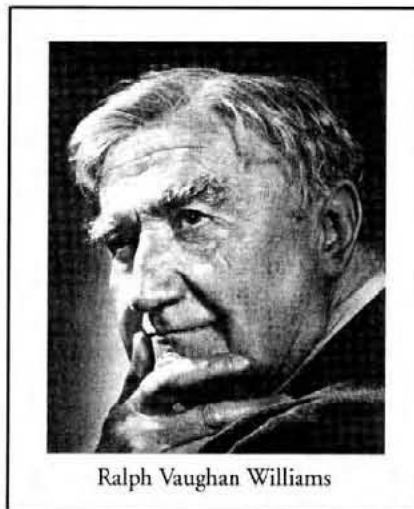


Ralph Vaughan Williams's  
*Three Shakespeare Songs:*  
 An Analytical Guide  
 for Conductors  
 and Composers  
*by David Conte*



Ralph Vaughan Williams

## Introduction

Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Three Shakespeare Songs* represent a supreme achievement in the repertory of twentieth-century unaccompanied choral composition. Composed in the last decade of the composer's long and productive creative life, the *Three Shakespeare Songs* reveal a composer at the height of his technical and expressive powers.

Vaughan Williams's catalogue is dominated by works for the human voice, ranging in scope from full-length opera to arrangements of folk songs and hymn tunes. He composed thirty-nine works for chorus and orchestra, including such masterpieces as the *Five Mystical Songs* (Herbert, 1911); *A Sea Symphony* (Whitman, 1903); *Sancta Civitas* (Revelation, 1925); *Dona Nobis Pacem* (also Whitman, 1936), and *Hodie* (various, 1954). Several important instrumental works include voices as part of the orchestral texture: wordless chorus (*Flos Campi* 1925), and solo voice (*Pastorale Symphony No. 3* 1921).

The special character of an instrumental work often influences a later vocal work. For example, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* for double string orchestra with solo quarter

(1910) bears a remarkable structural and textural resemblance to the *Mass in G Minor* for double chorus (1921). The inspiration of the fourth movement of the *Symphony No. 6* (1947) was the text of the second of the *Three Shakespeare Songs*, "The Cloud-Capped Towers," and the two pieces end with an identical chord progression.

The *Three Shakespeare Songs* (1951) are Vaughan Williams's fifteenth work for unaccompanied chorus, beginning in 1891 with the *Three Elizabethan Songs* (Herbert) and including madrigals, part songs, sacred anthems and motets, and his most extended work in this medium, the great *Mass in G Minor*.

Every composer's style is built on a unique combination of musical habits, intuitions, and choices. Vaughan Williams played the organ and the piano, but above all he was a choral singer and a violinist. His early study of English folk song and his editing of the *English Hymnal* reinforced his violinist's and singer's habits of thinking melodically. Later study with Ravel in Paris (1908) and contact with the music of Debussy helped him to expand beyond his early models of Brahms, Wagner, Stanford, and Parry, without abandoning their important lessons of tonal syntax. Ultimately, Vaughan Williams evolved a deeply personal style based on all these influences, and informed by a strong sense of the social mission of the composer. His description of this mission in his book *National Music* (1934) acknowledges the central role of singing and choral music in our musical culture:

Art . . . if it is to be of any value . . . must grow out of the very life of the composer himself . . . our composers are much too fond of going to concerts. There they hear the

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finished product. What the artist should be concerned with is the raw material . . . the lilt of the chorus at a music-hall . . . the rousing fervor of a Salvation Army hymn . . . The art of music above all other arts is the expression of the soul of a nation . . . any community of people who are spiritually bound together by language, environment, history and common ideals and, above all, a continuity with the past.

### Three Shakespeare Songs

In 1951 the choral conductor Armstrong Gibbs invited Vaughan Williams to compose a work for unaccompanied mixed voices that would serve as a "test piece" for the June festival of the Federation of Music Festivals, of which Vaughan Williams was president. Though at first Vaughan Williams was not enthusiastic about providing a piece for this pedagogical purpose, he later relented and presented Gibbs with the *Three*

*"Full Fathom Five" is the most complex of the three songs, in its phrase structure and variety of texture.*

*Shakespeare Songs*. The songs were first heard at the festival on June 23, 1951.

Given that the impetus for the *Three Shakespeare Songs* was pedagogical, the following analysis is offered in this spirit as a guide for choral conductors and composers of choral music. For the choral conductor, the kind of analysis shown here is indispensable in learning and memorizing the score, and in teaching the score to the singers. Identification of the tonal cen-

ters provides the essential key to the structural organization of the entire work. Knowledge of the various modes and scales used in the work enable the conductor to focus on such aspects as tuning, phrasing, and identifying expressive dissonance, particularly in relation to the text. This knowledge is also essential for the conductor who wishes to apply moveable-do solfège in the rehearsal. This analysis will include many suggestions for this application.

Of special value for the choral composer is a study of Vaughan Williams's writing for unaccompanied voices. How often does one encounter unaccompanied music which, in spite of the best intentions of conductors and hard work on the part of singers, is too difficult to learn, where singers must work too hard to "find" their notes? Vaughan Williams's technique balances a rich and varied harmonic palate with an intuitive sense of what is organic and grateful for the human voice and ear.

The following analytical description is accompanied by tables to give the reader an overview of the formal structure of each song. Important information is shown regarding key areas, melodic material, scale structure, length of phrases and sections, and details of texture and dynamics. It will be most helpful for the reader to have a brief familiarity with the tables before reading the accompanying text (Tables 1, 2, 3), and to consult the score (published by Oxford University Press).

### "Full Fathom Five"

"Full Fathom Five" is the most complex of the three songs, in its phrase structure and variety of texture. The song is in ABA form, reflecting the structure of the punctuation and imagery in Shakespeare's text. (See Table 1)

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
A Of his bones are coral made,  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:

Nothing of him that doth fade,  
B But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange.



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Table 1  
 “FULL FATHOM FIVE”  
 FORMAL DIAGRAM

*Andante misterioso*, 4/4 meter

19 measures

6.5 measures

4 measures

4 measures

5 measures

Sop div., ten chordal ostinato

Alto triplet 8th-note ostinato

*pp*

Bass melody

*p pp ppp* (underwater echoes)

A “Ding-dong bell.” “Full fathom five ...” “Of his bones ...” “Those are pearls ...”  
 F major (pentatonic with flatted-6th; F-G-A-C-D<sup>b</sup>)

11 measures

2.5 measures

2.5 measures

1.5 measures

4.5 measures

3-part S. A.

4-part S. A.

+ T. B. div.

11-part SATB

B “Nothing of him...” “But doth suffer...” “Into something...”

(II=V)

i

V

E maj. hexatonic  
 (E-F<sup>#</sup>-G<sup>#</sup>[g]-B-C-D)

A maj. hexatonic  
 (A-B<sup>b</sup>-C<sup>#</sup>-D-E-F)

B maj. hexatonic  
 (B-C-D<sup>#</sup>-E-F<sup>#</sup>-G)

fm hex./ C maj. pentatonic  
 (F-G-A<sup>b</sup>-B-C-D{d<sup>b</sup>})  
 (C-D-E-G-A<sup>b</sup>)

*mp*

*pp*

*ppp pppp*

13 measures

2.5 measures

2.5 measures

2 measures

6 measures

*pp* Sop ostinato in 4-part canon  
 Alto triplet 8th-note ostinato  
 Ten pedal D<sup>b</sup>

quarter-note triplets  
*cresc. to f*  
 Ten triplet 8th-note ostinato

dim. to *ppp*

A *pp* Bass melody *cresc. to f* dim. to *ppp*

“Ding-dong bell.”  
 F major hexatonic (F-G-A-C-D<sup>b</sup>-E<sup>b</sup>)

“Sea nymphs..”

“Hark! ...”

“Ding-dong bell.”

A Sea nymphs hourly right his knell:  
Hark! Now I hear them—  
Ding-dong bell.

Taken from *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene 2, the speaker of this text is the magician-sprite Ariel, consoling Ferdinand, who has been led to believe that his father Alfonso died in a shipwreck and now lies buried at sea. All of Vaughan Williams's musical choices regarding rhythm, texture, harmony, and melody work together to create a mysterious, underwater atmosphere.

The first A section begins with a seven-bar introduction which establishes the character of the scene. The texture is rich and complex, on three distinct registral and rhythmic levels, and is maintained throughout this section. (Figure 1)

**Foreground:** Basses singing the full text with a variety of rhythms

**Middleground:** Altos singing an eighth-note triplet *ostinato*: "Ding-dong bell"

**Background:** Sopranos and tenors in an alternating half-note rhythmic *ostinato*: "Ding-dong"

The feeling of regularity of the meter

is subtly challenged by the appearance of contrametric patterns in the middleground and background *ostinati*. The bass melody always begins in the middle of the bar, further obscuring the meter. The resulting interlocking web of gently undulating rhythms, created through the use of both simple and compound divisions of the beat, perfectly capture the underwater images of the text.

**Figure 1. "Full Fathom Five", mm. 7-10.**

*Contrametric patterns*

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**Figure 2. "Full Fathom Five", mm. 9-10.**

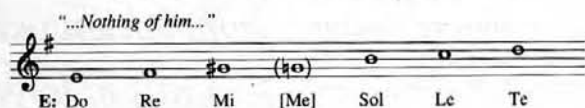
**Figure 3. F-major pentatonic scale with lowered 6<sup>th</sup> degree.**

The tonality is F major, as reflected in the key signature. More specifically, the entire passage contains *only* those notes derived from an F-major pentatonic scale with one very expressive chromatic inflection of D<sup>b</sup> (F-G-A-C-D<sup>b</sup>). The lowered sixth-scale degree borrowed from the parallel F minor, and foreshadows the appearance of F minor at the end of the B section. The single half step between C and D<sup>b</sup> creates a mildly dissonant "blur," which suggests the mysterious haze of the underwater scene. (As an example of the importance of a single note, try substituting D<sub>4</sub> for D<sup>b</sup>; the character of the song is utterly changed.) The voice exchange of C and D<sup>b</sup> between the upper sopranos and tenors creates the greatest harmonic tension in the passage, and is expressive and practical to sing. (Figure 2)

Assigning the movable-do syllables to this passage (Do-Re-Mi-Sol-Le) is an invaluable aid to tuning and remarkably sharpens the singers' awareness of the expressive character of the music. (Figure 3)

The design of the bass melody has several distinctive features. The effect of an underwater echo is created by repeating the last word of each of the three phrases ("lies...;" "made...;" "eyes...") at softer and softer dynamic levels. The triplet-eighth-note rhythm of this repeated word is an echo of the alto *ostinato*: "Ding-dong bell." There is also a subtle increase in intensity in each successive melodic statement in the bass voice, cre-

**Figure 4. E-major hexatonic scale;**  
Basis of mm. 20-23, "Full Fathom Five".



ated by the addition of a new note of the pentatonic scale in each phrase:

- "Full fathom five . . ." (F-G-A)  
 A "of his bones . . ." (F-G-A-C)  
 "Those are pearls . . ." (F-G-A-C-D $\flat$ )

The fact that all melodies and harmonies of this first A section are based on a single scale reflects an important aspect of Vaughan Williams's technique in writing for unaccompanied chorus. Long passages based on a single number of pitches create a harmonic field, where the unaccompanied singers are supported in finding their pitches with ease. This same technique, where one scale is the basis for all vertical and horizontal relationships, is a main feature of recent choral music by composers such as Pärt, Tavener, and Lauridsen, and is often extended throughout an entire piece. Vaughan Williams creates formal and structural contrast through decisive modulation to several key centers within a single piece, all organized around a single tonic.

The B section is based on a new line of

text which further develops the images of the first stanza: the eternal tomb of the sea and its effect on the body:

- Nothing of him that doth fade,  
 B But doth suffer a seachange  
 Into something rich and strange.

A corresponding deepening of musical expression is achieved by Vaughan Williams in this section through an expansion of the number of voices and pitches present in successive phrases, and the number of key areas.

The section begins with a new texture of women's voices in unison rhythm. The

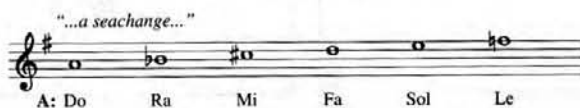
texture gradually thickens with each new phrase; three-part women's voices expand to four-part writing on the word "seachange;" *divisi* men's voices are added to create a six-part texture, which gradually evolves into rich eleven-part harmony by the section's end on the word "strange."

The five-note scale, which was the basis of the A section, is expanded here to five sets of six-note scales, some with occasional added chromatic inflections (shown in brackets). It is the particular interval structure and resulting harmonies derived from these five scales that are the source of Vaughan Williams's uniquely expressive harmonic language. Let us take each scale in turn, assigning the relevant moveable-do solfège syllables to illuminate more fully the expressive character of the notes. (Conductors can use the syllables in rehearsal; again, the singers' experience of the expressive character of the music will be greatly intensified.) (Figure 4)

This scale combines the brightness of diatonic major with the darker inflections

**Figure 5. "Full Fathom Five", mm. 20-21.**

**Figure 6a. A-major hexatonic scale;**  
Basis of mm. 23-24, "Full Fathom Five".



**Figure 6b. B-major hexatonic scale;**  
Basis of mm. 25-26, "Full Fathom Five".



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of the sixth and seventh scale degrees of descending melodic minor. The occasional lowered third from the parallel-minor scale makes possible the harmonic cross relations favored so often by Vaughan Williams and reminiscent of the sonorities of Byrd and Purcell. Also characteristic in this passage is the use of parallel chords in second inversion. (Figure 5, 6a, 6b)

A new chromatic inflection is introduced to these two identical scales; the Phrygian second scale degree. This scale yields two major triads a half step apart, making possible the strong harmonic progression of Neapolitan to major tonic. (Figure 7 and 8)

The scales in this section of E, A, and B, which relate to each other as I, IV and V in the key of E, give a strong sense of unity and forward motion to the B section.

The bridge back to the tonic of F major in the second A section contains a truly marvelous modulation. As shown in the table, the C-major triad, which functions as the Neapolitan in B major, becomes V in F major. The arresting freshness of the eventual return to F major in the second A section is delayed by first using the F-minor scale, before mov-

*One sign of masterful composition technique is unity of large- and small-scale structural relationships.*

ing to the remarkable eleven-note chord on the word "strange." This chord is built in an exact transposition to C major of the chromatically inflected F-major pentatonic scale of the first A section, giving this chord a dominant function, and setting up the return to F major. (Figure 9)

This unforgettable chord is most skillfully orchestrated for chorus. There are subtle voice crossings between the *divisi* sopranos and the tenors and baritones, which reinforce the sonority in the singers' ears and provide for smooth preparation of dissonance; the women's voices, which are higher and acoustically thinner, are anchored by being enclosed within

**Figure 7. Harmonies, mm. 23-26. "Full Fathom Five".**

"...Nothing of him..."

A: ♭ II                      I                      B: ♯ II                      I

**Figure 8. F-minor hexatonic scale;  
Basis of mm. 26-27, "Full Fathom Five".**

"...Into something rich and..."

f: Do    Re    Me    Fi    Sol    La    [Le]

**Figure 9. C-major pentatonic scale;  
Basis of mm. 28-30, "Full Fathom Five".**

"strange"

C: Do    Re    Mi    Sol    Le

Figure 10. "Full Fathom Five", mm. 28-30.

an octave, whereas the lower men's voices are enclosed within an expressive minor seventh, lending the sonority the gentle, strange color of a true underwater echo, and connecting it to the alternating half-note rhythm of the "Ding-dongs" in the song's opening bars. (Figure 10)

The second A section returns with a richer version of the opening texture, and contains the song's dynamic and registral climax. (Figure 11,12)

In the first phrase of this section, the underwater texture is created now with a descending melody stated in four-part canon. (This canonic texture is reminiscent of the opening of the Sanctus for the *Mass in G Minor*.) (Figure 11,12) The triplet eighth-note contrametric *ostinato* returns in the altos, supported by the expressive D<sup>b</sup> pedal in the tenors. The basses

sing the full text, accompanied by the gradual *crescendo* of the *ostinato*, now built on the broader and heavier quarter-note triplets. A *forte* climax is reached on the bass words "Ding-dong bell," followed by a fairly rapid *diminuendo*, as all the voices sink lower and lower in register, leaving only the single expressive D<sup>b</sup> in the altos. This D<sup>b</sup> ingeniously serves as an enharmonic common-tone C<sup>#</sup>, which is fifth of the opening F<sup>#</sup>-minor chord of the second song, "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers." The presence of a common tone makes it possible for the chorus to proceed more easily from "Full Fathom Five" to "The Cloud Capp'd Towers" without an interrupting starting pitch.

One sign of masterful compositional technique is unity of large- and small-scale structural relationships. The small-scale chord progression of Neapolitan to tonic is reflected in the large-scale structural relationship of the key center of E in this B section to the key center of F in the A section. This structural unity of triads and key areas related by half steps dominates all three songs (particularly No. 2) and is present in many of Vaughan Williams's pieces, giving his entire *oeuvre* a strong sense of stylistic unity. (Figure 13)

"The Cloud-Capp'd Towers"

The text for this song had deep spiritual resonance for Vaughan Williams. When his *Sixth Symphony* (1944-47) was

Figure 11. "Full Fathom Five", mm. 31-34.

Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:

A Hark! Now I hear them  
Ding dong bell.

Figure 12. Sanctus from *Mass in G Minor*, mm. 18-19.

*The harmonies express a finely graduated sense of forward motion, all within an idiom that is grateful and natural to sing.*

harmony in detail before proceeding with a more general analysis of the treatment of melody, rhythm, texture, and form.

Below (Figure 14) are all fourteen harmonies in the song. Because the sense of tonal center shifts continually, and because of the strong sense of A minor as a tonal goal of the middle B section, A minor is a practical choice for harmonic analysis and as the basis for moveable-do syllable assignments. Especially interesting is the series of alternating minor/major triads, built on roots ascending by half steps from F to A<sup>b</sup>. (These chords are shown in brackets.) (Figure 14)

For the conductor, incorporating singing with chromatic moveable-do syllables in the warm-up period of rehearsal is excellent preparation for singing "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" with true intona-

Figure 13. Harmonic structure of "Full Fathom Five".

premiered, many admirers were compelled to ask what the music meant in a programmatic sense, particularly the meditative last movement, which is an unrelieved *pianissimo senza crescendo*.

Vaughan Williams cited Prospero's words from *The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene 1: "We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" as a verbal description of "the substance of my last movement." (In *The Tempest*, Prospero has just made a large group of spirits vanish, and is reminding his daughter and her fiancé that mortal life also ends quickly.) The character of the music of this movement drifts about contrapuntally and finally dissolves into two alternating chords: E<sup>b</sup> major and E minor. The mysterious quality of this chord progression derives from the juxtaposition of two triads, which are only distantly related in the classical sense, but share the common tone of G. A detailed examination of "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" will show the frequent use of this exact progression, and the application of a general technique of triadic progression derived from various combinations of half-step root movements, with and with-

out common tones.

The chorally idiomatic harmonic language Vaughan Williams creates in this song is unique. The harmonies express a finely graduated sense of various levels of forward motion, all within an idiom that is grateful and natural to sing. For this reason, it is valuable first to discuss the

Figure 14. Fourteen Harmonies in "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers".

Figure 15. Ascending and descending chromatic scale, with solfège syllable names.



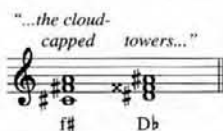
tion, and a powerful general exercise for singing chromatic choral music. The syllables corresponding to the chromatic scale based on A minor are shown here, with some adjustments made to reflect Vaughan Williams's spelling preferences. (It must be noted that there is no possible syllable name for F double sharp, as found in m. 20. Using the enharmonic syllable "Sol" is suggested.) (Figure 15)

A note concerning the key signature of two sharps in this song: this is most likely F# Phrygian. The song was originally composed down a whole step with no key signature, which would be E Phrygian. (This matches the tonality of the coda of the fourth movement of the *Sixth Symphony*.) Though the song begins with an F#-minor chord, and this chord returns at the recapitulation in m.19, the analysis will show that the song cannot be said to be "in" the key of F# minor or Phrygian, in any way that is pedagogically useful. Rather it is logical to assume that having written out the entire song a whole step lower with no key signature, Vaughan Williams simply transposed the song up a whole step, adjusting the key signature accordingly. The question of the use of key signatures in much twentieth-century music is a very large one, and an in-depth examination is beyond the scope of this article. Twentieth-century composers have been inconsistent in their use of key signatures, and this often obscures clear tonal relationships, and the deep connection between twentieth-century music and music of the past.

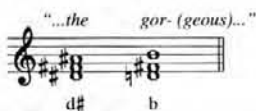
Five types of root-movement progressions, all involving chromatic voice-leading by half step, account for almost all of the harmonic movement in "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers." Each type of root movement has a distinct character and sense of propulsion in relation to its surrounding harmonies. In figures of progressions below, reading all note names from top to bottom to spell chords shows the half-step voice leading, and often puts the strongest melodic motion in the top voice, as it is in the song. (Figure 16. 1-5)

Though the root movements in "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" are predominantly of the chromatic voice-leading type outlined above, there are also the more traditional root movements by diatonic seconds and perfect fourths. It is the subtle

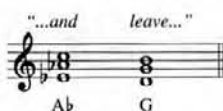
**Figure 16.1** - Root movement by third with no common tones, mm. 2-3.



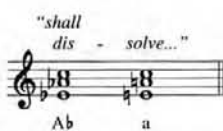
**Figure 16.2** - Root movement by third with common tones, mm. 3.



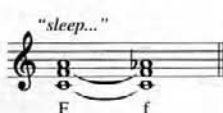
**Figure 16.3** - Root movement by half step with no common tones, mm. 9-10.



**Figure 16.4** - Root movement by half step with common tones, mm. 15-16.



**Figure 16.5** - Shifting from major to minor with the same root, mm. 24-25.

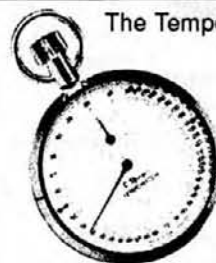


blending of these traditional progressions with the chromatic ones that gives the piece its sense of coherence and balance, and shows the liberating influence of Debussy on Vaughan Williams's harmonic style. For example, the harmonies of mm. 3-11 cohere beautifully around the tonal center of A minor, with frequent use of simple mixture (chords borrowed from A major), and use of double mixture (vi, or F minor) and secondary mixture (#VII: read A# major triad as an enharmonic spelling of G#).<sup>1</sup> (Figure 17)

"The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" is in ABA form, like "Full Fathom Five." Vaughan Williams distinguishes each formal section as it reflects the structure and character of the words. The text of the A section is a list of descriptive nouns: "towers", "palaces", "temples", and "globe." The B section introduces the first verb: *dissolve*. The return of the

opening chord progression coincides with the first and only use of a personal pro-

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Figure 17. Chord Progression of mm. 3-10, "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers"

The musical score shows four vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are: "the gor - geous pal - a - ces. The sol - emn tem - ples. the great globe it - self, shall dis - solve." The chord progression is indicated below the bass line: a: ii V<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> VI<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> VI iii<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> iii ii<sub>6</sub> i<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> i. The dynamic marking is *pp* (pianissimo).

*The presence of second inversion chords with their perfect fourths gives the song a slightly medieval sound, and lends a dimension of timelessness.*

ing dynamic of *pianissimo* is maintained throughout the song, with only one slight *crescendo* inspired by the vastness of the words "the great globe itself."

The melody is subordinate to the rich chords, moving mostly by step. A notable moment of triadic melodic movement is again inspired by the words "the great globe itself." The sense of deep concentration in this song is achieved partly through frequent use of repeated notes in the melody, suggesting a "reciting tone" as found in chant. The chromatic half-step voice leading of many of the harmonies further contributes to the smoothness of the texture. The voices move mostly homorhythmically, with occasional melodic dissonance in eighth notes in the inner voices.

The texture of "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" is reminiscent of the string writing in Vaughan Williams's instrumental music, especially the *Fanstasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, with frequent doubling at the octave of the soprano melody in the tenors. Sound acoustical principles of spacing of chords are always observed, with frequent open fifths between the lowest two voices. Though most of the chords are in root position, more than the usual number are in second inversion, a favorite voicing of Vaughan Williams. The presence of second inversion chords with their perfect fourths gives the song a slightly medieval sound, and lends a dimension of timelessness.

There is a subtle change in texture in the B section of the song. The largely homorhythmic texture is loosened a bit.

noun: *we*. (See Table 2)

A The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all of which it inherit,  
shall dissolve,

B And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind.

A We are such stuff as dreams are made of;  
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.

The emotional tone of "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" is established in the opening bars, and is maintained throughout the entire song, with only the subtlest variations in dynamics, tempo, and harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic character. Again, all of Vaughan Williams's musical choices serve to create the text-inspired mood of impenetrable mystery, awe, and calm. Let us examine each in turn the treatment of tempo, dynamics, melody, harmony, rhythm, and texture.

The *Lento* tempo is slow enough for the rich, subtle harmonic shifts to register fully in the singers' and listeners' ears, but not so slow as to make the long phrases impractically difficult to sing. The open-

Table 2  
 "THE CLOUD-CAPP'D TOWERS"  
 FORMAL DIAGRAM

Lento, 4/4 meter

9 measures				
	2 measures	2.5 measures	2.5 measures	2 measures
A	<i>pp</i> "The cloud-capp'd towers,	the gorgeous palaces	The solemn temples, the great globe itself,	<i>(poco cresc.)</i> shall dis-
	Triads: f#m      D#M	d#m bm EM FM	c#m bm am	abm f A#m

8 measures				
		<i>poco animato</i>		<i>a tempo</i>
	2 measures	3 measures		3 measures
B	<i>pp</i> "-solve, yea,,all which it inherit shall dis-	solve, And like this insubstantial pageant faded		leave not a rack behind. We
	Triads: am      A#M		GM	gm      F#M

8 measures				
	3 measures		5 measures	
A	"are such stuff as dreams are made on,		And our little life is rounded with a sleep." <i>ppp</i>	
	Triads: F#M   f#m7   D#M		bm EM F   f#m	FM fm

as first the basses break into the melodic foreground on the words “yea, all which it inherit,” and later the sopranos on the words “And, like this insubstantial pageant faded.” The background harmonies on the words “shall dissolve” seem literally to dissolve, oscillating back and forth between A minor and A<sup>b</sup> major, recalling the last two harmonies of the fourth movement of the *Sixth Symphony* (E minor and E<sup>b</sup> major).

The opening texture returns in the second A section, with melodic doubling at the octave of both the soprano melody and an inner voice, resulting in the richest melodic texture of the song. The final progression contains the harmonies of F<sup>#</sup> minor to F major, recalling the chord progression at the end of the *Sixth Symphony*. The half-step gesture is extended to the very last chord; the relative calm of F major is darkened with the final sonority of F minor.

“Over Hill, Over Dale”

The text of the third song, “Over Hill, Over Dale,” has a magical character similar to the first two songs. Taken from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act II, Scene I, this text is spoken by one of Queen Titania’s fairies, and establishes the spirit world in Shakespeare’s drama, a world beyond rationality.

Vaughan Williams creates an introduction and coda through text repetition to frame an A-B-A form. The A sections feature the personal pronoun I; the B section is a list of descriptive nouns (*cowslips, coats, rubies, favours, and freckles*). (See Table 3)

B In their gold coats  
spots you see;  
Those be rubies,  
fairy favours,  
In those freckles live  
their savours:

A I must go seek some  
dewdrops here,  
And hang a pearl in  
every cowslip’s ear.

Coda Over hill, over dale,  
Thorough bush,  
thorough brier,  
Over hill, over dale.

“Over Hill, Over Dale” is the most simple and direct of the three songs, though not without its own subtleties. Its overall harmonic color has a strong relation to the first song, “Full Fathom Five,” with its prevalent use of the lowered sixth-scale degree in major (the note E<sup>b</sup> in G major), and its use of pentatonic structures. It also provides an effective contrast with the first two songs in tempo and meter; the song is marked *Allegro Vivace*, and is in duple-compound meter.

The six-bar introduction establishes a complex mood; at once pastoral, energetic, and mysterious. The *Allegro* tempo creates a feeling of vitality; the compound meter creates a pastoral mood, though tempered with mystery as expressed by the harmonies in the opening bars. These harmonies can be analyzed as two forms of the submediant triad in G major; the diatonic minor triad, and the rich aug-

mented-major seventh chord. Again, chromatic syllables will help the singers to tune these harmonies. (Figure 18)

The chromatic character of these chords is contrasted by the following harmonies built from the G-pentatonic scale. Textural variety is achieved by alternating the *divisi* women’s voices with the *divisi* men’s voices, then combining them in a four-part SATB texture.

The A section introduces the character of the fairy, who describes her duties for the queen. The voice of the fairy is represented by the sopranos, supported by an *ostinato* in the lower three voices derived from the harmonies and rhythms of the introduction. Several measures of triple-compound meter lengthen the phrases of this section. This music emphasizes e minor, the relative minor of the opening key.

In the B section, the changing character of the text results in a corresponding change in the character of the music. The fairy describes the cowslips in the landscape of the fairy world. The tonality shifts to the closely related key of A minor; the meter settles into a steady 6/8; the texture begins with some exact rhythmic imitation between the sopranos and the lower voices, and evolves into the first homorhythmic texture of the song, as all four parts rise to a *forte* dynamic in unison rhythm, and in the bright relative tonality of C major: “Those be rubies, fairy favours; In those freckles live their savours.”

The second A section is marked by the return of the fairy speaking with the per-

Intro Over hill, over dale,  
Thorough bush,  
thorough brier,  
Over park, over pale,  
Thorough flood,  
thorough fire,

A I do wander  
everywhere,  
Swifter than the  
mooné’s sphere;  
And I serve the fairy  
queen,  
To dew her orbs  
upon the green.

The cowslips tall her  
pensioners be;

**Figure 18. “Over Hill, Over Dale”, mm. 1-2.**

**Allegro vivace**

The musical score for Figure 18 shows the vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment for the first two measures of the song. The tempo is marked *Allegro vivace*. The lyrics are: "O - ver hill, o - ver dale,". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the bass line. Harmonic analysis below the piano part indicates the chords: G: vi and VI<sup>+7</sup>.

Table 3  
 "OVER HILL, OVER DALE"  
 FORMAL DIAGRAM

Allegro vivace, 6/8 meter

6 measures

<p>2 measures</p> <p>Intro "Over hill, over dale,</p> <p><i>p</i> Sop, Alto G major (vi-bVI+7)</p>	<p>2 measures</p> <p>Thorough bush, thorough brier,</p> <p>Ten, Bass</p>	<p>2 measures</p> <p>Over park, over pale, Thorough flood, Thorough fire,</p> <p>SATB G pentatonic</p>
--	--	--

14 Measures

<p>3 measures</p> <p>9 6 8 ;8</p> <p>"I do wander everywhere,</p> <p>A <i>p</i> Sop. melody; <i>pp</i> ATB ostinato w/ text from intro. E pentatonic minor</p>	<p>3 measures</p> <p>9 6 6 ; 8</p> <p>Swifter than the mooné's spere;</p> <p><i>cresc.</i></p>	<p>4 measures</p> <p>And I serve the fairy queen,</p> <p><i>f</i></p>	<p>4 measures</p> <p>To dew her orbs upon the green.</p>
--	--	---	--

8 measures

<p>2 measures</p> <p>"Cowslips tall her pensioners be;</p> <p>B <i>p</i> Sop. melody; <i>pp</i> ATB rhythmic imitation A minor</p>	<p>2 measures</p> <p>In their gold coats spots you see;</p> <p><i>cresc.</i></p>	<p>2 measures</p> <p>Those be rubies, fairy favours,</p> <p>SATB; unison rhythm <i>f</i> C major</p>	<p>2 measures</p> <p>In those freckles live their savours:</p>
--	--	--	--

Table 3 continued on page 22

Table 3 continued

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7 measures

3 measures

4 measures

9, 6

6; 8

"I must go seek some dewdrops here,

And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.

A

*f* *deces. p*

Soprano melody;

*pp*

ATB harmonic underpinning  
e minor pentatonic

---

8 measures

2 measures

2 measures

2 measures

2 measures

"Over hill, over dale,

Thorough bush, thorough brier,

Over hill, over dale."

CODA

*pp*

Ten, Bass

Sop, Alto

Ten, Bass Sop, Alto

G major (vi-bVI+7)

---

**Figure 19.1** - Measure 43, final chord; "Over Hill, Over Dale".**Figure 19.2** - Final chord; *Magnificat*

sonal pronoun "I," represented again by the sopranos, and returning to the tonality of E minor. This section is exactly half as long as the first A section, and leads smoothly into the coda.

The coda is an extended duplication of the texture and harmony of the introduction. The two mysterious submediant chords return, again alternating between *divisi* men and women. The women's voices end the song, sustaining the final augmented-major seventh chord. This ending is reminiscent of the last phrase of Vaughan Williams's *Magnificat* (1932) for women's voices, solo mezzo-soprano, flute, strings, and harp, where the four-part *divisi* women's chorus sings the word "Hail." (Figure 19.1, 19.2)

## Conclusion

Vaughan Williams's *Three Shakespeare Songs* brilliantly fulfill their original pedagogical purpose: to provide a challenging and grateful work for choral singers, using texts of the highest literary and spiritual quality. We have shown the logic with which it is possible to apply moveable-do *solfege* syllables to ensure good intonation and to increase the singers' awareness of the expressive character of certain notes and intervals, particularly in relation to the text. The formal tables show the phrase structure and tonal centers of each section, and can greatly aid the conductor with interpretation, pacing, and memorization.

The *Three Shakespeare Songs* are model pieces for unaccompanied chorus. Most of the musical materials have diatonic and pentatonic origins, with expressive chromatic inflections, that create the mysterious atmosphere inherent in the texts. The

## *The Three Shakespeare Songs are model pieces for unaccompanied chorus.*

individual vocal lines are largely conjunct; with the exception of a few melodic fifths and one octave in the bass line of "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" there is no interval larger than a fourth in the entire set of songs and the interval of a second predominates. The more frequent chromaticism of "The Cloud-Capp'd Towers" always occurs by half-step motion, and frequently between harmonies with common tones. Dissonances are always carefully prepared. The formal structure of each song reflects the structure of the texts, and shifts in tone, emphasis, and speaker articulate new formal sections. The layering of simple and compound rhythms is natural and organic, and effectively creates the magical world inspired by the texts. Word repetition is used sparingly but effectively to create formal balances, or to build *ostinati* (for example, "Ding-dong bell").

In an address to the Intercollegiate Music Council at Yale University in 1959, the American composer Randall Thompson articulated beautifully the technical and aesthetic challenges of composing for unaccompanied chorus, and emphasized the value for all composers of connecting with their deepest musical impulses

through the composing of choral music. The spirit of Thompson's words bears a strong resemblance to Vaughan Williams's essay from *National Music*, which was quoted at the beginning of this article. Both composers speak of choral singing as an indicator of the relative health of a musical culture:

... an instrumental style unleavened by the knowledge of writing for voices can become . . . turgid . . . and lose touch with the human spirit . . . an impediment to choral composition is the difficulty of applying contemporary compositional techniques to writing for chorus. Modern idioms—the insistence on dissonance and super-chromaticism, on fitful and irregular rhythms . . . do not lend themselves . . . to the medium of the chorus. . . . Many of the greatest composers' greatest works are choral, and they can all be sung by amateurs. It would be a terrible indictment of contemporary schools of music composition if they (failed) to do what their forefathers did so well.

This brief survey of Vaughan Williams's career, with its commitment to choral music, and a detailed analysis of one of his late choral masterpieces, the *Three Shakespeare Songs*, show Vaughan Williams to be a choral citizen of the highest order.

Nora Benc: "This analysis is the first in a book in progress, including unaccompanied choral works by Debussy, Mesiaen, Poulenc, Britten, Hindemith, Susa, Conte, and Whitacre."

## NOTES

- 1 For a complete discussion of advanced mixture, readers are referred to Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice-Leading*, Chapter 30 (Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich)

—CJ—