

POP GOES THE MUSIC?
AN EXPLORATION OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FOLK AND POP MUSIC
AS SEEN IN THE WRITINGS OF RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

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A common error exists frequently in contemporary discussions of the use of folk idioms as a compositional element in art music. Many authors today equate folk music with popular forms such as jazz, rock, and blues. In fact, the terms "folk" and "popular" have unfortunately come to be synonymous in conventional speech. For instance, George Gershwin (1898–1937) referred to his opera *Porgy and Bess* as an "American folk opera," although it includes distinctly pop forms such as blues and jazz.

However, an honest examination of the historical development of music will note that folk music and "popular" music in the more specific sense are, in fact, different in many significant ways. Certainly folk music is popular, but it is not the same as "pop" music in the way the term is used today to describe the commercial music of radio, film, and television. For sake of clarity in this paper, I will use the term "pop" to denote such music, while "popular" will be used to express the broader dictionary definition of something that is "widely liked or appreciated."¹

Perhaps one of the most helpful and instructive methods one could employ to discover the significant differences between folk music and pop forms is to query the writings of composers who have used folk idioms in their music. In the English-speaking world, no one is

¹ *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 1064.

better known for such practices than British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). Indeed, as Alain Frogley notes, "Mention the name Ralph Vaughan Williams and into most people's minds come immediately three words: English, pastoral, and folksong."²

The goal of this paper will be to examine the writings of Vaughan Williams and his predecessor, Cecil Sharp (1859–1924), and illustrate their understanding of the distinctions between art, folk, and pop music. I will show that this distinction is evidenced in how they define each of the terms and in their motivations for cataloguing and utilizing folk tunes in their art music.

Brief Historical Background

An interest in English folk songs emerged in England toward the end of the nineteenth century. By 1898 the Folk Song Society was founded, and rising composer Ralph Vaughan Williams joined the Society in 1904.³ The Society had been perfectly comfortable simply discussing folk music in the abstract until an influential folk tune advocate named Cecil Sharp challenged them to actually collect folk tunes and promote their use in the art music of the day.⁴ Vaughan Williams was strongly influenced by Sharp's admonition and very soon joined him in his cataloguing and advocacy of the folk tunes of English heritage.

It is upon this foundation that Vaughan Williams's career as a composer began, and his connection with English folk music soon became ingrained in the consciousness of musical and

² Alain Frogley, "Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams," in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, Alain Frogley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

³ James Day, *Vaughan Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

national society. As Simon Heffer notes, "The effects would be spectacularly far-reaching: folk-songs would not merely shape Vaughan Williams as a composer, they would, through him, shape a whole school of English music that would for years be indissolubly associated with the Royal College and what would come to be called the 'English musical establishment.'"⁵

In an attempt to understand Vaughan Williams's thoughts regarding folk music and specifically its difference from pop music, I will draw largely from one of his writings that deals specifically with this topic, *National Music*. Additionally, since Cecil Sharp had such a strong influence upon Vaughan Williams and his love for the English folk tune, I will also use his important work, *English Folk-Song; Some Conclusions*, in an attempt to uncover both Vaughan Williams's and Sharp's understandings and motivations behind their loyalty to folk music.

Definitions

The final goal of Vaughan Williams was, of course, to compose art music. His many hours finding and indexing folk tunes were all spent with the purpose of using those melodies in his own compositions. As such, a distinction between art and folk music in his understanding is self-evident. Cecil Sharp, however, makes this distinction more explicitly. In Sharp's understanding, art music "is the work of the individual, and [an expression of] his own personal ideals and aspirations; it is composed in, comparatively speaking, a short period of time, and, by being committed to paper, it is for ever fixed in one unalterable form."⁶ Sharp saw, then, four primary distinguishing characteristics of art music, detailed in Table 1 (p. 8): art music is (1) individual, (2) personal, (3) quickly composed, and (4) unalterable.

⁵ Simon Heffer, *Vaughan Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 24.

⁶ Cecil Sharp, *English Folk-Song; Some Conclusions* (London: Simpkin, 1907), 19.

Conversely, Sharp saw folk music as (1) racial, (2) communal, (3) continually developing, and (4) variable: "Folk music, on the other hand, is the product of a race, and reflects feelings and tastes that are communal rather than personal; it is always in solution; its creation is never completed; while, at every moment of its history, it exists not in one form but in many."⁷ Since Sharp and Vaughan Williams were most interested in the revival of the English folk song, their writings further elaborate and explain these principles.

The "racial" aspect in music is evident, for Sharp, in the fact that every race has its own unique forms. He notes that "in every land we do find music of a distinctive and often of a very beautiful quality." He further identifies the particular sub-group within a race in which this music is perpetuated as being the "unlettered classes," and therefore clearly distinguishes folk music from the "educated or art music of the same nation."⁸ Both Sharp and Vaughan Williams are careful to recognize the "unlettered, unsophisticated, and untraveled people" of a nation as the source of folk music.⁹ This localized aspect of folk culture had its strengths. A lack of formal education or travel prevented such cultures from being influenced by stereotypes, allowed them to be "self-dependent for [their] inspiration," and freed their "artistic utterance" to be "entirely spontaneous and unself-conscious" — all virtues in Vaughan William's opinion.¹⁰ So though folk music is uniquely racial, it is also closely tied to a specific section of the race.

Sharp and Vaughan Williams also highlight the communal nature of folk music. In fact, Sharp notes that within a folk culture, those musical forms that are too individualistic will not

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Ibid., 1–2.

⁹ Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

last; only "those tune variations which appeal to the community will be perpetuated."¹¹ Vaughan Williams notes some further implications that derive from the communal nature of folk music: "(1) It is purely intuitive, not calculated. (2) It is purely oral, therefore . . . it must be limited by the span of what both the singer and hearer can keep in their minds at one stretch. (3) It is applied music . . . (4) [It] is purely melodic."¹² These implications were, for Vaughan Williams, both strengths and limitations. For instance the "intuitive," unpremeditated nature of folk music precluded any propaganda or commercial motivation. Instead, folk music was a sincere expression of communal emotion. On the other hand, the length limitations of folk music due to its oral nature prevented significant depth in the forms. However, this could also be seen as a strength since these simple expressions were accessible and appealing to all. In this sense, folk music is legitimately "popular." Vaughan Williams also seemed to find virtue in the strictly applied nature of folk art where "the idea of art for art's sake has happily no place in the primitive consciousness."¹³

The purely melodic aspect of folk music provides another significant contrast with art music. Vaughan Williams notes that the major and minor modes of Classical European forms are foreign to folk music. He recognizes that "the major and minor modes hardly every appear in truly melodic music" as seen in the folk tunes that he catalogued. According to Vaughan Williams, most folk tunes make use of the Dorian, Mixolydian, and Ionian modes.¹⁴

This communal nature of folk music leads, then, to its never-ending development. For both Sharp and Vaughan Williams, this evolutionary aspect is a definite strength of the music

¹¹ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 38.

¹² Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

since it creates a "natural selection and survival of the fittest."¹⁵ Only those tunes that "accurately express the taste and feeling of the community" will survive; "what is purely personal will be gradually but surely eliminated."¹⁶ This is not to say that no bad folk song exists. The continually changing state of folk music may also make it possible for a tune to get "into the hands of an incompetent singer who has spoiled it." However, over time this bad tune will certainly pass away. This for Vaughan Williams is a characteristic superior to that of art music since "the written note, however bad it is, remains to cumber our national libraries."¹⁷

Unfortunately, according to Sharp and Vaughan Williams, folk music as an art is largely dead, and this provides the first evidence of a distinction between folk and pop music in their thought. With a chain of events including the Industrial Revolution and the creation of mass media came the emergence of a new form of culture that found its home in commercialism — pop culture. Pop culture by its very nature destroyed folk culture since mass media soon found its way into every corner of modernized society and influenced the before-uninfluenced. Sharp marks the end of folk art around 1840.¹⁸ This is not to say that folk music itself is dead. Rather, according to Vaughan Williams it is the "art of the folk-singer" that no longer exists, and "we cannot, and would not if we could, sing folk-songs in the same way and in the same circumstances in which they used to be sung."¹⁹ Vaughan Williams clearly bemoans this fact in his praise of this music "which is unpremeditated and therefore of necessity sincere, music which

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 14.

¹⁷ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 37.

¹⁸ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 151.

¹⁹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 38.

has stood the test of time, music which must be representative of our race as no other music can."²⁰

Sharp recognizes the confusion between the use of the terms "folk" and "popular" in the English language as one of semantics:

The word itself ["folk song"] is a German compound, which of recent years has found a home in this country. Unhappily it is used in two senses. Scientific writers restrict its meaning to the song created by the unlettered classes. Others, however, use it to denote not only the peasant songs, but all popular songs as well, irrespective of origin, i.e., in the wider and looser sense in which it is sometimes used in Germany. This is to destroy the value of a very useful expression, and to rob scientists of a word of great value. The expansion was, moreover, unnecessary. For the English language already possessed in the phrase "popular song," a description which covered the wider field. There was, therefore, no need to do violence to the restricted and strictly scientific meaning of "folk song" by stretching it beyond its natural signification. On the other hand there was a very good reason for coining a new term, or for importing a foreign one, to signify a peasant-made song, because our language contained no word with that precise meaning.

Those, therefore, who claim the right to use the term folk song in the loose sense of popular song, are placing upon it a meaning never given to it by the scientific writers of Germany, the country of its origin.²¹

There is no doubt that Sharp, and by extension Vaughan Williams, saw a definite difference between folk music and pop music and that they found folk music to be superior to pop. It seems that the confusion between the terms lies primarily in the word "popular." Neither folk nor pop music are by necessity popular — it is not the defining characteristic of either — yet both often are popular. Additionally, not only is the popularity of a tune not an indication of its positive value, but also, according to Sharp, is it not an indication of its negative value: "The important thing to remember . . . is that bad tunes are popular, not because of their badness, but because of their attractiveness. The classes who sing bad tunes sing them simply because they never hear

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 2–3.

good ones that appeal to them with equal force."²² Sharp and Vaughan Williams found in folk music, as I will show shortly, tunes that were both good and popular.

Table 1

Art Music	Folk Music	Pop Music
Individual	Racial	Mass Produced
Personal	Communal	Commercial
Quickly Composed	Continually Developing (1) intuitive (2) oral (3) applied (4) melodic	Mass-produced (1) manufactured (2) printed (3) entertainment (4) harmonic
Unalterable	Variable	Transient

Motivations

The motivations behind Vaughan Williams's use of folk idioms in his music also clearly demonstrates the distinction between folk and pop music in his thinking. Clearly Vaughan Williams's interest in folk music was connected to his desire for a distinctly English national music. Indeed, as the title of his work on folk music (*National Music*) illustrates, Vaughan Williams was motivated by nationalism, and although there are certain pop forms that are most closely associated with individual nations (jazz in America, for instance), it is the folk music of a country that best displays its national character. And as Alain Frogley notes, "Almost invariably, Vaughan Williams's music has been deemed to reflect essential features of the English national character, of English landscape, and of the English language."²³

²² Ibid., 174.

²³ Alain Frogley, "Constructing Englishness in Music," 5.

The motivation that perhaps best reveals Vaughan Williams's understanding of the distinction between folk and pop music is his desire to use folk music to improve the musical sensibilities of the masses. In folk music Vaughan Williams saw musical forms that were ennobling and good while at the same time popular.

Both Sharp and Vaughan Williams clearly evidenced their opinions that folk and pop music were different in their rejection of pop music as they collected tunes throughout England. As Julian Onderdonk notes, "[Vaughan Williams] pursued the great majority of his collecting in isolated rural areas and rejected songs betraying the influence of urban popular ["pop"] music."²⁴ They considered the pop music of their day to consist of "poverty-stricken tunes" that exerted a "harmful influence upon the character" and that were "banal" and "vulgar."²⁵ They desperately desired to improve the musical tastes of the people, and they considered folk music the perfect tool in their endeavors. Sharp advocated the use of folk tunes in education, wherein he hoped to "effect an improvement in the musical taste of the people, and to refine and strengthen the national character."²⁶ Likewise, when asked to edit *The English Hymnal*, Vaughan Williams "found an opportunity to improve musical standards at large in an area where many people were exposed to functional music who might never attend a concert or an opera performance in their lives."²⁷ The following two quotes by Sharp and Vaughan Williams are perhaps idealistic in their hopes, but nevertheless reveal their motives behind using folk tunes and their understanding of the distinction from pop music:

²⁴ Julian Onderdonk, "Vaughan Williams's Folksong Transcriptions: a Case of Idealization?" in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, 120.

²⁵ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 173; Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 38.

²⁶ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 135.

²⁷ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 31.

For good music purifies, just as bad music vulgarizes; indeed, the effect of music upon the minds of children is so subtle and so far-reaching that it is impossible to exaggerate the harmful influence upon character which the singing of coarse and vulgar tunes may have. Up till now, the street song has had an open field; the music taught in the schools has been hopelessly beaten in the fight for supremacy. But the mind that has been fed upon the pure melody of the folk will instinctively detect the poverty-stricken tunes of the music-hall, and refuse to be captivated and deluded by their superficial attractiveness. Good taste is, perhaps, largely a matter of environment; but it is also the result of careful and early training.²⁸

In the English-speaking countries where artistic impulses are so apt to be inarticulate and even stifled, there are thousands of men and women naturally musically inclined whose only musical nourishment has been the banality of the ballad concert or the vulgarity of the music-hall. Neither of these really satisfied their artistic intuitions, but it never occurred to them to listen to what they called "classical" music, or if they did it was with a prejudiced view determined beforehand that they would not understand it. To such people the folk-song came as a revelation. Here was music absolutely within their grasp, emotionally and structurally much more simple than their accustomed "drawing room" music, and yet it satisfied their spiritual natures and left no unpleasant aftertaste behind it. Here indeed was music for the home such as we had not seen since the days of Thomas Morley when no supper party was complete without music when the cloth was cleared away.

Is not folk-song the bond of union where all our musical tastes can meet? We are too apt to divide our music into popular and classical, the highbrow and the lowbrow. One day perhaps we shall find an ideal music which will be neither popular nor classical, highbrow or lowbrow, but an art in which all can take part. . . . We must see to it that our art has true vitality and in it the seeds of even greater vitality. And where can we look for a surer proof that our art is living than in that music which has for generations voiced the spiritual longings of our race?²⁹

Though perhaps a bit naive, Sharp and Vaughan Williams both demonstrate a clear differentiation between folk and pop music in their motivations.

Conclusion

Recognition of a difference between folk and pop music may perhaps seem inconsequential, but for a composer like Ralph Vaughan Williams the distinction was at the heart

²⁸ Sharp, *English Folk-Song*, 172–3.

²⁹ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 38–9.

of his life's work. For Vaughan Williams and his mentor, Cecil Sharp, the commercial nature of music often rendered it banal and vulgar — it was music created specifically to feed the ever-changing appetite of the masses. Vaughan Williams recognized his responsibility as a composer to contribute to the greater good of society. He quickly realized, however, that strictly art music was slipping further out of the grasp of general society. He needed a musical form that was both ennobling and popular, and he found that form in folk music.

Perhaps contemporary composers should learn from Vaughan Williams's example, at least in his clarity of terminology, and at most in his aim to wean the people from vulgar music and draw them with appealing yet uplifting musical offerings. Vaughan Williams portrayed a great optimism in the collective character of a people uninfluenced by politics, entertainment, or pop culture. Indeed, as he said so masterfully,

Can we not truly say of these [English folk-songs] as Gilbert Murray says of that great national literature of the Bible and Homer, "They have behind them not the imagination of one great poet, but the accumulated emotion, one may almost say, of the many successive generations who have read and learned and themselves afresh re-created the old majesty and loveliness. . . . There is in them, as it were, the spiritual life-blood of a people."³⁰

³⁰ Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, 23.

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