



# Pearson

## Vaughan Williams: Three songs from *On Wenlock Edge* (for component 3: Appraising)

### Background

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was an English composer of symphonies, operas, vocal music and a variety of other forms. His most famous pieces include *The Lark Ascending* for solo violin and orchestra, one of the most popular of all classical compositions.

Like many other composers of the early twentieth century, he sought to break away from the German Romantic style that had been prevalent throughout most of the previous century.

The influences he looked towards to replace German Romanticism included:

- **English folk song.** Early in the 20th century Vaughan Williams developed an interest in the English folk song tradition, which was already beginning to die out. Country people sang traditional songs that had been passed down from generation to generation. These songs were often performed at home unaccompanied. Together with other musicians Vaughan Williams travelled around the countryside writing down the words and notation of these songs, so that they could be preserved for posterity. Some aspects of folk music style, particularly **modality** influenced his own musical style.
- **The English choral tradition**, notably the **Tudor church music** of composers such as **Thomas Tallis** and **William Byrd**. This music was also modal in character.
- The music of the **French 'impressionist'** composers. Vaughan Williams studied with Ravel in Paris shortly before writing *On Wenlock Edge*. The influence of the impressionist style can be heard right from the first bars of the song cycle, with the use of **tremolo strings** and **parallel harmonies**. The bell effects in 'Bredon Hill' are reminiscent of Debussy's piano piece *The Submerged Cathedral*, though Debussy's music was written slightly later than this song cycle.

*On Wenlock Edge* is a **song cycle** written in 1909, comparatively early in Vaughan Williams' career. It is a group of six songs setting poems from *A Shropshire Lad* by A.E. Housman, written in 1896. The poems describe rural life and convey a nostalgic sense of lost innocence.

For the Edexcel syllabus, songs 1, 3 and 5 have been chosen.

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## Instrumentation and vocal style

The instrumentation of Vaughan Williams' songs is unusual. There are a number of 19th-century pieces for the type of **piano quintet** used here (a piano and string quartet) – by composers such as Schumann and Brahms. The combination of **solo voice and piano quintet** is, however, extremely rare. Vaughan Williams supplied an alternative part for solo piano that could be used in the absence of a string quartet. This alternative part (shown in lighter and smaller print) is shown separately in the score, especially when the original piano part has a series of trills and the melodic line would otherwise be missing in the vocal accompaniment (e.g. bar 35 of the first song).

The main solo piano part contains most of the harmonies used in the string quartet music and the left-hand part frequently **doubles the cello** (e.g. bar 7).

## Other features of the piano style

- **Block chords.** This type of **homophonic** style is particularly apparent in the last song to illustrate the sound of church bells.
- **Trills** (e.g. bar 33 of the first song).
- **Parallel chords** (e.g. bar 2 of the first song, where there are **parallel first inversions**).
- **Una corda** – literally 'one string', i.e. use the left, 'soft' pedal. On a grand piano pressing this pedal moves all the 'hammers' to the left so that they only strike one of the three strings for the note. When the pedal is released, Vaughan Williams uses the term *tre corde* (three strings) (e.g. bar 9 of 'Is My Team Ploughing?').
- **Ostinato** accompaniments. There are rippling semiquaver ostinato figures from bar 5 of the first song, as well as at various other points in the songs.
- Rapid **arpeggios** (e.g. bar 31 in the first song).

## String style

- **Tremolo** strings feature right from the start in combination with **pizzicato** cello. Notice here that the cello uses the **tenor clef**. The first note is a G above middle C – the clef sign points to middle C on the second top line.
- The cello has **triple stopped pizzicato** in bar 8 and elsewhere.
- **Sul ponticello** technique is used from bar 57 of the first song. This means that the string players use the bow very close to the bridge to produce an almost unnatural metallic tone quality. The technique is a **word painting** technique to illustrate the gale in the text. When the players return to normal bowing technique Vaughan Williams uses the term *naturale* (bar 62).
- The **instrumentation is reduced** to a solo cello and piano from bar 9 of 'Is My Team Ploughing?' It is further reduced in the middle section of *On 'Bredon Hill'*, when only the piano is used (bar 52).

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- **Con sordino** (muted) (e.g. the end of 'Is My Team Ploughing?'). All the strings are marked *con sord* here. They are also marked **fortissimo**, so the muted affect is for the tone quality the mutes produce, rather than to make the music quieter. A **pianissimo** muted effect can be heard at the beginning of 'Bredon Hill', where the upper strings have **double stopping** (playing two strings at once).
- A combination of **pizzicato** and **arco** is used to suggest the sound of bells in the last song (e.g. bar 100).
- **Open harmonics** are used for the string chords at the very end of 'Bredon Hill'. They illustrate another bell effect. To play open harmonics the player lightly touches the string exactly half way along its length, while bowing the string. The resulting sound is an **octave higher**, as well as being very delicate in quality.

### Vocal style

The music for **tenor soloist** is not particularly virtuosic. There are **occasional high notes** such as the top A for the word 'dead' in 'dead man's sweetheart' in 'Is My Team Ploughing?', but most of the music is comfortably within the **standard tenor range**.

The vocal music is mainly **syllabic** (one note to a syllable). There are only occasional **melismas**, as on the word 'happy' at bar 33 of 'Bredon Hill'.

The accentuation of the syllables is masterfully done. There is frequent use of an **anacrusis** to fit the iambic nature of much of the poetry, as at the beginning of the words of 'Bredon Hill':

In |summertime on |Bredon The |bells they sound so |clear

At the beginning of 'Is My Team Ploughing?' the solo tenor sings in **recitative style** with free rhythm over static chords. Even more freedom is given to the soloist at the end of 'Bredon Hill', where he is instructed to sing in a totally free tempo, as long as he finishes before the final instrumental section.

### Melodic style

The **modal** style of the **folk song-influenced** melodic writing is immediately apparent in the first song. The opening vocal line has a very **restricted note range** – only four letter name pitches, before the F on the word 'Wrekin' introduces a fifth note – a type of **pentatonic** outline. Then there are **repeated notes** to emphasise the power of the gale (bars 11-12).

The style changes dramatically after the **forte** climax on the top G in bar 13, as the voice descends **chromatically**. This sudden change adds to the drama of the storm. All these features are repeated of course in the second verse. Repeated notes and chromaticism are features of the next section from bar 34.

The recitative style melodic line at the beginning of the second of the songs is clearly **Dorian** in character. The standard untransposed Dorian mode is D to D with a distinctive **flat third and**

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**seventh.** As in the first song, a simple **diatonic** modal beginning leads to a more **chromatic** style. The beginning of the song is mainly **conjunct**, but later there are larger **leaps (bars 14-15)**.

In 'Bredon Hill' the vocal music begins as if it is in the standard major key of G, but again the flat seventh F natural at bar 29 indicates modal writing – in this case an untransposed **Mixolydian** (G to G). The middle of the song is again more chromatic.

## Rhythm and metre

- **Triplets** and **sextuplets** are heard from the beginning of the first song.
- **The sextuplet semiquavers** at bar 3 produce a **cross-rhythm** with the semiquavers in the piano left hand.
- From bar 31 there are rippling **hemidemisemiquavers** in the piano part.
- In 'Is My Team Ploughing?' the long held notes enable the voice to sing in **free time**, in the manner of a **recitative**.
- There are frequent **time signature changes** in this song, combined with speed changes indicated by **animando** (more animated), etc.
- 'Bredon Hill' features sustained bell chords with **tied semibreves**.
- One of the most important rhythmic features of the three songs is the careful attention Vaughan Williams gives to the accentuation of syllables and an attempt to reach as closely as possible the **natural rhythms of speech**. It would be possible to speak the words of the beginning of the first song using Vaughan Williams' rhythms and it would sound perfectly natural.

## Texture

Vaughan Williams constantly **varies the textures**.

- At the beginning of the first song there are **parallel first inversions**.
- The piano **doubles** the upper string parts here, while the *pizzicato* cello plays occasional notes **doubling the second violin down an octave**.
- From bar 7 there is a texture of **ostinato sextuplets** in the piano right hand, **unison trills** in second violin and viola, while the cello and piano left hand **double** the voice part **two octaves below**.
- There is **reduced texture** towards the end of the song from bar 50-54 where the strings drop out leaving just the voice and piano, then the cello joins with the chromatic descent. The song ends with the piano on its own.
- At the beginning of 'Is My Team Ploughing?' all instrumental parts move together *homorhythmically* (i.e. with the same rhythm). Then chordal **homophony** in strings enables the voice to sing in free tempo.
- **Block chords** accompany cello and voice from the *animando* at bar 9.
- There is a *fortissimo tutti* at bar 50.

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- ‘Bredon Hill’ features solemn sustained chords imitating the sound of the tolling of bells.
- There is simple **melody-dominated homophony** in ‘Bredon Hill’ as the voice enters over sustained chords allowing again for a recitative-like freedom
- The bells ring out more rapidly from bar 52 with a new triplet ostinato, creating a three-layered texture

## Tonality and harmony

- Much of the harmony is **consonant**, as can be heard in the first chord of the piece, a chord of **E $\flat$  in first inversion**. Any sense of E $\flat$  major tonality is immediately negated by the **A $\flat$  minor chord** in the middle of the bar, with its suggestion of a **whole tone** progression downwards from E $\flat$  to C $\flat$  in the piano left hand and violin 2.
- **Parallel chords** feature from bar 1. This is a typical **impressionist** feature.
- There is a **false relation** in bar 3 between the D $\flat$  in the cello and the D $\natural$  in the following quaver in second violin.
- The **modal** character of much of the harmony is shown as early as bar 3 when the note **G** appears as the **tonic** of **pentatonic** style harmony with an **added fourth C** instead of a third. These notes are outlined in the piano ostinato. The harmony for the whole section from half way through bar 3 contains only four different notes (G–C–D and an occasional F). The final note A of the scale isn’t used until bar 7.
- **Dissonance** appears for the word ‘gale’ in bar 11 where the A $\flat$  clashes with the G in the rest of the harmony – this is an example of word painting.
- **Chromatic** chordal movement can be heard later as the harmony slips down a semitone at a time (bars 14–15). There are more distinctive chromatic slides with the reference to the ‘heaving hill’ (bar 37).
- **Dorian** harmony is heard at the beginning of ‘Is My Team Ploughing?’ Simple diatonic chords are given their mysterious quality by placing the D minor and G major chords one after the other. The G chord has the distinctive raised sixth of the Dorian scale.
- **Seventh chords** dominate ‘Bredon Hill’. At the beginning there is a series of long held **minor seventh** chords, all in **root position**.
- Sevenths become **elevenths** in bar 52. **Extended chords** like these are common in impressionist harmony.
- There are occasional **second inversion seventh chords** (e.g. bar 29).

## Structure

### No. 1 ‘On Wenlock Edge’

There are five verses in Housman’s text. The overall structure is AABBA/B, where the last verse combines both A and B elements.

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<p>1. <i>On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble; His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves; The gale, it plies the saplings double, And thick on Severn snow the leaves.</i></p>	<p>Bars 1– 16</p>	<p>Instrumental introduction then tenor voice, at first diatonic modal over pentatonic style ostinato accompaniment. There is more dissonance at the word 'gale' and descending chromatic melody for the last line of the verse.</p>
<p>2. <i>'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger When Uricon the city stood: 'Tis the old wind in the old anger, But then it threshed another wood.</i></p>	<p>16– 31</p>	<p>A modified repeat of the music for the first verse. The instrumental introduction now starts in the middle of the bar.</p>
<p>3. <i>Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman At yonder heaving hill would stare: The blood that warms an English yeoman, The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.</i></p>	<p>32– 43</p>	<p>New music for the introduction to the third verse. Extended trills are an important feature of the accompaniment. Mysterious chromatic phrases highlight the words 'heaving hill' (in the storm). The agitated music is all to highlight the 'hurtful thoughts'.</p>
<p>4. <i>There, like the wind through woods in riot, Through him the gale of life blew high; The tree of man was never quiet: Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.</i></p>	<p>43– 55</p>	<p>Modified repeat of the third verse music.</p>
<p>5. <i>The gale, it plies the saplings double, It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone: Today the Roman and his trouble Are ashes under Uricon.</i></p>	<p>55– end</p>	<p>The music for the last verse combines elements of the music from both first and third verses. The instrumental music from the beginning of the first verse is heard at the beginning of the section. The vocal melody from the beginning of verse 1 is heard at low pitch in the left hand of the piano part at bar 62, with new <i>tremolo</i> accompaniment above and A♭s entering early in the melodic line (bar 57). The sliding chromatic harmonies of the middle verses are heard next (from bar 68).</p>

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### No. 3 'Is My Team Ploughing?'

Vaughan Williams omits the third and fourth verses of Housman's poem. The structure of the song is **modified strophic** with three pairs of verses:

1. AB
2. AB
3. A1B1

<p>1. <i>"Is my team ploughing, That I was used to drive And hear the harness jingle When I was man alive?"</i></p> <p>2. <i>Ay, the horses trample, The harness jingles now; No change though you lie under The land you used to plough.</i></p>	1–18	<p>The conversation between two young men is contained in separate verses of Housman's poem. The odd numbered verses have the words of the ghost. The even numbered verses have the response of the living man.</p> <p>The music of the dead man is marked <i>misterioso</i> and <i>pianissimo</i> and is to be sung as if from the distance.</p> <p>After a brief chromatic link in the accompaniment, the living man's response is agitated and has loud repeated triplet chords on the piano, with a countermelody in the solo cello.</p>
<p>3. <i>"Is my girl happy, That I thought hard to leave, And has she tired of weeping As she lies down at eve?"</i></p> <p>4. <i>Ay, she lies down lightly, She lies not down to weep: Your girl is well contented. Be still, my lad, and sleep.</i></p>	19– 37	The music of the first two verses is repeated.
<p>5. <i>"Is my friend hearty, Now I am thin and pine, And has he found to sleep in A better bed than mine?"</i></p> <p>6. <i>Yes, lad, I lie easy, I lie as lads would choose; I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,</i></p>	38– end	<p>The music starts the same as in the previous pairs of verses, though the dead man's music is now higher and the instrumental accompaniment has agitated tremolos.</p> <p>The response rises to a powerful climax on a high Ab (bar 45) with <i>tutti</i> accompaniment. It then rises a semitone higher still for the final climax on a top A in bar 50 as the living man announces he has taken a</p>

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<i>Never ask me whose.</i>		dead man's girl for his own. There is a sudden hush as the final line comes.
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### No. 5 'Bredon Hill'

The seven verse structure is: Introduction–A–A–B–B1–C–D–A1–postlude.

1. <i>In summertime on Bredon The bells they sound so clear; Round both the shires they ring them In steeples far and near, A happy noise to hear.</i>	Bars 1–35	Vaughan Williams uses the word 'bells' as a starting point for his setting. There is a long <i>pianissimo</i> introduction with slow, tolling seventh chords.  The tenor has a simple diatonic melody in Mixolydian mode (with its distinctive 'major' quality), recalling happier times. There is a change of harmony to flat chords for the last line.
2. <i>Here of a Sunday morning My love and I would lie, And see the coloured counties, And hear the larks so high About us in the sky.</i>	35– 51	Repeat of the music of the first verse, with four bars of bell chords at the end.
3. <i>The bells would ring to call her In valleys miles away: 'Come to church, good people; Good people, come and pray.' But here my love would stay.</i>	52– 66	The bells now peal out more strongly on the unaccompanied piano, with an ostinato with right hand triplet chords, based on fourths and fifths over seventh chords in the left hand.
4. <i>And I would turn and answer Among the springing thyme, 'Oh, peal upon our wedding, And we will hear the chime, And come to church in time.'</i>	66– 83	The music continues without a break over similar but quieter ostinato bell phrases.
5. <i>But when the snows at Christmas On Bredon top were strown,</i>	84– 100	The strings return and the music becomes quieter still as his love's death is described.

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<p><i>My love rose up so early And stole out unbeknown And went to church alone.</i></p>		<p>There is more dissonance in the string introduction (clashing with the piano LH). The mournful phrases are conjunct.</p>
<p>6. <i>They tolled the one bell only, Groom there was none to see, The mourners followed after, And so to church went she, And would not wait for me.</i></p>	<p>100– 114</p>	<p>The tolling bell is heard in single isolated notes, with the combination of <i>pizzicato</i> violin and <i>arco</i> violin. The minor third interval becomes more prominent now. There is harsh dissonance with the D notes sounding against E<math>\flat</math>.</p>
<p>7. <i>The bells they sound on Bredon, And still the steeples hum. 'Come all to church, good people,' Oh, noisy bells, be dumb; I hear you, I will come.</i></p>	<p>115- end</p>	<p>High-pitched harmonics on the strings give an ethereal quality to the music. New accompaniment figures can be heard. The music rises to a climax on top A as he begs for the bells to be silent.</p> <p>An instrumental postlude remembers the slow bell music from the beginning of the song. The solo voice ends with <i>pianissimo</i> repeated Gs (the latter two sung monophonically).</p>

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