows how this also made philology an ideal companion to folklore and nationalist Romanticism.[56]

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that leaders of a wider English Folk Revival, of which the folk song movement was a part, were also heavily steeped in these issues. In a seminal study, Georgina Boyes describes how such historical pursuits, as well as the new influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, helped to situate folk singers as precious sources of former musical knowledge who were quickly passing away.[57] Indeed, fellow collectors and writers on English folk song, Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, not to mention (as we have seen) Vaughan Williams himself, had all repeated this refrain.[58] In fact, the composer hinted at an awareness of this cultural background when he remarked in his 1912 essay on folk song that he had 'no pretence to have an expert knowledge of archaeology or antiquarianism, or folk-lore, or any of those subjects which an expert should possess'.[59] Additionally, as Jan Marsh has written, strong interest in gypsies accompanied the folk music revival. They stood as symbols of the virtues of rural life. Marsh specifically cites Vaughan Williams's unrealised *Lavengro* opera as part of a larger creative corpus involving them.[60] Both the composer's love for *Lavengro* and his interest in folk song seemed to have been fostered alongside one another. The same cultural climate contributed to both of these interests, making their connections seem more than coincidental.

I BEGAN THIS ARTICLE with the suggestion that there are at least strong similarities, and possibly a real connection, between Vaughan Williams's conception of folk song and major themes in *Lavengro*. Prior to concluding, it will be helpful summarise so far. Despite the fact that Borrow's protagonist worked with spoken language and Vaughan Williams with folk song, both men clearly believed that valuable knowledge was to be had from those who inhabited the rural districts of England. According to both, this special knowledge served as a testament to the rich traditions existing inside the nation's borders that had been spurned or unnoticed by many of its inhabitants, and that could also form the basis both for cultural and national discovery. By their own admissions, both the Romany language in the case of one man, and English folk song in the case of the other, acted as catalysts for *self*-discovery. (Kennedy writes that Vaughan Williams 'did not "discover" folk song, nor a tradition. He discovered himself.'[61]) Both men also viewed their collected knowledge in essentially philological fashion, expressing their belief that these materials evolved or were handed down from earlier versions and thus contained vital links and clues to an irretrievable past. In addition, the circumstances surrounding Vaughan Williams's early preconceptions and direct experiences with folk song took place amidst an English culture and Folk Revival movement

56. JW Burrow: 'The uses of Victorian philology in Victorian England', in Robert Robson, ed.: *Ideas and institutions of Victorian Britain: essays in honor of George Kitson Clark* (New York, 1967), pp.182ff.

57. Georgina Boyes: *The imagined village: culture, ideology, and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester, 1993), pp.5–6ff.

58. See Maud Karpeles: *An introduction to English folk song* (London, 1973), pp.95–96.

59. Vaughan Williams: 'English folk-songs', in Manning, ed.: *Vaughan Williams on music*, p.185.

60. Jan Marsh: *Back to the land: the pastoral impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914* (London, 1982), p.88.

61. Kennedy: *The works of Vaughan Williams*, p.37.

during which *Lavengro*'s themes were at their most attractive to English audiences.

In conclusion, one last factor bears mentioning – that of Vaughan Williams's occasional tendency to frame statements and experiences according to his favourite literary characters and circumstances. Several of his writings feature phrases and figures from favourite works such as *The pilgrim's progress* (from which he created his final completed operatic work), the Bible, and a variety of other sources. For one example, he sometimes offered views on musical matters in the form of Bunyanesque metaphors.[62] Memorably, he cast one admired contemporary, Jean Sibelius, in terms of the Pilgrim struggling along an arduous path representing strongly-held artistic values but yielding no easy solutions.[63] Although he did not appear to have left behind similar writings that incorporate *Lavengro*, the book may well have factored somehow into his early conception of folk song. Perhaps Vaughan Williams did not go so far as to consider himself a man after *Lavengro*'s protagonist, journeying into and around the villages of rural England, seeking after cultural artifacts, substituting folk singers for gypsies (although, as mentioned, in some cases they were one and the same), and in so doing self-consciously enact a kind of musical philology in the manner of Borrow. However, it is difficult not to make a connection on some level, and not to recognise that Vaughan Williams was in one sense a man after this fascinating author – a passionately curious individual who embarked upon journeys into the field with eager anticipation of what he might discover there.

62. Michael Kennedy briefly remarks in *The works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* that the composer thought that *The pilgrim's progress* 'had something in common' with *Lavengro* (p.309).

63. Vaughan Williams: 'Sibelius (1865–1957)', in *National Music and other essays*, pp.261–64, at p.261.

Copyright of Musical Times is the property of Musical Times Publications Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.