

# British Art Song Composition, Performance, and Pedagogy and the Articulation of National Identity in Early Twentieth Century England

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**Abstract:** English song in the early 1900s was tightly associated with notions of Britishness in the wider context of the development of British art song. The paper, focusing on Ralph Vaughan Williams' *On Wenlock Edge*, explores the parts played by poetry, landscape, folk influence, modal writing and chamber texture in the creation of a musical language which was part of Englishness. It also focuses on the role of the singers and teachers, in terms of their emphasis on diction, speech rhythm, textual clarity and controlled expression. These techniques contributed to the development of an identifiable style of English singing and the dissemination of the repertoire via teaching, concert performance, festivals and commemorative events. English art song also was related to memory, continuity and national renewal in the years around the First World War. Composition, performance and pedagogy were thus not isolated domains but are interdependent practices which contributed to the development of English art song as a musical tradition and as a form of cultural expression.

**Keywords:** English Art Song; National Identity; Ralph Vaughan Williams; *On Wenlock Edge*; Music Pedagogy; Performance Practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Clark [1] thinks that English art song in the early 20th century made a notable contribution to the development and expression of England's national consciousness in terms of composition, performance and teaching. At the same time, there were also pictures of the countryside and local customs, as well as English cultural symbols in the work. Artistic and cultural changes occurred at the same time, and composers, singers and teachers began to use art music to establish an English musical tradition. These were related to the large-scale political and social changes, such as the impact of the First World War and changes in British nationalism, and the spread of English composers around the world [2]. This essay explores the role of compositional techniques, performance practices and educational methods in the development of an English musical identity through the lens of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *On Wenlock Edge*. This also examines the way in which the identity of the work was conveyed to the public by the performer and its connection to the nationalist qualities of English art song.

## 2. The Intertwining of English Art Song and National Identity

English art song was a fully-fledged musical genre from the late nineteenth-century through the early decades of the twentieth century. It was influenced by the melodic qualities of the English folk tradition but had the form and the expressive palette of European art music. The genre was also influenced by the larger cultural issues of the day, such as increasing nationalistic tensions in the face of an uncertain empire, and the social effects of war [3]. For these reasons, composers looked more and more to the countryside, to English poetry, and to traditional folk sources for a musical style that would be recognisable as decidedly English.

In the early 20th century, the composition, performance and education of art song contributed to the consolidation of a sense of English cultural identity. They set English folk songs into classical music, and were able to develop a national style based on English music through the use of traditional material [3]. Vaughan Williams, for example in *On Wenlock Edge*, associated the images of the countryside with music, and landscape and literature became significant conveyors of the nation. This relationship was further strengthened by the use of performance practice, specifically by focusing on the sound of the voice and clarity of the vocabulary, but also the emotional resonance of the text. English composers, such as Peter Pears, were interested in the literary character of the English works and their links to native vocal traditions [4]. Music education continued to foster such a way of singing by learning how to use natural rhythm and intonation in English. Therefore, composition, interpretation and pedagogy worked together to create an idiom that could be recognised as a national one, and thus art song was able to express cultural inheritance and a sense of collective identity in a period of profound political and social changes [3].

Vaughan Williams was one of the composers who worked in this period and combined elements of folk music with the style of cultivation. His work was instrumental in making English art song more than just an importation of continental models, but a real expression of national culture. *On Wenlock Edge* was composed in 1909, and features poetry by A. E. Housman, who has been described as depicting his imagery of rural England through memory, loss, melancholy, and place [5]. Vaughan Williams' ability to fuse English landscape, historical memory and cultural inheritance in an expressive world through the interaction of poetry and music is achieved in this work.

### 3. On Wenlock Edge and Its Reflection of National Identity

On Wenlock Edge is composed in six songs for voice and piano with string quartet accompanying songs 2 and 4. The literary material that it uses is taken from the work *A Shropshire Lad* from the A. E. Housman's collection of the same name, which was written towards the beginning of the twentieth century, and is dealing with nature, bereavement and the inevitability of death [6]. The subjects are dealt with in an English rural context, with the landscape playing a significant part in the expression of a national identity. The country side represents the beauty and fragility of English life, and individual emotions are given their cultural significance [1].

The first song sets the musical style that is used throughout the cycle, in its modal harmonic organization and varying rhythmic arrangements. Strong wind is over the hills of Shropshire in which the poem is set [4] and this is the impression they wish to convey with their animated piano part which opens the work. The beginning of the third movement "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble," is a vocal line that seems to convey the sense of the emotional burden borne by the surrounding landscape and serves to strengthen the bond between English people and their native land [6]. Thus you can read into this image of "troubled woods" the unease of England in a time of national unease. This is the opening song of the cycle, and it sets the listener up for the contrasting ideas of greater degrees of emotional expression and moments of stillness. These contrasts indicate the persona of an Englishman who is strong, but exposed to sadness and introspection [3].

This national atmosphere is further developed in the second song, "From Far, from Eve and Morning", in a folk-like rhythm and piano writing, which suggests the sweep of the open English countryside. While its poetic origin dwells on the transience of time and the powerlessness of human endeavour, Vaughan Williams makes the concept musical, moving beyond a personal reflective commentary on time into a larger question of cultural identity. Braun's depiction of the English national identity is therefore based on the relationship between the individual, the landscape and inherited memory [6]. The composer weaves English folk influences into an already established literary canon as a way of depicting the countryside as a physical place that is also a timeless symbol of English resilience [1].

That the two pieces, "The Lent Lily" and "Is My Team Ploughing?", include a string quartet also further enhances the specifically English nature of the cycle. The use of multiple layers of music, created through the interplay between the singer, piano, and strings, adds to the piece's expressive richness and complexity. The string instruments' warmth and resonance enhance the closeness of sound and place [6][1] in the meantime. The quartet also highlights a chamber-music style associated with an English tradition which was considered to be specifically English in the early 20th century. When used, it is therefore part of a larger musical tradition, allowing national culture to be recognised and sustained [2].

On Vaughan Williams's *Wenlock Edge*, the Englishness of his music comes from his rural landscape, literary culture, Romantic thinking, and unique perception of the beauty of country life, all woven into a musical fabric which is remarkably immersive. The cycle is a fusion of modernist

aesthetics and the familiar icons of 'Englishness', and the newer ideas of composition with the traditional images of the culture. In this synthesis, it helped to articulate a potential sound for English music and how art song could convey a story of national affiliation in the face of swift social and cultural transformation [6].

### 4. The Pedagogical Impact of English Art Song

The systems of instruction in music in early twentieth-century England held only a minor place in terms of the construction of national identity, alongside creative and interpretative practices. This was despite strong contemporary policies of cultural continuity and developing a sense of national belonging within music education [6]. Prominent composers of the period, including Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and Benjamin Britten, came into close contact with education institutions like the Royal College of Music and the music courses at the University of London. In this way, they fostered the emergence of an English musical style that was rooted in England's classical heritage and folk music.

Within critical debates of English art song, the focus has been mainly on how the singing technique relates to the interpretation of the music, and how the music can convey narrative meaning. This connection was particularly apparent in English song cycles that fused poetry and music to convey a narrative that was perceived as being representative of English experience [8]. Teachers and singers then spent a lot of time on the interpretive techniques to be passed on. Their teaching focused on pronunciation, emotion and proper attention to the literary text [2].

Vocal pedagogy in the early 20th century is evident in works of teachers like William Shakespeare, and in some of the techniques brought over to the Royal College of Music. These techniques particularly stressed the accuracy of English pronunciation and the sensitivity in performing English works [7]. Accents and intonation were encouraged to be used in a natural way to maintain the natural sound and patterns of speech and intonation of the English language. This training was both of a practical necessity in order to perform intelligibly and an element of a larger cultural drive for a recognisably English tradition of singing [7].

Conventions of performance also played a significant role in the process of forming a national identity in English art song. Famous singers of the time, like John Coates and Peter Pears, became known for their characteristic interpretations of English song cycles, in which the purity of the word and emotional authenticity were interpreted as leading interpretive principles [6]. Along with the modern day composers, these musicians helped reinforce the idea that English music could be a unique means of national pride. They also contributed to giving English song a more distinct character from the cosmopolitan and highly-stylised tradition of the German and French song repertoire [7].

### 5. The Role of English Song in National Celebrations

English art song also gained a significant role in the national commemoration and the collective celebration. Arts were given a lot more attention in England in the years after the First World War, as they were able to communicate a public image of endurance and convey the resilience of the

English population. Music, especially the English song tradition, was very visible in public culture and was more and more part of British national consciousness [9]. Song cycles like Vaughan Williams' *On Wenlock Edge* were played and recorded at remembrance events, festivals and concerts. This exposure helped enhance the significance of the work in the rest of the nation's efforts to build a national identity [6].

Public performances and music festivals helped to bring English art song into prominence, and ceremonial and commemorative contexts provided it with a more specifically national role. *On Wenlock Edge*, composed by Vaughan Williams and set to Samuel Butler's poetry, which seemed to be promising national restoration and national regeneration, was performed at concerts which had to do with the mourning, the recovery, and the regeneration after the First World War [6]. These works explored and reinforced familiar themes of rural life and British traditions that provided viewers with a common cultural context with historical continuity. Listeners might thus be led to individual memories and national experience in the same musical context. In such a situation, English art song emerged as a medium to demonstrate national pride and helped unite society, while the national narrative was changing greatly [1].

During this period the growing popularity of English song was also an accompaniment to the growing cultural nationalism, which sought to identify England by its differences with continental Europe [10]. Nationalistic feeling was expressed and reinforced post-war through music by Vaughan Williams, Holst and others, who became a kind of artistic language for this idea [11]. The public response to English art song in turn went beyond the musical qualities. Listening to and performing such a repertoire might also serve as a statement of belonging and a statement of an 'Englishness' in particular.

## 6. Conclusion

As revealed by the analysis above, composition, interpretation, and instruction of English art song all played a part in the construction of national consciousness in England in the early twentieth century. In works like *On Wenlock Edge* Vaughan Williams developed a musical vocabulary that could express English cultural experience: its beauty, its strength and its sadness. More important, however, are the ways in which English music was used to convey national culture and collective identity, either by conscious design or by

accident. More significant, however, are the ways in which English music was used to convey national culture and collective identity, either by design or by chance. Composers used native folk materials as well as the accepted language of European art music, thereby creating a language which was easily recognisable as English, by both performers and listeners. English art song thus helped shape England's view of itself and its cultural re-understanding of itself in a significant period of change. The genre offered a platform to reassess inherited traditions, to find artistic expression for new concepts of nationality, and to protect and assert a vision of 'Englishness' for the future.

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