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"Words Move, Music Moves":

An Examination of Musical Settings of the Poetry of T. S. Eliot

A supporting document submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

in Music

by

Erik John Lawrence

Committee in charge:

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December 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful to my doctoral committee members. Firstly, Robert Koenig, who has not only been a keen and insightful teacher, but a great supporter and friend during the four years of my studies. Next, Dr. Isabel Bayrakdarian and Jennifer Kloetzel, both of whose wealth of performance experience has given me invaluable knowledge of the performing arts. To Dr. Martha Sprigge, who wholeheartedly supported my topic and gave me great resources, I am indebted. To the cornerstone of this academic endeavor, Dr. John Stroup, I will be ever grateful for first bringing me to the wonder and wisdom of Eliot's poetry. To Dr. Stroup's fellow students, Dr. Matthew Vale, Ross Arlen Tieken, Ethan Kim, Christian Hauser, and Luke Riel, you all know how dear you are to me. Julie Davies and Valdis Jansons, incredible international talents, brought their individual creative vocal instincts to enliven the music of Reif and Swanson, previously unrecorded, in the lecture-presentation of this project. Those who did not hear their respective interpretations of this music are the poorer for it. I would be remiss not to thank Fr. Nicholas Speier and Valerie Yova for providing a quiet, contemplative space in which to study for and write this document, as well as a space to rehearse the music of Swanson and Reif. Finally, I must thank my supportive, inspiring, loving family for their encouragement during this process, as indeed during my entire life and artistic career. Arnold and Donalda Merbitz, and John and Cynthia Dickinson, my dear grandparents, provided endless imaginative worlds to spark my artistry. Last but best of all, to my parents Erik and Nina Lawrence, how can I express my eternal thanks?

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ABSTRACT

“Words Move, Music Moves”:

An Examination of Musical Settings of the Poetry of T. S. Eliot

by

Erik Lawrence

There are very few musical settings of the poetry of T. S. Eliot, considering his stature as one of the most influential and admired of twentieth century poets. Fewer still are the settings in that historically abundant genre of art song for voice and piano. This document will explore possible reasons for this seeming incongruity, as well as explore the approaches which the four composers who did set Eliot in this genre took interpretively and stylistically. In gathering information, the poetry and scores themselves were the most useful source, as well as historical and biographical literature on the poet’s and composers’ lives, and some of their peers. The main trouble with Eliot’s poetry seems to stem from the significant stylistic shift in the so-called Modernist period of English literature coinciding with the two World Wars. Poetry became vastly more dense and allusive, as well as grammatically and rhythmically more abstruse. At the conclusion of the document, an alternative stylistic method, employed by other composers during the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, will be suggested as a subtler way to give clarity of intent to a musical setting of Eliot’s poetry.

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Part 1: Eliot and Music

A. Introduction to Eliot's Verse and his Musical Influences, Collaborations, and Friendships

T. S. Eliot's poetry is a dense web of allusions to culture, place, nature, music, monument, myth, architecture, philosophy, and rhetoric. Precious few composers have attempted to set it to music. The manner in which poetry was set to song in the nineteenth century was dying in the radical experimentation of the inter-war years at the beginning of the twentieth. Eliot's poetry bears its own rhythm, its own musical structures, which renders further actual melodic elaboration mostly moot. In the following pages, we will examine four composers who dared attempt a traditional setting of Eliot's poetry in the popular nineteenth century genre of Schubert, Brahms, Fauré, and others: the art song for voice and piano.

Eliot's attention to the arts outside of literature was unfailingly perceptive. He kept abreast of the literary works of younger writers, and championed them when they made an impression. His position as one of the founding directors and editor of Faber & Faber enabled him to function as curator of nascent talent in his own country. But he was also interested in emerging composers, devoting his time to conversation between artistic disciplines, and attending premiers of important stage and musical performances. This atmosphere of cross-pollination in British art circles gave rise to direct financial and professional support: the year of Eliot's death saw the founding of Faber's music publishing division, led initially by Benjamin Britten. Composer Sir Michael Tippett gives a glimpse of this inter-arts dialogue in a description of his mentorship by Eliot:

> I knew Eliot very well, and knew him particularly at the time he was writing the plays. I met him first just as he was about to do *Murder in the Cathedral,* saw all of them as they came out, and talked to him at great length about the problems of mixed art--which of course opera is. He helped me an enormous amount to see how music upon music must be the absolute centre of the opera.[1]

Stravinsky and Wyndham Lewis were also among the artists with which he associated, and through them, accessed the currents of wider trends in twentieth century art, both musical and visual. Stravinsky and Eliot discussed collaborating on an opera.[2] The project fell through, but Stravinsky's Neoclassical opera *The Rake's Progress* was the fruit of his collaboration with that other giant of Anglo-American Modernist verse, W. H. Auden. Stravinsky composed a brief piece for male choir and small orchestral ensemble after the death of his friend Eliot, setting the opening of the Latin Requiem Mass, his *Introitus: T. S. Eliot in memoriam*.[3] Only once however did this supremely influential and prolific composer set Eliot's actual verse: the choral anthem *The Dove Descending Breaks the Air*, the text of which forms the fourth section of the last poem in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, his late mystic masterpiece.

The *Four Quartets* collectively encompass a variety of styles and amalgamate influences from many cultures across many centuries. Stravinsky's selection of text betrays a shrewd acknowledgement of the limitations of musical setting. The two stanzas which begin with the line "The dove descending breaks the air" are among

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[1] Michael Tippett, "Sir Michael Tippett: The Man and His Music" [pamphlet] (Baarn, The Netherlands: Phonograph International B.V., n.d.), 7.

[2] Mildred Meyer Boaz, "Musical and Poetic Analogues in T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and Igor Stravinsky's 'The Rite of Spring'" *The Centennial Review* 24, no. 2 (1980): 218.

[3] Eliot's much-quoted maxim "Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal" comes from his series of essays published under the title *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1928). Stravinsky is often attributed an extremely similar quotation.

the most conventional in Eliot's entire œuvre. Iambic tetrameter and *abababcc* rhyme scheme[4] here make for a poignantly accessible and immediate appeal to the reader's sense of tradition and familiarity in the comparative ocean of disparate allusions in the roughly 16,000-word collection of poems. Judging from Stravinsky's anthem, his selection of text was based on the paradoxical familiarity of the poem's verse (making it easy to set to music), and the mystic unfamiliarity of its theological theme (inspiring the composer's interpretive reflection). As we shall see, the four composers discussed below followed Stravinsky's lead, intentionally or otherwise, in selecting Eliot's more conventionally metered poems for their musical settings.

Of the four composers whose music we shall examine, two are English and two American. The most established, Benjamin Britten, was born in 1913. Thomas Adès, born in 1971, is the only one of these composers whose life did not overlap with Eliot's. The Americans, Howard Swanson (born 1907) and Paul Reif (born 1910) join Britten in the generation immediately after Eliot, who was born in the previous century in 1888. Swanson's and Reif's song settings come from the decade of the 1950's, and Britten's comes from 1972. Adès's song cycle is his Op. 1, published in 1990. Swanson's selection of Eliot's poetry is the earliest written, his *Preludes* written and published around the time of *The Love Song of J. Alfred*

[4] Eliot almost indulges in the "Venus and Adonis" rhyme scheme, which would form a sestain, but adds a seventh line (here the last *a*-rhyming line, occurring in the middle of the stanza) probably invoking the numerological significance of the number seven in the Ancient Near East, esp. in Hebrew Scriptures. The theme of section IV, "The dove descending," centers on the feast of Shavuot/Pentecost. In the Jewish tradition, this commemorates the giving of the Torah on Sinai, and in the Christian tradition marks the descent of the Holy Spirit, both of which were, according to scripture, accompanied by fire. Hence, Eliot mixes themes of purification, refinement, and completion. Stravinsky sets Eliot's ascetic but conventional verse in atonal polyphony and pays little heed to the poetry's scansion, obfuscating any sense of familiarity and thus seeming to highlight the sense of terror in the encounter with the Divine Other, the "Cloud of Unknowing." See Donald Senior et al., *The Catholic Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 398-9.

Prufrock. Britten's selection, *Journey of the Magi*, was published a decade or so later, around the time of Eliot's spiritual crisis and conversion to Anglicanism. Reif's and Adès's selections both come from the early 1930's, when Eliot's stature was firmly established: *Five Finger Exercises* and *Landscapes*, respectively.

As with Stravinsky's choice of text, these four poems show us Eliot's deceptively complex mastery of form. Apart from *Journey of the Magi*, these poems are fairly short, in largely uniform tetrameter with little variation. *Magi* is by far the most adventurous in line-length, but is also the most accessible to the reader because of its highly conversational, almost casually confessional voice.[5] Adès exploits the natural imagery in Eliot's verse with abundant text-painting. Swanson's songs reflect admirably the anguished, morose nature of the text, inspired by the French Symbolists. Reif's songs are the lightest, setting some of Eliot's most comic verses. In all of these texts, however accessible and familiar their verse appears at first glance, there rumbles the tectonic themes of Eliot's existential pondering on Time and Death. This is the contemplative strength of Eliot's writing: that even in his "lighter" works, the themes of his most rigorous, lengthy poetic monuments appear undiluted. Natural scenes of animals and plants still evoke for Eliot his most persistent questions of life. Mundane human actions cannot help but signify greater realities — "a lifetime burning in every moment," as the poet says in *East Coker*, the second of the *Four Quartets*. This is the rich symbolic meat that attracted these four ambitious composers to Eliot's poetry. We will examine the interpretive lens through

[5] As we will see, Britten's setting is equally adventurous, being the only one of these four settings to include more than one voice part. Britten's conservative streak still shows itself in the cast of three male voices — countertenor, tenor, and bass — representing the familiar characters of the Three Kings.

which each composer interacted with the texts. First however, it will be beneficial to look at Eliot's own understanding and appreciation of music, especially as it relates to his poetry.

B. Eliot's Musical Vocabulary

We are fortunate to have recordings of poets of the turn of the twentieth century reciting their own works. The performances reveal a bold, rhetorical style adapted to clearly carry the voice over a crowd before the existence of electronic audio amplification. Vowels are sustained in a manner similar to singing. The whole body of the poet is thrown into the delivery of the lines. The poet is not only a writer but an actor, even celebrant of a sacred rite. One can listen to a recording of W. B. Yeats reading his "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and detect the influence of the Irish Bardic tradition. Although Yeats did not speak Gaelic, he invested much energy into the preservation of the ancient pre-Christian bardic tradition.[6] Fortunately, there exist also recordings of the Irish Gaelic bardic schools which give us even more direct aural evidence of this sung-speech. Stock melodic figures often accompany recitations of poetry. We know this was the case also with Greek epic poetry and the professional *aoidoi (*ἀοιδοί), or singer/composers of the Classical period (c. 500 – 300 BC). Yeats drew direct comparisons between ancient Greek culture and his own ancient Irish heritage.[7] His contributions to Irish folklore and his fascination with

[6] Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, "Yeats and the Bardic Tradition." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994): 90.

[7] As is evident from the style of the bulk of his epic narrative poems on Irish legends.

Mediterranean Classicism can be seen in works like “The Wandering of Oisin,” and “Sailing to Byzantium.”[8]

The bardic declamation that Yeats embodies gave way to a new voice in the inter-war years — Eliot’s voice of the outsider — the American expat in the Old Countries, the Unitarian in Christendom, the Modernist in the Georgian era. A comparison of Yeats’s reading style and Eliot’s gives an immediate impression of the shift in psychological state from this younger generation of poets. Eliot’s reading is cautious, self-critical, evasive, even obsessive. Yeats’s influence formally on Eliot is obvious from his repetition of phrases and words, rich use of consonance and assonance, and internal rhyme.[9] The content of the poetry however reveals a far more tortured, anguished internal state: doubting, second-guessing, and suspicious even of momentary happiness. If a poem like Yeats’s “The Second Coming” ominously foretold the horrors of World War II, Eliot’s “The Waste Land” is the reflection of a sensitive mind resigned to the ugliest manifestations of human cruelty. Eliot’s generation saw the rich artistic fruits of the late nineteenth century in Europe give way to the bloodbath of the early twentieth. This, more than anything else, renders comprehensible the starkness of the watershed of twentieth century

[8] As Yeats was likely aware, Byzantine liturgical chant in the Eastern Christian tradition provides an excellent modern-day glimpse at the ancient conception of the unity of poetry and music. The codification and simplification of Byzantine chant notation was a relatively recent development in the eighteenth century, but the art form goes back to the earliest days of Christian ecclesial worship. It forms an unbroken tradition with ancient Greek music, but incorporates Roman, Syriac, and Hebrew musical traditions. The system of eight church tones in Byzantine music is not simply a system of whole- and half-step scales, but a repertoire of melodic cells unique to each tone, the eight of which are rotated weekly throughout the liturgical cycle of the year.

[9] Yeats, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, and the ancient Greek dramatists were required reading in Eliot’s mind, according to artists whom he mentored. See Suzanne Robinson, “The Pattern from the Palimpsest,” in John Xiros Cooper, ed. *T. S. Eliot’s Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music* (New York: Garland Pub., 2000), 150.

Modernism. What, if anything, was there in culture to hold on to or to learn from the artistic monuments of the past if all European cultural achievement ended in internecine slaughter?

The answer for twentieth century artists was to learn from each others' craft. Eliot was a paradigm of those artists who banded together across national boundaries to learn from each other's disciplines. Eliot's musical tastes were keen, and he often wrote his impressions of live performances and recordings. Beethoven's late works seem to have haunted him in particular. In March 1931, aged 47, Eliot wrote to fellow poet Stephen Spender: "I have the A minor Quartet on the gramophone, and I find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly, or at least more than human gaiety, about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die."[10] Five years later, *Burnt Norton* was published, the first of Eliot's late masterworks the *Four Quartets*, Eliot's best effort (his *Preludes*, discussed below, being another) at giving a poetic analog to a musical genre. Although it has been pointed out that *Burnt Norton* carries over the same five-section structure of his earlier masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, it seems equally likely Eliot cast the poem in five "movements," matching the structure of Beethoven's A Minor String Quartet, Op. 132. While it is probably a stretch to make a one-to-one comparison of the five sections of *Burnt*

[10] Quoted in Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of "Four Quartets"* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 19.

Norton with the five movements of Beethoven's quartet,[11] Eliot creates definite tonal and rhythmic diversity between the five sections by varying rhyme, scansion, and vocabulary. As in a multiple-movement symphony or chamber composition, the sections are of varying length and character: some lighter, some of weightier theme and rhetoric.

Apart from these more obvious architectural features, Eliot's approach to poetry is subtly yet unquestionably informed by the Western tradition of orchestral art music. There are direct references to the Western canon of Classical music in Eliot's poems. In his *Portrait of a Lady*, we have the following scene probably describing a piano recital of Ignacy Jan Paderewski:

> We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
> Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.
> "So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
> Should be resurrected only among friends
> Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
> That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."[12]

In *Burnt Norton*, Eliot compares the "stillness of the violin, while the note lasts" to the timeless quality of a great work of art. Apart from these direct similes, Eliot and other composers of his generation spoke of the phonetic variety and harmony of the sounds of the words themselves. Attempting to define the "musical" quality of his poetry without adequate knowledge of musical theory, Eliot rather vaguely stated it had both "a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meaning of the words which compose it, and … these two patterns are indissoluble

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[11] Although, some musicologists have attempted this. See Harvey Gross, "Music and The Analogue of Feeling: Notes on Eliot and Beethoven" *The Centennial Review of Arts & Science* 3, no. 3 (1959): 269–88.

[12] All quotations of Eliot's poetry will be taken from this publishing: T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Limited ed. Franklin Center Pa: Franklin Library, 1976).

and one."[13] In speaking of the first of these two levels of musicality, fellow English modernist poet Basil Bunting gave a more specific description of the poet's toolbox of sounds:

> Poetry, like music, is to be heard. It deals in sound - long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relations of the vowels, the relations of consonants to one another which are like instrumental colour in music. Poetry lies dead on the page until some voice brings it to life, just as music on the stave, is no more than instructions to the player. A skilled musician can imagine the sound, more or less, and a skilled reader can try to hear, mentally, what his eyes see in print: but nothing will satisfy either of them till his ears hear it as real sound in the air. Poetry must be read aloud.[14]

Bunting was a performer of his own poetry, hence the somewhat argumentative tone of the above quote. Nevertheless, it shows the degree to which poets made constant and direct comparisons between poetry and music. Although poetry was now firmly divorced from music in praxis, either in the melodic style of ancient epic poetry or the more modern intoned rhetorical style, there was a new and nonetheless rigorous metaphorical link between the act of writing poetry and the act of composing music. If, as Bunting argues, vowel consonance is directly equated with musical harmony and if the interplay of phonetic consonants is directly equated

[13] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (3rd ed. London: Faber, 1950), 33.

[14] Basil Bunting, "The Poet's Point of View," (1966) included in Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2009).

with musical orchestration, the distinction between poet and composer is already blurred a great deal.[15]

Eliot however mentions a deeper level of musical patterns: “the secondary meaning of the words which compose [the poetry].” He seems to be referring to the thematic content of his poetry undergirding the surface level arrangement of sounds. The fact that Eliot sees these two levels as “indissoluble and one” forms the generative problem of the whole of his *Four Quartets*. The poem constantly refers to itself (often detrimentally) and its own tension between formal pattern (the surface level “musical pattern of sound”) and the thematic philosophical statements made by the words (the “secondary meaning of the words”). In the case of the French Symbolists, whose work Eliot greatly admired and imitated, the surface level is preeminent. In the case of medieval poets like Dante, who form the opposite pole of Eliot’s influence, the thematic content is preeminent. This problem might be restated as the balance between form and content.

Significantly, it is Beethoven’s music which seems to have inspired Eliot most to tackle this problem of form and content. Beethoven’s radical experimentation with form in his late period compelled Eliot to attempt to get “beyond poetry” as Beethoven got “beyond music.”[16] Eliot’s *Four Quartets* continually return to the

[15] In a Ph.D thesis on “T. S. Eliot and the Music of Poetry,” Maria Frendo has throughly fleshed out Eliot’s indebtedness to the French Symbolist movement, one which included poets, painters, and composers (including, as he himself professed, Claude Debussy). A principle tenet of the movement was to express the inexpressible in language by subordinating the meaning of words to their inherent “music” in service of the form of the poem. In a 1933 lecture Eliot said he wanted to get "beyond poetry, as Beethoven in his later works, strove to get beyond music.” Quoted in Howarth, Herbert. “Eliot, Beethoven, and J. W. N. Sullivan,” *Comparative Literature* 9, no. 4 (1957): 322–32. See Maria Frendo, “T.S. Eliot and the music of poetry,” (PhD thesis, Durham theses: Durham University, 1999).

[16] Howarth, 322

themes of “time,” “the rose,” “fire,” “stillness,” and “movement,” almost as Beethoven’s works restate motivic cells, transforming and developing them over the course of a movement. Drawing this comparison further, these themes of Eliot are words which have a particular “musical” sound, and Eliot manipulates them as such in rhyme, consonance, and assonance, to give the surface level “musical pattern” to the verses. To illustrate, let us examine the opening section of *Burnt Norton*.

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable. *5*
> What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.
> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is always present. *10*
> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose-garden. My words echo
> Thus, in your mind. *15*
> But to what purpose
> Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
> I do not know.
> Other echoes
> Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow? *20*
> Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
> Round the corner. Through the first gate,
> Into our first world, shall we follow
> The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
> There they were, dignified, invisible, *25*
> Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
> In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
> And the bird called, in response to
> The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
> And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses *30*
> Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
> There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
> So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
> Along the empty alley, into the box circle,

To look down into the drained pool. *35*
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool. *40*
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality. *45*
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

In the opening five lines, we immediately see the repetition of the word “time” combined in different ways with “present,” “past,” and “future.” We could see this as a parallel to the way a melodic figure is repeated in different harmonizations.The word “present” is used in two different meanings in the first two lines: as “happening now,” then as “extant.” Again, this is similar to the way in which musical motifs can take on different roles in a melodic phrase, either in the opening of a melody or in its cadence. Larger groups of words are repeated and rephrased throughout the section: line 6 and line 9 both use “What might have been” in different contexts. Eliot transmutes the phrase to “what has been” in the second instance. Eliot then quotes lines 9 and 10 verbatim in lines 47 and 48, tying the entire section together as a unit. “Rose-garden” in line 14 is restated as “rose-leaves” in line 17. Lines 35-41 are particularly rich with repetition and restatement. “Pool,” “dry,” and “light” are restated in various ways. Lines 37, 38, and 40 all begin with “And.” Phrase structures are repeated and varied, as in lines 26-7: “*over* the dead leaves, *in* the autumn heat, *through* the vibrant air.” The examples could continue nearly

indefinitely of what Eliot seems to be drawing from Beethoven's knack for motivic development.

These repetitions of phrases and words are one aspect of the surface-level color and rhythm to this musical work of literature. In the first section of *East Coker*, the second of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot seems to take inspiration of a different kind from the musical trends of his day. The years after World War I saw many composers taking a reactionary stance against Late Romanticism and its frequent association with radical nationalism. French and English composers were particularly interested in the musical past of their respective countries. Vaughan Williams' collections of English Folk Song Arrangements and hymn tunes informed much of the harmonic character of his work. Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is not only a memorial to the harpsichord suites of the French Baroque composers, but an explicit memorial to the friends he lost in the Great War, the watershed that did much to precipitate Neoclassicism in the twentieth century.

Eliot, in turn, offers a brief segment in the first section of *East Coker* written in an English orthography inspired by Geoffrey Chaucer and Edmund Spenser. The archaic language heightens the theme of retrospection in this section of the poem. The spelling emerges in the following quotation, beginning in line 29, the way Eliot poetically reanimates the medieval English villagers from the ground in which they were buried:

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music *25*
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman

In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodiois sacrament. *30*
Two and two, necessarye coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
Whiche betokeneth concorde.

In this way, we see Eliot taking part in the larger artistic trends of his day. The Neoclassical impulse is a significant recurring thread throughout artistic history, particularly in times of political unrest and potential cultural collapse. In Beethoven's day, the Napoleonic wars threatened European stability and the permanence of national borders. Beethoven's own late period was the result of personal crisis as he struggled with the next phase of his creative development, having "conquered" most of the artistic genres extant in his day. During the anguished period in Beethoven's life from 1812-1819, he also looked back at the Renaissance and Baroque composers for inspiration, drawing new ideas from fugal development and choral part-writing. His late works are replete with imitative writing and fugal development in the style of Palestrina and Bach. Eliot, as said above, considered Beethoven's late quartets "quite inexhaustible to study," and when he writes of his impression hearing the "fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering," in the A Minor quartet Op. 132, it seems only too obvious he is referring to the third movement which Beethoven himself titled "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit."

The connection between Eliot's quote and Beethoven's song of thanks for the convalescent is strengthened by the themes of the poem itself. The fourth section of *East Coker* is a meditation on the contrasting states of sickness and health, and the paradoxical nature of both, leading every human to inevitable death. As with the

rest of the *Four Quartets*, and indeed with Beethoven's own creative output, the only answer for Eliot to such a paradoxical problem is faith in a "Gottheit." Eliot's own artistic path mirrors his spiritual journey, and the progression of his poetry tells the tale of his existential search: from initial popularity and struggle with fashionability in poems like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and the *Preludes* (discussed below), through the chaos and despair of *The Waste Land* mirroring the upheaval of World War I, into the childlike state of imagination in poetry like *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and the *Five Finger Exercises* (which also take part in the musical discussion below), to the final theological reflections in his late masterwork *Four Quartets*.

Eliot had a deep interest in the mystical tradition of the Catholic Church. The fourteenth century mystic and anchoress Julian of Norwich is quoted at the very end of his *Four Quartets*. The emphasis on the wisdom of silence, seen throughout the Western mystics, and indeed in the *hesychastic*[17] tradition of the Eastern Church, must have penetrated deeply into Eliot's mind. It seems no accident that Eliot was inspired to write his late masterwork by nothing else than music, the wordless art, having already achieved the utmost financial and critical success as a wordsmith. Thus, the themes Eliot brings to bear in the poem are truly too profound to be discussed in words.

It is very difficult to discuss the surface level of poetic imagery in *Four Quartets* without reference to the deeper themes of the whole poem. At the deeper thematic level of the poetry, the elemental words Eliot uses like "time," "dancing," and

[17] Hesychasmos (Ησυχασμός), the contemplative tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, is literally translated translated as "stillness," or "silence."

“move,” form the meditative core to the large sections of the poems. To take a few examples, “movement” is developed in the first section of *East* Coker as the dancing of rustic villagers long dead, which in turn draws comparisons to the passage of “time,” another motivic theme. “Time” again forms the basis for the first and last sections of *Burnt Norton*, but the theme of “movement” is developed and philosophically examined in the context of “time,” since movement can only exist in the flow from past to future (in “time”). In this way, Eliot use the generative meaning of certain thematic words to propel the poetry forward across large sections of his *Four Quartets* in the same way Beethoven and other composers developed large sections of their symphonies and quartets from the generative germ of small motivic cells.[18]

Eliot also uses the age-old poetic structure of chiasmus[19] throughout the *Four Quartets*. The device is famous in the Western classical music tradition for being utilized symbolically by Bach and other composers.[20] The “BACH” fugal motif is itself a chiasmus, as conceived in Bach’s personal musical cryptogram, the “Bach Crossmoniker.” A single note is placed in the center of two intersecting horizontal and vertical staves. Bach uses three different clefs to make the note read,

Figure I A: Bach’s Crossmoniker, taken from Violinist.com, editor Laurie Niles’s blog

[18] Maria Frendo, “T.S. Eliot and the music of poetry,” (PhD thesis, Durham theses: Durham University, 1999), 214–227. Frendo draws the connection more specifically with Wagnerian *leitmotifs*, but Wagner was consciously attempting to be Beethoven’s successor.

[19] From the Greek letter “χ” (chi).

[20] Nicole Biamonte, “Variations on a Scheme: Bach’s ‘Crucifixus’ and Chopin’s and Scriabin’s E-Minor Preludes,” *Intégral* 26 (2012): 47–89.

starting at the right and going clockwise, the musical notes “BACH.” As further explained below by Laurie Niles:

> The notes in the motif spell Bach's name: B flat for B; A for A; C for C; and B natural for "H." And if you are a little confused about the H, here is the explanation: in German musical language, "H" represents B natural and "B" represents B flat.[21]

The musical cryptogram was used in hidden ways both by Bach himself, and many other composers.

Brahms uses a different kind of chiasmus in his *Deutsches Requiem* (1868). The figure occurs in the fugue of the penultimate movement (See Figure I C, following page). Voices intersect in an “X” shape through ascending lower instruments and descending upper instruments. Brahms calls attention to this chiasmus both by the climactic *fortissimi*, and by repeating it later. An extremely similar passage is found in the final bars of the fugue at the end of his *Handel Variations* (1861) for solo piano. The rising bass figure crosses a descending scalar melody in the right hand.

Figure I B: Chiastic voice-leading in Brahms’s *Handel Variations*

[21] https://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/20208/28428/

Figure I C: Chiastic structure in Brahms's *Deutsches Requiem*

Eliot's use of literary chiasm, while not clearly inspired directly from musical sources, nevertheless reveals the breadth of his knowledge of the Western art tradition and the way in which Western artists formalize their works.[22] To take one example: in the large opening section of *Four Quartets* quoted above, we can see a chiastic flip of nouns between line 3 toward the beginning and line 46 toward the end. This involves the words "future" and "past." Line 3 has: "And time future contained in time past." Line 46 has: "Time past and time future."

All these literary and "musical" features of Eliot's work make the poetry itself complex, dense, and dynamic, and therefore very difficult for composers to "enhance" or "interpret" through musical setting. Part II, following below, will examine four composers who succeeded in setting Eliot's poetry to music. The songs set shorter, less complex poems in order to be manageable. Setting a mammoth work like *The Waste Land*, with all its changes of voice, perspective, and rhythm, to name a few, would certainly require a composer's life work. It might be said, however, that all explicitly musical settings inevitably destroy the Modernist poet's sense of that subtler "music" of their poetry.

[22] One musical chiasmus Eliot might have known, since Beethoven was the composer Eliot most tried to evoke in *Four Quartets*, is seen in his song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*. Beethoven here uses a chiastic structure to organize its six movements. See Stephen C. Rumph, *Beethoven After Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 3.

II. PART 2: ELIOT AND THE COMPOSERS

In this section, we will examine four settings of T. S. Eliot's poetry by four different composers variously from England, America, and Czechia. In order to narrow our focus, only the settings for voice and piano (the most traditional and popular form for composers setting poetry) will be discussed. Indeed, of the settings of Eliot's poetic texts, the following examples are the only four for this instrumentation widely available.[23] Two of them, the set by Howard Swanson and the set by Paul Reif, had only one edition and are now permanently out of print. As discussed in the section above, the difficulties inherent in setting Eliot's poetry have made the musical attempts a rare thing indeed in the wider context of art song in the Western music tradition. To begin, we will examine the musical settings by Englishmen Benjamin Britten, from 1971, and Thomas Adès, from 1990. Afterward, we will examine the American settings, by Howard Swanson, from 1952, and Paul Reif, from 1957. These four composer's compositions illustrate four very distinct approaches to interpreting and setting Eliot's work.

A. Britten's *Canticle IV: "Journey of the Magi"*

Benjamin Britten knew and admired the poetry of T. S. Eliot as a young man, yet put off setting it to music until the last few years of his life. Although he never knew Eliot personally, he was certainly well acquainted with the poet's status within the country and the rest of the English-speaking world.[24] In some ways, Britten seemed

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[23] The last composer considered, Paul Reif, composed one other song for low voice and piano on the Eliot poem, "La figlia che piange." The set of songs considered below, "Five Finger Exercises," was chosen because of its greater length and stylistic contrast to the other Eliot poems considered below.

[24] Graham Johnson, *Britten Voice and Piano: Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten* (First ed. London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 140.

to have followed in Eliot's footsteps, founding the music publishing division of Faber & Faber, Faber Music.[25]

Like Eliot and others, Britten was caught up in the twentieth century Neoclassical impulse, bucking against the preponderance of the German Romantics in the European and American art music tradition. In his later years particularly, Britten became enamored with the music of his compatriot of three centuries prior, Henry Purcell. His 1945 orchestral work *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* famously uses a Purcell Rondeau from the opera *Abdelazer* as the theme to the subsequent variations. Britten also published a popular set of arrangements of Purcell arias and songs for voice and piano.[26] Purcell's knack for setting libretti in an expressive and conversationally frank manner inspired Britten greatly: "One of my chief aims is to try to restore to the musical setting of the English Language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell."[27]

Of the smaller works of Britten's are the five Canticles, variously written from 1947 to 1974. As the name implies, they are mostly of religious subject matter, bearing similarity to the church cantata arias of composers such as J. S. Bach and

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[25] Faber Music was founded in 1965, coincidentally the year of Eliot's death. Eliot had been hired as editor of the literary publishing firm in 1925, working there for the rest of his life as curator and writer, evaluating and promoting the work of younger literary talent from his office perch overlooking Russel Square in London (a location mentioned in some of the poetry discussed below). W. H. Auden and artist-poet David Jones, author of *In Parenthesis*, are among the authors Eliot championed and published at Faber.

[26] Henry Purcell, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, and Richard Walters, *The Purcell collection: 45 songs: realizations by Benjamin Britten* (United States: Boosey & Hawkes, 2008).

[27] Quoted in Philip Brett, ed., *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 125.

Dieterich Buxtehude. Britten selected texts from poets he admired. Only three of the Canticles are based on Biblical stories: *Canticle I* sets poetry based on the Song of Solomon, *Canticle II* concerns Abraham and his son Isaac with text from medieval mystery plays, and *Canticle IV* describes the familiar Christmas story of the "Three Kings" following the star to Bethlehem, with poetry by T. S. Eliot.[28]

It is no accident that Eliot's notoriously difficult poetry—which frequently shifts tone, perspective, and speaker, mostly without warning—should have presented Britten, the ultimate stage composer, with a particular set of problems, despite his long-time admiration for the poet's work. This perhaps explains Britten's choice of text: the Christmas poem *Journey of the Magi*,[29] a familiar theme on a traditional story which Eliot chose to present from the perspective of one of the eponymous magi from the biblical account. Eliot's narrator recounts the story from hindsight, older and having had ample time to meditate on the events of the visitation. It is again Eliot turning to the past for thematic inspiration, but presenting it in a modern

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[28] Britten set one other poem by Eliot in his *Canticle V: "The Death of Saint Narcissus"* scored for tenor and harp, not covered here on a technicality since it is not an art song for voice and piano, despite all other similarities. This particular poem of Eliot's is not published along with his *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, possibly wanting to suppress this early work based on the ambiguity of the poem's subject, and thereby avoiding religious controversy. Eliot seems to be blurring imagery from the Greek myth of Narcissus with the hagiography of Saint Narcissus, an early Christian apostle and martyr in Athens, possibly the "Narcissus" mentioned at the end of St Paul's letter to the Romans (because of his birth name, likely a pagan convert to Christianity). Eliot, inspired by the Symbolist movement, is blurring the sacred with the profane, much as Oscar Wilde did in his one-act French-language play *Salome*. Eliot similarly is interpreting St Narcissus's retreat from the world as a dissatisfaction with human love (like the mythological figure), unable to find one he loves more than himself. "So he became a dancer to God," as Eliot tells us in the poem.

[29] The poem was originally published as part of a Faber & Faber series of published poems by various authors sent to associates of the firm. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* was the first of his contributions. Five more were to follow, and are now published along with his collected poems under the title *Ariel Poems*. See Russell Elliott Murphy, *Critical Companion to T. S. Eliot: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work,* (New York: Facts on File/InfoBase Publishing, 2007).

context. The poem is a psychological and spiritual meditation foreshadowing the vein of confessional poetry of the 1960's. The narrator speaks with a certain Yankee candor, giving the reader his immediate impressions of the journey and even displaying a certain disappointment with the religious experience of encountering the Holy Family; the return to their homeland was a return not only to mundanity but depravity and despair, which the narrator seems to be coming to terms with during the verbal processing of his poetic discourse.

Britten's theatrical interpretive powers come to bear on this poem, transforming the monologue into a three-way conversation. With this change, the focused perspective of Eliot's original meditative soliloquy is abandoned in favor of a more interesting scene involving all three of the magi. Britten casts the familiar "Three Kings" as three male voices: bass, tenor, and countertenor.[30] The scene could be heard as the three magi recounting their tale to a listening audience, each filling in information that the other has left out, or putting in their own perspective if it varies from that of another voice. The influence of Purcell can be felt particularly in this conversational interaction between the three characters. Britten uses the contrast between homophonic and imitative polyphonic textures to give variety and interest to his setting of the text, much as Baroque composers such as Handel and Purcell did. The difference between homophony and polyphony also serves to elucidate important moments in the text as Britten interprets it. We will explore a few examples.

[30] The premiere of the piece at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1971 featured Britten at the piano, his partner Peter Pears singing tenor, James Bowman singing countertenor, and John Shirley-Quirk, bass. This information appears in the frontispiece of the first published score to *Journey of the Magi.*

The opening entrance of the three magi, after a short piano introduction of four bars setting the stage and seeming to imitate the loping gait of camels (see Figure II A on the following page, left hand piano part, mm. 1–2), is homophonic, suggesting the firmness of their agreement on the events as they are being told. Britten has the magi repeat certain words and phrases for rhetorical emphasis (again, in imitation of Baroque vocal writing: e.g. in Handel's "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts" with the repetition of "and I will shake…"). In the opening line, "A cold coming we had of it," "coming" is repeated with the three voices outlining a G Minor harmony, our first triad of the piece which agrees with the two-flat key signature, after the picturesque and slightly comical piano introduction. Again in the second line, "Just the worst time of the year," Britten has the singers repeat "the worst time" twice, this time in a B-flat minor harmony.

Tonal ambiguity, ever-present in Britten's music, is used here to indicate the magi's unsettled interpretation of their pilgrimage experience. This will be further described below with the climax of the piece. If we try to find a tonal center of the piece as a whole, it is necessary to examine both the opening and the final bars. In the first vocal entrances, Britten displays both G Minor, and B-flat Minor as potentials for the tonal center. The harmony, again displaying this ambiguity of meaning, is only somewhat resolved in the final bars of the piece with G Minor chords in the piano. However, Britten leaves a troubling melody in an unrelated key hanging over the final G Minor harmony.

Canticle IV

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

T. S. ELIOT

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
Op. 86

Rather slow and measured (♩ = 72)

COUNTER-TENOR

TENOR

BARITONE

PIANO

heavy

pp

cresc.

marked

C-T.

T.

B.

pp smooth

'A cold coming coming we had of it,

© 1972 by Faber Music Ltd.

F0438

Figure II A: Britten's *Canticle IV: "Journey of the Magi*," page 1, after Eliot's 1927 poem.

Eliot's poem has a clear three-paragraph structure, underlining the primary spiritual dilemma of the magi, namely, the impermanence of transcendent experience this side of death. The first paragraph is mainly a description of the journey, undertaken out of sincere faith, yet quickly devolving into the mundane human and animal foibles at each stop of their journey; the final line of the first paragraph asking the question whether "this was all folly."

Figure II B: Imitative entrances in *Journey of the Magi.*

Eliot’s second paragraph gives the magus’s contemplation of their epiphanic encounter with the Holy Family in Bethlehem. The poetry in this paragraph is rich with symbolic imagery—a “running stream” being an image of the “Living Water” in Christian literature, the “three trees on the low sky” foreshadowing the three crosses on the hill of Golgotha, and “six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver” suggesting the number of man and the open betrayal of Judas—these being the more obvious of Eliot’s religious symbols. Britten’s treatment has the magi singing each of these images in turn, as if each is recalling them in the act of the telling. As the magi come to the scene of the crèche, Eliot ends the paragraph in his typically understated way: “it was (you may say) satisfactory.”

The line reveals much of the nature of Eliot’s religious experience, and the way in which he expresses this through his poetry. For Eliot, there were no ecstatic visions, or earth-shattering revelations in his spiritual journey. The experiences which strengthened his faith were quiet, contemplative moments in which he could contextualize his own journey in the development of cultural religion throughout history and place, at least as he understood them to have developed. Britten here perceptively elucidates this in the music. The word “satisfactory” is passed rhapsodically between the three singers, accompanied by sparse harp-like chords in the piano and a plainchant-like melody in the piano, in an extended, appropriately meditative passage, seeming to exist in a timeless moment of prayer.

In the last paragraph of Eliot’s poem, the speaker draws attention away from the narrative itself, removed in time by however many years or decades, to the present moment as he is retelling it to the reader or listener. Here, the magus speaks with

new earnestness and honesty of the spiritual crisis engendered by their pilgrimage. Britten draws attention to this crux of Eliot's poem with the singers' repetition of the phrase, "This set down/This: . . ." Eliot's magus tells us that, "this Birth was/Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." Whether the poet is implying that the agony was in the hardships of their journey, or whether the magi had a mystical vision that was both revelatory and painful, or some combination of both, is not made clear.[31] Britten aptly makes this the dynamic high point of the Canticle, with jagged vocal lines and loud declamation. Britten also inserts his wry wit in the piano accompaniment to the line "bitter agony." The same scalar grace-not figure which occurred first when describing the "camels galled, sore-footed, refractory," is here used to underscore the magi singing of their "agony," drawing inevitable comparison between the stubbornness of the animals and the animalistic discomfort and ingratitude of the magi, even in the midst of their spiritual quest.

The last four lines of Eliot's poem tell of the magi returning to the religious landscape of their country, inwardly changed now by their experience on the journey and contemplating the relationship of the "Birth/Death" in Bethlehem with their own eventual departure from this life, which they now gladly anticipate. Britten's brilliant juxtaposition again of the piano's plainchant-like melody over the final cadence links the "satisfactory" experience of the pilgrimage with the "pilgrimage" to the next life after death. It is perhaps this, more than any other detail

[31] Mystical contemplatives of many faith traditions have written of their ecstatic states granted during meditation involving both euphoria and pain. Eliot, who later quotes the English mystic Julian of Norwich in his *Four Quartets*, may have been referring here to the ecstasy of contemplatives like John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, or Julian. See Julian, and James Walsh, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich,* (St. Meinrad, Ind: Abbey Press, 1974), and Teresa, E. Allison Peers, and Teresa, *Interior Castle,* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988).

of the poem, which makes sense of Britten's choice of text, and why he would wait until this decade of his life to set it to music. How long Britten knew of the poem is probably impossible to determine, but the meditation on death and time, ever present themes in Eliot's work, must have been particularly meaningful to Britten in the last five years of his life.

The *Canticle* is a moving tribute to Eliot's work, to the circle of musical friends who performed at the Aldeburgh Festival, and to the tradition of English Baroque music. Britten and Eliot were both Modernists with strong ties to the past. Other artists of the English Modernist movement, like James Joyce and David Jones, took the collective cultural memories and recontextualized them in literary works imbued with the frenetic rhythm of twentieth century life, yet built on age-old mythological forms. Joyce's *Ulysses* is a perfect example, with its narrative of quotidian life in Dublin in 1904, but with a literary structure hung on the framework of Homer's *Odyssey*. David Jones's 1937 epic poem *In Parenthesis* is another example of a modern narrative, in this case a first-person perspective of a Welsh soldier in World War I, placed within an *Iliad*-like genre, and freighted with imagery from Welsh, Brittonic, and French mythic literature.

Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, tells the reader, ". . . you know only/A heap of broken images . . ." In a poem stuffed with disparate images, the irony is hurled at the reader that Western European culture is now so old and over-stuffed as to be incomprehensible to moderns. Modernist artists like Joyce and Jones, Eliot and Britten therefore serve dual role as creators and curators of past art, sifting through the artistic monuments of the past and uncovering the human experience that

serves as the creative node for new works of art. In Britten's case, this was to reinvigorate English Baroque forms with modern harmonic language and musical idioms in his stage and vocal settings. His choice of poet in the *Canticle IV* only intensifies this historical cross-pollination. To quote Eliot again, "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future,/And time future contained in time past." An object example of the interpretation of these lines can be found in Britten's musical setting.

There is, however, something lost in Britten's setting of the particular rhythm and syntactic choices Eliot makes in his verse. There is, in particular, the peculiar "Yankee candor" of the opening lines: "Just the worst time of the year." Britten's Neo-Purcellian declamation clashes with this colloquialism, removing the immediacy of the personal plea to the listener. Eliot's rhythmic sense is based on line length, and each thought is chosen carefully to coincide with natural speaking pace, much like lines in a play script.[32] His use of enjambment is frequently used to draw rhetorical attention to certain words.[33] The following lines from the last paragraph of Eliot's poem are a good example:

> All this was a long time ago, I remember,
> And I would do it again, but set down
> This set down

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[32] Eliot also authored several stage plays, and had a good sense of dramatic pacing, which carries over into his poetry. Many actors, including Sir Alec Guinness, Fiona Shaw, Tom Hiddleston, and Jeremy Irons, have been drawn to the poetry enough to give recorded readings of them.

[33] To illustrate, this is in direct contrast to a poet of whom Eliot was fiercely critical, John Milton. A reading of even one page of *Paradise Lost* will reveal the lack of concern Milton has for the independence of each line, despite his strict adherence to iambic pentameter. This gives Milton's verse an entirely different speed and pacing from another contemporary, such as John Dryden. See T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*; [Essays] (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957).

This: were we led all that way for *35*
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

Lines 33–35 carry a particular dramatic weight for the entire poem, and the repetition and enjambment Eliot uses here is carefully constructed. Britten draws attention to this moment by repeating the phrase, “set down this,” several times among the three singers. This compositional choice proves Britten’s insight into the poem, yet the approach to dialect and rhythm in the musical setting creates an entirely different effect to Eliot’s original verse. In the following section, we will explore another composer’s approach to tackling Eliot’s rhythm.

B. Adès’s *Five Eliot Landscapes*

The five poems Eliot published under the title *Landscapes* are short studies in rhythm and internal rhyme, and the concentration of image Eliot stuffs into these short works is remarkable. Each describes a different location that had been meaningful to the poet: three of the poems are based on locations in the Northeastern United States, two on places in the British Isles. The poems come from the years 1933-34, after Eliot had lived in America for a year, lecturing at Harvard.[34] The three poems based on American landscapes are likely inspired by this time, although the imagery of the river in the second of the poems, “Virginia,” draws upon strong memories of Eliot’s childhood in St. Louis, Missouri, spent

[34] Eliot had been asked to deliver lectures in the sixth annual Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry position at Harvard University. The same position has since been occupied by the likes of Robert Frost, Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, Luis Maria Borges, and many other of the most influential names in music and literature. Leonard Bernstein’s “Unanswered Question” lecture series comes from the same Professorship.

beside the Mississippi River. The imagery of rivers plays a strong thematic role also in the third poem of the *Four Quartets*, *The Dry Salvages*. Eliot once wrote to a friend, “I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those people who have not. I consider myself fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London.”[35]

The three *Landscapes* with American toponyms, *I. New Hampshire*, *II. Virginia*, and *V. Cape Ann*, have an intimate familiarity with their subjects, tenderly and delightedly describing various flora and fauna Eliot observes in his birth country. By contrast, the other two poems describe a national park in Scotland—*Rannoch, near Glencoe*—and a village in Wales—*Usk*. These two poems show Eliot in his more esoteric mood, with *Rannoch* apparently referencing various indeterminate historical military conflicts, and *Usk* giving obscure references to locations in the small Welsh village only locals would understand.[36]

It is typical of Eliot’s paradoxical nature that the two more abstruse and thorny of the poems should concern places in his adopted country of Great Britain, while the three more intimate and personal of these poems describe locations in America, the country Eliot permanently left in his mid-twenties. At the risk of psycho-analyzing Eliot, there is something of the vagrant about him—one of the Lost Generation: a man without a people, a family, or a culture to truly call his own. This sense

[35] This quote comes from a letter to Marquis Childs quoted in the address "American Literature and the American Language" delivered at Washington University in St. Louis on June 9th, 1953, published in *Washington University Studies, New Series: Literature and Language*, no. 23 (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1953), p. 6.

[36] https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/aug/06/highereducation.books

permeates his poetry, as in the passages in *The Waste Land* juxtaposing vulgar social chatter with references to medieval literature, for instance. This clash of populism with elitism, the profane with the sacred, was natural to Eliot, a man perpetually with each foot in two different worlds.

The music of Thomas Adès shares several of these stylistic traits with Eliot's poetry. His orchestral four-movement quasi-symphony *Asyla* is essentially a composed piece of acoustic techno music, according to the composer himself.[37] If Modernists like Eliot broke down the wall of separation between "high" and "low" art, Postmodernists like Adès have the task of exploring this new, unbounded territory. Eliot seems to be a pioneer and pathfinder to some degree for Adès. His first published composition—by the publishing house of Eliot and Britten, Faber—is a set of songs for soprano and piano entitled *Five Eliot Landscapes Op. 1*. The texts for these songs are the five poems, *Landscapes*, discussed above. Apart from this work, Adès's Op. 10 is a ten-minute orchestral work roughly in sonata form entitled, *…but all shall be well*. The title is a quotation from the end of *Four Quartets*, which is in turn a quote Eliot took from Julian of Norwich, a phrase she used when discussing the spiritual core of her mystical visions.

Whether or not Adès identifies with Eliot's voice of the outsider and the pilgrim, it is undeniable that there are strong aesthetic and philosophical similarities between Eliot and Adès's work. Both artists have a strong connection to their own artistic tradition throughout the centuries, as well as a thorough foundation in the classics of other artistic disciplines. This historical link is equally matched with their

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[37] Quoted in John Walsh, "Arts: A young man in a hurry," *The Independent* (May 1999). Adès speaks of spending a sleepless night furiously working on the score.

perspicacious sense of the trends of their own age. By keeping their thumb on the pulse of their own time, they are able to synthesize new creations from the fragments of past monuments, molded in the modern spirit. This gives their works the sense of historical weight which has made them both so renowned and successful.

Adès's Op. 1, the *Five Eliot Landscapes*, shares similarities with Eliot's early work in this very regard of historically-informed art. Eliot also made an immediate impression in his first years in England with his bold Modernist poems that worked in conversation with medieval poets like Dante, as well as with influential contemporary poets like Ezra Pound. His early critical essays on established English authors had a swaggering polemical character, challenging the likes of Milton, Whitman, and even Shakespeare, saying of *Hamlet*: "And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art."[38] Something of the same youthful ambition comes through in Adès's early compositions. His choice of Eliot for song text speaks to his priorities in wrestling with great historical artists.

From the opening bars of the *Eliot Landscapes*, Adès creates a disorienting kaleidoscope sound-world of extreme registral span in the piano, opaquely atonal harmonic language, and tightly controlled rhythmic values in both piano and voice parts. The soprano sings mainly in the higher end of the acceptable range. Often, the part is extremely high, especially in the last song, "Cape Ann," as to render the text unintelligible. The notes, hovering around C6, and delivered at patter-song-like

[38] T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems." *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 5.

Figure II C-1: Bird calls in V. “Cape Ann.”

speeds, make it impossible for the soloist to convey actual phonetic or semantic meaning. In the other songs, this is also a persistent problem for the soloist to render clarity of textual articulation. The simple auditory effect of this extreme writing is certainly beguiling, if not distracting.

In a 2010 Australian public radio interview, Adès had this to say about writing for the character Ariel in his opera, *The Tempest*, based on the Shakespeare play:

> Sometimes when a singer hits their top note in an opera, that's the climax and everyone applauds when that happens, but you get an exciting feeling if you treat those notes as simply another part of the instrument's range. That's why Ariel's up there. She sings very, very high, and the Queen of the Night has this in Mozart, singing these phenomenally high notes, but she doesn't make a big deal about it... And it makes her all the more terrifying that for her it's just another note. So that's why I wrote for Ariel like that, because it's not a human being who would sing a high E and then sit back, exhausted, and wait for the applause; it's the wind, an elemental force of nature. Similarly, when you have the notes on a cello or a violin, it can take us to an emotional point we might not other wise reach, perhaps.[39]

[39] Quoted in: Dominic Wells, "Plural Styles, Personal Style: The Music of Thomas Adès," *Tempo* 66, no. 260 (2012): 7.

If we take Adès at his word, it is precisely this fairy-like, beguiling quality which he intended to convey in the early *Eliot Landscapes*. The question why is another matter. While it is possible he had not yet fully formed his aesthetic tonal palette—his opera the *The Tempest* was still over a decade in his career's future—it seems overwhelmingly more likely that an artist of Adès's technical sophistication would make every choice carefully, especially in his première composition. Even if Adès had not fully worked out the connotations he wished to invoke with each of his stylistic choices, the decision of extreme height in the vocal part is certainly the boldest in this entire composition.

If it is a certain magical, other-worldly quality Adès wanted to impart to his song setting, and it certainly does that, the listener inevitably must wonder why. The poems themselves are some of Eliot's least redolent of the spiritual dimension, unlike the vast majority of his work. Indeed, all five of these poems are firmly rooted in specific places and describe in sensuous detail the look and feel and smell of the physical objects and creatures which inhabit them. Eliot's voice of the observer in these poems is one of intimate involvement with its surroundings, both in the immediate sensual sense and in the more evocative sense of memory. Yet neither sense in these five poems is concerned with the mystical or spiritual, except in the sense of timelessness.

Adès seems more concerned with filling in connotations which he feels should be there, despite what the poet says. Eliot's choice of direct physical sensations, however, is one of the things which sets these five poems apart in Eliot's collected works, and gives them their particular charm. By exchanging the voice of Eliot's

very human nature-lover to a disembodied aerial spirit, or in his own words describing the character Ariel, “elemental force of nature,” Adès fundamentally shifts the foundation of the textual sense. It is a bold choice, but not one which feels warranted, since there is no spiritual or super-human insight which is conveyed in the text themselves. The charm of the poems themselves come from the deliciousness of the imagistic language, not from some transcendent message

Figure II C-2: Mm. 1 and 7–10 of “Cape Ann.”

conveyed by a supernatural force. Hence, the inhuman sprightliness of the vocal acrobatics distract from, rather than add to, the direct perspective of the poetry.

To be fair to Adès, the vocal line in the last song, “Cape Ann,” almost certainly is a text-painting choice to imitate the call of the sparrows in the text. The rapidity of the vocal delivery again renders the actual text mostly indiscernible to the listener. Adès repeats the words “Quick, quick,” many times throughout the song, as Eliot does to a degree to imitate the sparrow in his poem. If Adès had restricted the vocal acrobatics to this word, it might have been more effective as a restrained, intentional choice. The extreme vocal line continues into the next line, however, obscuring the beautiful and heavily evocative descriptors, “Swamp-sparrow, fox-sparrow, vesper-sparrow.” The rhythm of these lines is also obscured by the over-repetition of “Quick.” There are 27 instances of the word “quick” in just the first two pages of the song. Adès justifiably uses this word in an onomatopoetic way as a major motif in the song, since the entire poem centers on avian imagery. A reading of the first two lines of Eliot’s poem, however, reveals a very specific rhythmic feel:

> O quick quick quick, quick hear the song sparrow,
> Swamp-sparrow, fox-sparrow, vesper-sparrow. . .

None of this inherent rhythm in Eliot’s poetry is heard in Adès’s setting, unfortunately. “Cape Ann” particularly suffers from an unbridled display of the imagination of the composer, without due regard to the content of its poetic text.

It is tempting to regard Adès’s use of Eliot’s poetry as merely a totemic way to lend literary gravitas, since there is little of an interpretive attempt of the text at a deeper structural level. Instead, Adès seems to put a veneer of sparkling, yet undeniably arresting musical ideas over Eliot’s verse. The sheer novelty of the

extreme tonal registers, and stunning vocal part makes the set worthwhile to study. It is not Adès's compositional talent which is questionable, but his interpretive powers as an illuminator of text. As was said before, however, there remain strong similarities between Adès's and Eliot's artistic ethea. It is obvious from the title of his Op. 10 symphonic work, *…but all shall be well*, that Eliot's larger masterworks were impactful on the composer's creative imagination. For the reasons stated in the first half of this paper, it is extremely difficult to convey the pacing, internal rhythm, and structure of some of Eliot's greatest poetic works in any other setting than their original use. Musical setting tends only to detract from these profound works. In Adès's case then, he seems to have set himself the unhappy task of making do with the shorter poetic works of Eliot: works which are almost always mere exercises or experiments to keep his poetic skills keen for the larger poems like *The Waste Land* or *Four Quartets*. It is the sense of timeless spiritual breadth or other-worldly contemplative mysticism of these large works Adès may have been trying to endow on the *Five Eliot Landscapes* which, charming as they are in their own right, simply are intended as lighter, more imagistic works.

Apart from the close inspiration Adès drew from Eliot's poems, there exits another kinship between the two artists in the collage quality of Modernist and Postmodernist art. The aforementioned juxtaposition of disparate cultural allusions found in Eliot can also be seen in this song cycle. Toward the end of the first song, "New Hampshire," Adès inserts in the

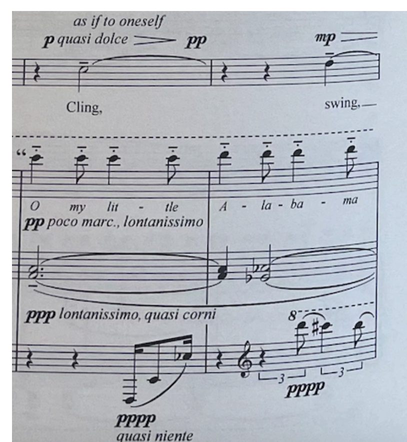

Figure II D-1: mm. 112-13 of "New Hampshire"

7

114 p p pp mp p p

Spring, sing, sing,

(8)

dar - ling, do you want the stars to play with,

pppp ancora più p ppp pppp

119 pp mp senza dim. mp estatico, quasi dolciss., sognando

sing, Swing up in -

the moon to run a - way with, O

ppp pppp legato ppp pp ppp ppppp legato ppp pppp

125 quasi senza rit.

- to the ap - - ple - - tree.

my lit - - tle A - - la - ba - - ma doll?

for R.B.

Figure II D-2: Mm. 114–130 of “New Hampshire”

piano's right hand part a traditional English lullaby as a sort of descant to the soprano's vocal line. The tune is often coupled with the words "Lula, lula, lula, lula, bye-bye." Adès, without explanation, changes these to, "O, my little Alabama darling," written below the piano's right hand staff. The words are not heard in performance, but written there merely for reference to the performer. The changed lyrics also add a fascinating personal touch to the choice, linking it not only with Postmodernist allusion, but the earlier Symbolist movement from which Eliot drew such strong inspiration. The use of personal symbols was a distinguishing feature of the entire visual, literary, and musical movement. The mystery and speculation surrounding these potent images draws the reader or observer into the imaginary world of the art work, participating with the artist in the work of interpretation. Adès seems here to be following suit with Eliot's use of Symbolist techniques.

The *Five Eliot Landscapes* promise much from the composer Thomas Adès. What comes across most strongly is the confidence of his musical choices. It is a fittingly bold debut to his published career. Eliot's text is used as a jumping-off point for some of Adès's early experimentation with instrumentation and virtuosically exhilarating techniques, even while those very techniques often obscure the text which inspired them. The final line of the last poem reads, "The palaver is finished." Adès sets this line all on a D-flat6 in the soprano's range. The effect, while a fittingly eerie close to the spine-tingling sound-world of this song set, again renders the words themselves unintelligible to the listener. Strangely, the closest musical comparison that comes to mind in this instance is that of the earliest polyphony of the Notre Dame school. In the *organum* of Léonin and Pérotin, a Gregorian

plainchant melody would be sung so slowly as to act functionally as a bass line for florid polyphonic decoration. The actual words and meaning of the text were presumed to have been known and understood by listeners so well, that the text did not need to be literally understood in real time. Similarly, Adès seems to presume on the listener's knowledge of Eliot, or at least presumes the supplement of a printed text to accompany the performance. More than an elucidation of the text, Adès's set is a post-Symbolist, or perhaps post-Impressionist, commentary on Eliot's verse, using ideas mined from the poetic material to spin out a giddily detailed set of musical ideas. Adès evokes Eliot's spirit more than sets his verse.

C. Swansons' *Four Preludes*

The four short poems entitled, "Preludes" were published in Eliot's first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. Being part of Eliot's debut work, they are intended to impress, while simultaneously showing us some of Eliot's most powerful early influences. On trips with British Vorticist artist Wyndham Lewis*,* Eliot met James Joyce in Paris around the time of this initial publication.[40] In addition to the unapologetic frankness of Joyce, the "Preludes" likewise show the influence of the French Symbolists, and are particularly redolent of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in their psychological angst and the intensity of the grimy descriptive language. To underscore Eliot's indebtedness to the French Symbolists and Modernists, published in Eliot's Collected Poems from 1920 are several of his poems written in French: "Le Directeur," "Mélange Adultère de Tout," "Lune de Miel," and "Dans le Restaurant."

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[40] Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann, *The Critical Writings of James Joyce* (New York: Viking Press, 1959), 492–495.

Swanson spent two years in Paris studying with Nadia Boulanger just before the outbreak of World War II, then returned after the war for an extended period of time in the years 1952–66.[41] Away from the racial tensions of his country, Swanson was able to engage with European artists as an equal, drawing inspiration from current trends. His *Concerto for Orchestra* (1956) comes from this period. Before this, most of Swanson's works are for smaller ensembles. His *Suite for Cello and Piano* (1949) shows the influence of French Symbolists, particularly Debussy. The movement in this suite entitled "Pantomime" especially takes part in the turn-of-the-century fascination with the tragic clown.

Much of Swanson's music is also imbued with African American motifs, particularly in the blues-inspired melodic scales he employs to construct his harmonic language. In her article on the composer for New Grove Dictionary, musicologist Eileen Southern notes an "ever-present, although subtle, influence of black American folk music idioms," which takes shape in the context of a "basically neo-classical style that allows for the free use of dissonance."[42] It is this poignant sense of restraint which makes Swanson's aesthetic pair so well with Eliot's verse. Swanson's background expressive sensibility as an amateur church musician, performing with his mother in Atlanta Georgia, is subsumed into a sound world which is markedly cosmopolitan in temperament. Eliot demonstrates a similar guardedness of the world traveller in his *Preludes* with the emotive restraint of lines

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[41] Marsha J. Reisser, "Howard Swanson: Distinguished Composer," *The Black Perspective in Music* 17, no. 1/2 (1989): 9–11.

[42] Eileen Southern, *Swanson, Howard*, in Grove Music Online, 2001, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000027192 (accessed November 3, 2022).

like, "I am moved by fancies that are curled/Around these images, and cling:/The notion of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing." There is a strong sense of bottled-up emotions—of a deeply feeling soul in a strange, uncomprehending world.

This to say, Eliot and Swanson share this common blend of American and French culture—a peculiarly contradictory blend of Continental skeptic disillusionment with the ambitious vulnerability of the New World. Fresh yet intense, this art is distilled and economical with its emotive language. Swanson's music which, according to Southern, is "basically neoclassical," shares again with Eliot a fidelity to past forms and traditions. For example, most of the second "movement" of Eliot's last *Quartet*, "Little Gidding," is written in a style deliberately mimicking Dante's three-line *terza rima* of the *Divine Comedy*, or at least mimics an English translation of the Italian. Likewise, Swanson wrote in traditional European forms: symphonic structure appears in his three-movement *Short Symphony* (1948), or the aforementioned four-movement *Suite for Cello and Piano* (1951), with movements entitled, "Prelude," "Pantomime," "Dirge," and "Recessional." Swanson set the iconic Langston Hughes poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to a traditional art song arrangement with voice and piano (1942). There exists an unfortunately unpublished manuscript of a *Threnody for Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1969) for string orchestra,[43] possibly inspired by the Penderecki *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, published 8 years prior.

Looking at Swanson's setting of the Eliot *Preludes*, the influence of German motivic technique is evident, along with the seamless and overlapping structures of Fauré's *chansons*. The first song in the set, "The winter evening settles down," has

[43] Reisser, "Howard Swanson: Distinguished Composer," 22.

Figure II E: Repeating A-phrase in Swanson's "The winter evening settles down."

the clearest ABA strucure, with a returning phrase in accompaniment and voice on the final line of the poem, paralleling the opening. The second song, "The morning comes to consciousness" is quite short and through-composed, drawing its tension from repetition of one melodic set developed in the accompaniment, sometimes

Figure II F: Opening pitch set material from Swanson's "The morning comes to consciousness."

imitated in the vocal line, rising from the bass to treble registers of the keyboard. The third, "You tossed a blanket from the bed," has a kind of return to opening material in the last nine bars of the accompaniment, but the vocal part overlaps the moment with its own expressive climax. The final song is also the longest: "His soul stretched tight across the skies": with a sort of rondo form that is perhaps the most easily accessible of the four songs to the listener. An easily recognizable repeating motif in both piano and voice introduce a series of mostly six-bar phrases throughout the song. The actual phrase structure of the song is as follows: 6 - 6 - 7 -

6 - 11 - 6 - 4. Each of these seven phrases is introduced by the same melodic/ harmonic motif that seems drawn from the blues scale. Swanson displays his mastery of structure as this "blue note" is finally resolved at the very end of the song, rising from a G-sharp to an A-natural in a cadence on F Major. The resolution

Figure II G: Rising G-sharp to A-natural resolution in piano right hand.

to F Major at the end of the song also draws attention to a theme of the four poems as a whole, and shows how Swanson is thinking of the *Four Preludes* as a cohesive unit. The reference in the final line to "vacant lots" hearkens back to line 8 of the first poem: "And newspapers from vacant lots." The metaphor would go on to develop into Eliot's "Waste Land" of the modern urban jungle: oppressive, empty, redundant. Swanson perceptively highlights this line in the first

Figure II H: Melodic climax of "The winter evening settles down, m. 18.

song with a crescendo building to G-sharp, the vocalist's highest note in the entire

set, which occurs in only two other places: the line “Six o’clock” in the first song, and “I am moved by fancies. . .” in the last song, though the latter is the only other instance which carries comparable expressive intensity. The climax at m. 18 of the first song serves to burn the image into the listener’s ear for the final resolution in the last bar of the last song when the “vacant lots” resolve, so to speak, to F Major. Swanson gives a surprisingly settled and possibly hopeful commentary to Eliot’s pessimistic set of poems.

The resolution to F Major also confirms the inherent tonality of Swanson’s musical language, extended and obscured as it is by both the blues-influenced scalar content, and the motivic way he manipulates his melodic cells. In all the seemingly atonal convulsions of these pieces, they all end on some sort of tonal cadence, with piquant non-chord tones in songs I and III.

Figure II I: Ending cadence on F-sharp7 b13 in I “The winter evening settles down.”

Set theory seems to come very readily to Swanson, in the way he constructs his pieces. Each song is unified by the opening melodic cells, which are modified by inversion, repetition, and transposition. Yet Swanson never uses the technique rigidly, but skillfully draws from its toolbox to provide a musical illumination of the text, which he always lets govern the dramatic pacing of the music. The songs are also unified by their final cadence, which serve as revelatory moments, unveiling

Figure II J: Ending cadence in B-flat Minor with hanging A-natural in III: “You tossed a blanket from the bed.”

the tonality that was hidden but nevertheless present from the opening of the song. The first song is cast in F-sharp, the second in A-flat, the third in B-flat, and the last in F. Swanson obscures the modality of these keys by means of jazz harmonies and missing thirds. In the first song, the final chord is a Maj7 ♭13, in songs II and III it is a Maj7. This obscured modality makes the final resolution to F Major in the last song all the more impactful.

This resolution is really the only interpretive spin Swanson puts onto the text. Otherwise, he lets the poetry speak for itself, creating musical climaxes only when the poems become obviously more expressive. There is only one moment of tone painting, occurring in m. 23 of the first song at the line “A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.” Swanson has the piano imitate the stamping of the horse with repeated accented octaves. The moment might be jarring if it was not also the penultimate line of the song which, after a fermata over the bar line, ushers in the return of the opening musical material.

Swanson’s setting is extremely sensitive to the text. He particularly highlights Eliot’s witty turns of phrase, such as in line 7 of the last poem: “Assured of certain certainties.” Swanson slows the tempo with a *ritardando* to insure the listener

grasps the pun. Eliot's writing, as an American influenced by the French Symbolists, seems to pair particularly well with Swanson's own blend of Continental techniques and folk idioms from the American South. Besides purely stylistic similarities, though, there is a close kinship of temperament between the two artists in their emotive restraint and traditionalist Neo-classicism. This is seen particularly in the limited use of tone painting and careful planning of structural climaxes which parallel the themes and pacing of the poem. By contrast, the next and final composer uses an approach which relies almost solely on tone painting.

Figure II K: Tone painting in m. 23 of "The winter evening settles down."

D. Reif's *Five Finger Exercises*

A composer unfortunately mostly forgotten, Paul Reif was something of a Renaissance Man in the twentieth century. There is very little biographical information available apart from a brief 1978 article in the New York Times on the event of the composer's death. It gives a short overview of his birth, musical training, and major compositions.[44] Born in Prague in 1910, his subsequent musical studies in Vienna included composition lessons with Richard Strauss and Richard

[44] https://www.nytimes.com/1978/07/08/archives/paul-reif-composer-for-films-theater-more-serious-works.html An additional article, containing supplementary information on the dates of his compositions is found here: https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/reif-paul

Stöhr, whose pupils also included Samuel Barber and Leonard Bernstein.[45] He fled the German Occupation of his home country in 1941 to take permanent residence in the United States. His knowledge of the area in Europe behind enemy lines was useful enough that he enlisted with US Intelligence in 1942 and was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government and the Purple Heart by the United States. His earliest published compositions come from the decade after the War, as he seemed to need time readjusting to civilian life and reviving his musical interests. The song cycle *Five Finger Exercises* (1957) is one of the earliest published after this period. Most of his larger orchestral and ensemble pieces began to be published in the 1960's.

The majority of Reif's compositions are dramatic or programmatic. He wrote two operas and incidental music for theater.[46] The latter category includes music for a Broadway play which ran for only one night, directed by Sam Wanamaker. This actor and entrepreneur was largely responsible for the construction of the Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London, which was to become one of the most impressive and lively bastions of applied performance practice of the Bard's plays existing today.[47] Two of Reif's significant works for chorus and percussion include a *Requiem for War* (1963), apparently inspired by

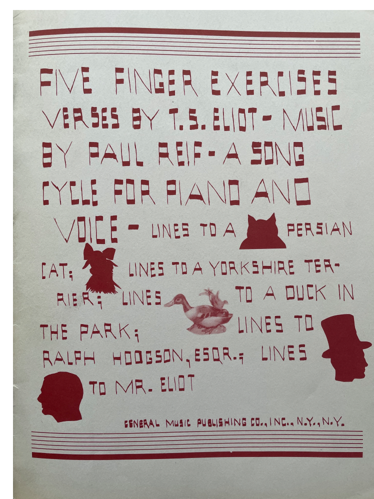

Figure II L: Cover for Reif's *Five Finger Exercises.*

[45] https://blog.curtis.edu/rrcblog/richard-st%C3%B6hr-composer-and-refugee

[46] https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/reif-paul

[47] https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/about-us/our-story/sam-wanamaker/

Britten's *War Requiem* premiered the previous year, and a setting of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1965).[48] Sadly, most of his scores appear to be out of print or lost. Yet it is clear that Reif was moving in circles of the great intellects and historical movements of the day.

One of these intellects Reif recognized in T. S. Eliot. The set of five poems Reif selected for his songs were written around the same time as the poems *Landscapes*, used by Adès. They come from a period of turmoil in Eliot's life with the strain of his first marriage, which ended in permanent separation between himself and Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot. His year lecturing at Harvard seems to have been a welcome respite from his life in England. Like the *Landscapes*, the *Five Finger Exercises* shows Eliot in an experimental vein. The title is both pun and musical reference to pianists' warm-up regimens. There are five poems, each of which could be described as an "exercise" in poetic craftsmanship. The title could thus be interpreted to reference the "five fingers" of a pianist, or that there are five distinct poems, making up five writing exercises. Eliot's multivalent poetic mind was consistently at work at every level of nomenclature.

Reif was a good match for Eliot's dry wit, casting his poetic material into molds of popular theater music, giving the more thanatological themes of Eliot's mind an amusing irony. As experimental and relatively "light" as are these five poems, the themes of mortality and time as ever dovetail with the superficially descriptive and humorous subjects. The first two poems commemorate beloved pets: first a cat,

[48] A letter in which, not so coincidentally, King quotes Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, concerning the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason." https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/reif-paul

then a dog. The third poem is an intimate morning landscape of ducks on a pond. The last two are cheeky caricatures of poets: Eliot's good friend Ralph Hodgson, then a self-deprecating lampoon of Eliot himself.[49] The first three poems Eliot turns into delicate *memento mori*, while the last two end the collection on a cheerful note.

Reif's music in this song cycle perhaps most clearly recalls that of Kurt Weill. The tactful play between the comic and the tragic in Weill's theater pieces finds a parallel in nearly all of Eliot's shorter verse. This, more than anything, seems to be what attracted Reif to Eliot's poetry, as he seemed most comfortable as a composer in a theatrical vein.[50] In this capacity, Reif crafts each of these five songs with an abundance of text-painting, and uses his keen dramatic sense to write music which serves perfectly to "set the stage" for each poem. In the 1950's, the era of some of the most iconic Broadway musicals, these song settings are quaint, but nevertheless carry the indelible mark of unabashed tonal spectacle.

The first of these poems sets the scene of Eliot in his editorial office at Faber, observing his Persian cat, Wooly Bear. The animal's lightning attentiveness to the birds outside is revealed as cruel irony to its captivity indoors. Eliot's musings carry him to a comparison with the incessant bustle of human life, and his own longing for quiet and release from labors. To this brief poetic snapshot, Reif adds three distinct

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[49] Eliot Hodgson article for details of the friendly rivalry and social life of the two poets. Also, for charming pictures of the poets with their dogs, mentioned specifically in the poems.

[50] There is the example of his more earnest works on difficult historical topics, such as the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, which show Reif's versatility. In fact, he set one other poem by Eliot, "La figlia che piange," for low voice and piano. The poem is one of Eliot's more tortured and certainly does not show his comic capabilities. It is not covered in this study, sadly, for two reasons: first, the *Five Finger Exercises* is a more substantial composition; second, Reif's style, as said above, seems most at home with light-comic theatrical pieces, and therefore doesn't give a strong enough contrast to the other composers covered in this study.

and disparate musical motifs. The tolling of a clock tower at the beginning of the song evidently conjures up the city park, “Russel Square,” and its teeming

Figure II M: Tolling clock tower bells in 1. “Lines to a Persian Cat.”

pedestrians. The second is a quasi-recitative as the poet begins to allegorize his cat as a citizen caught in the urban jungle and pestered with sensory input. The third is a gently rocking left hand accompaniment in the piano to mimic the “broken chair” of the poem, which Reif evidently interprets as a rocking chair. These three musical devices are almost entirely of Reif’s own imagination, not describing actual images in the poem itself, but which admirably enliven the imagery of the text with original details. As such, they are not strictly “text painting,”

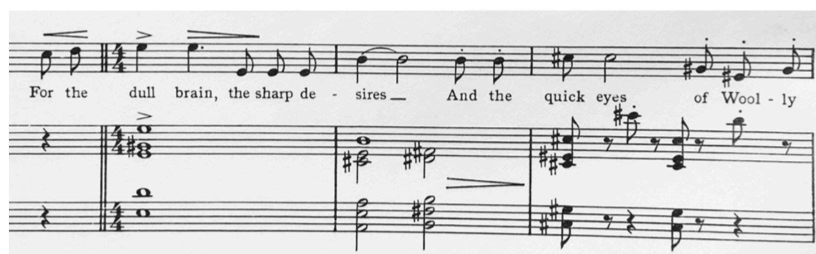
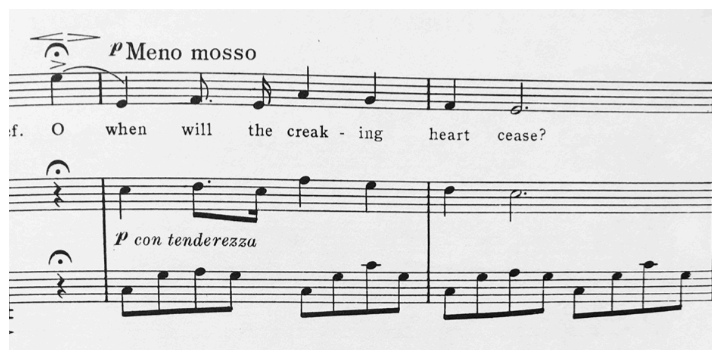


Figure II N: Quasi-recitative in 1., mm. 10-13.

Figure II O: Rocking-chair accompaniment in m. 19–.



but more of a musical-dramatic stage setting, bolstering the content of the poem. The unfortunate result of Eliot's concentration of imagery is that Reif feels the need to shift "scenes" with jarring frequency. The song is only 30 measures in length, and drastically shifts mood twice. To tie the song together, Reif employs the "clock tower bells" as a kind of refrain, returning once in the middle, and again softly at the end of the song as an echo.

The next song, "Lines to a Yorkshire Terrier," has the same theme as the previous, with Eliot drawing comparison this time to a Yorkshire terrier's cozy sleep inside during a thunderstorm, and his own eventual sleep in the grave. His morbid thinking is a theme of the set, becoming a joke in the final two songs where the poet pokes fun at his own self-seriousness. Written from 1930-32, these poems are also the first appearance of Eliot's "Jellicle cats" (dear little cats) and "Pollicle dogs" (poor little dogs).[51] Eliot's baby-names for the animals would show up again in the light-verse collection *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), becoming a running gag in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats* (1981), which the composer based on Eliot's poetry.

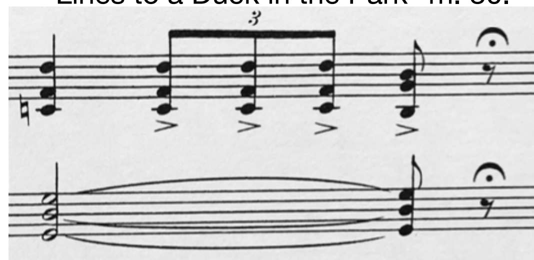
Figure II P: Tonal shift in "Lines to a Yorkshire Terrier", m. 13.

[51] Vinni Marie D'Ambrosio, "Meeting Eliot and Hodgson in Five-finger Exercises," *Yeats Eliot Review* 22, no. 2 (2005): 7–14. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed September 29, 2022). The author of this article provides a profound elucidation of the meaning of these poems, showing them to be far from the light, colorful works they seem at first reading. The poems come from the period of greatest personal turmoil during Eliot's life, and touch themes of detachment and self-care.

In Reif's setting, he casts the two characters (the poet and the dog), as two distinct musical voices. At the opening, a harmonically ambiguous figure in the right hand of the accompaniment "whines" over a B-flat drone in the left hand, representing the dog. The voice enters as the poet, with a dotted melody climbing a fifth, then descending. This music continues for the opening five lines of poetry. Reif then shifts the mood to portray the dog "safe and warm" with quieter, more static, major-mode chords (See Figure II P above). As the poet's thought runs again to death, the opening music returns, ending in a slow pitch descent with a fermata on the word "dust." Reif then switches the voice and piano part. The voice now sings the right hand piano melody of the opening, with the piano's right hand playing the opening voice melody. The switch seems to symbolize the poet identifying with the dog's existential plight by inhabiting the other's melodic material.

Figure II Q: Role reversal, mm. 31–.

Yet again, in the third song, "Lines to a Duck in the Park," Eliot's mind drifts toward death. This time, the mental segue is made because of the usual diet of the duck on worms which, says Eliot, will eventually consume his own body. The metaphor

Figure II R: Beethoven's "Fate" motif in "Lines to a Duck in the Park" m. 30.


recalls Hamlet’s speech to Claudius in Act IV, scene 3 of his eponymous play: “A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.” Reif makes his own musical reference to an iconic symphonic work by an earlier master. The piano hammers out the famous “Fate” motif of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony just after the singer’s melodic climax, “For I know, and so should you…” After this, the last two lines of the poem draw the direct comparison to worms and death: “That soon the enquiring worm shall try/Our well preserved complacency.”

Figure II S: “Lines to a Duck in the Park” opening.

The opening of the song portrays the stillness of the lake through slow, bare counterpoint in B Minor in the piano, delicately interacting with the vocal melody. As the textual content becomes more philosophical, Reif changes the tonality to G-sharp Minor, with new melodic material.

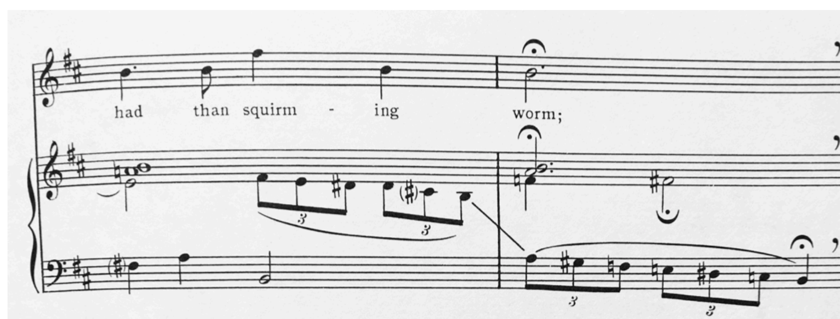


Figure II T: “Worm” motif, mm. 27–28

Reif’s “worm” motif begins in m. 23, a chromatically-colored descending scale of

two triplets. The motif is then ever-present through the remainder of the song. Its last appearance is, fittingly, in the final measure, leaving an unresolved and uncomfortable E, the subdominant pitch of B Minor, hanging above a B octave in the left hand of the piano. The unresolved dissonance serves dual function: first, to heighten the ambiguity of the final line of text, with its implied question of, “How do we live?” Second, considering the set of songs as a whole, the E can be seen as a leading tone to the next song, in F Major.

Figure II U: Opening measures of “Lines to Ralph Hodgson, Esqre.”

In these last two poems, Eliot answers the reader’s growing concern over the poet’s continued indulgence in thoughts of death. In “Lines to Ralph Hodgson, Esqre..” Eliot commemorates his friend and elder poetic colleague. One of the “Georgian poets,” because of their popularity during the reign of George V of England, Hodgson is given back-handed complements as a relic of a lost era of dinner parties and frivolous hobbies. In contrast to this, Eliot parodies the popular image he had cultivated of himself, the tortured and neurotic Modernist, in the last of the poems, “Lines for Cuscuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg.” Likely names for Eliot’s pets, the latter, “Mirza Murad Ali Beg,” was a real person, born Godolphin

Mitford.[52] Mitford was an Englishman born in India, and member of the occult movement of theosophy, who eventually joined the Roman Catholic Church toward the end of his life. That being said, he seems to be a stand-in for Eliot himself in the poem, as Eliot was similarly drawn to

Figure II W: Right hand trill, m. 49.

Figure II X: Falsetto, m. 29.

religions and traditions of the East, particularly to Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, but who finally embraced the religious traditions of his own Western culture. In the fifth poem of the *Five Finger Exercises*, Eliot gives an unflinching caricature of his own over-ambition and eccentricities.

Reif shows a large pallet of musical styles in the fourth song of the set. The colorful character of Ralph Hodgson is given three different genres of musical

[52] https://www.theosophy.world/encyclopedia/moorad-ali-beg

Figure II Y: Opening measures of 5. “Lines for Cuscuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg”

material: at the opening, a jaunty, sparkling march in 2/4 (See Figure II U); next, a sarcastic, plodding theme in 6/8 for Hodgson’s “Baskerville hound”; (See Figure II V) then in m. 42, he is given a graceful waltz in B-flat Major, evoking his whimsical flights of imagination. The chromaticism and counterpoint of this waltz is particularly Mahlerian (See Figure II W). The piano part is given a graceful descending line in the top voice which drops by half-step from the temporary tonic note, B-flat, to the dominant, F, which Reif harmonizes ingeniously, forming a beautiful counter-melody to the voice. Internal counterpoint, especially in the piano’s left hand, m. 46, enrich the accompaniment further. Apart from this stylistic diversity, Reif shows two charming bits of tone painting. One is at the line, “finches and fairies,” which he enlivens with a persistent full-measure trill in the piano’s right hand (See Figure II X). Possibly the most surprising, however, is the falsetto employed in the voice part setting the line which speaks of Mr. Hodgson, “Who is worshipped by all waitresses/ (They regard him as something apart)” (See Figure II Y).

The last of this set, “Lines for Cuscuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg,” Eliot’s comical self-portrait, is also Reif’s most acerbic. The style of the piece portrays Eliot, as if trying yet failing to imitate his friend Mr. Hodgson’s social graces, in a

discordant and off-kilter waltz. The voice enters in choppy, off-beat staccato figures, contradictory as Eliot himself. The figure is reminiscent of a two-note slur, which throughout the history of common practice music has always been closely associated with sighing. But, unlike the classical “sighing” figure, here it is notated with *staccati*, contradicting the very notion of the sigh. Instead, the figure is delivered by the vocalist as a sort of strangled spasm. It may be the most concentrated and efficient piece of musical characterization Reif gives in this entire set.

The final page of this song has two brilliant musical jokes to round off the set with a good-natured wink from the composer. The poet describes himself as follows:

> How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
> With a bobtail cur
> In a coat of fur
> And a porpentine cat
> And a wopsical hat:

The poetry here is gradually showing the influence of the nonsense verse of authors like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. The word “porpentine” is actually an archaic version of “porcupine,” appearing in a line of *Hamlet*, Act I, scene V: “Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.” But “wopsical” as a descriptor is almost certainly Eliot’s own invention. As if to underscore this descent into nonsense, Reif strips the piano accompaniment down to a simple descending chromatic line in the left hand, and a short B-flat with a grace-note like a hiccup in the right hand. This phrase ends in a fermata high note in the voice which introduces the final two lines of the song.

These last two lines give the punch-line of the poem: “How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot/(Whether his mouth be open or shut).” Reif sets this, for effect, as a

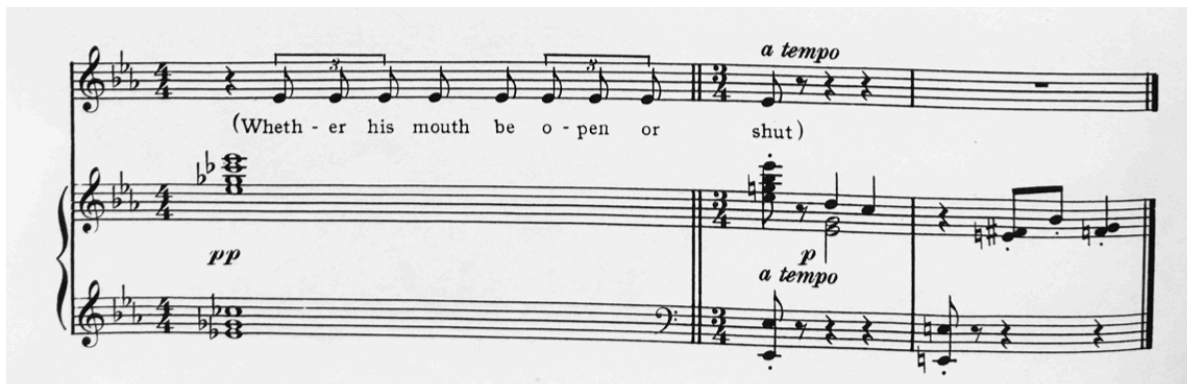


Figure II Z: Final bars and recitative

recitative, followed by a quick two-measure restatement of the opening material of the song. Reif's intuition into Eliot's wit seems to come naturally. It is a pity Eliot never worked as librettist for operetta, although Reif's set of songs gives us a glimpse of what that collaboration could have yielded.[53]

[53] Eliot only ever collaborated with one composer, Martin Shaw, on his own verse. This was for the pageant play *The Rock*, the choruses of which are often found in anthologies. See E. Martin Browne, *The Making of TS Eliot's Plays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND A POTENTIAL FIFTH APPROACH

This study has included four composers of widely varying styles, all from within two generations of Eliot's own life. The music of these four composers has shown startling variety of approach to the tough problem of interpretation and musical setting that Eliot's poetry provides. Yet the nearness of Eliot's death also hints at the possibility of many future approaches. In conclusion, I would like to offer one which seems to have potential to be a rich lode for composers.

In Robert Ashley's 1983 masterpiece *Perfect Lives*, an opera for television, the audience is given an entirely original take on the concept of "opera." Ashley himself is the narrator of the story, delivering his monologue of Modernist-inspired verse (written by the composer himself) over the backdrop of a pianist improvising popular American genres such as boogie-woogie, stride, and slower hymn-like music. The pianist, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, provides this backdrop of steady rhythm to Ashley's measured, yet subtly inflected, poetic and rhetorical delivery. The music does not mimic the emotive changes of the poetry, or develop in any discernible way. It merely provides an intricate tapestry of sound over which Ashley's hypnotic voice weaves the events and reflections of his story.

Ashley's manner of delivery is remarkably similar to that of poets like Eliot and Bunting, preserved in the recorded readings of their poetry. He does not recite the text emotively, as would an actor, but is focused more on the rhythm and phonetic harmony of the ordering of words. The cognitive difficulty for the listener in gathering the meaning of the text makes for a challenging interpretive experience. Here, the music plays a crucial role in creating a familiar backdrop of sound.

Listeners are invited to hone their skill of critical interpretation through the strangeness of poetry and recitation. The music therefore acts as a bridge or compromise to facilitate that interpretive challenge.[54]

In the case of Eliot and other Modernists, whose poetry is intended not only to be densely allusive, but also musically inspired, an approach such as Robert Ashley and Gene Tyranny took may work well. Since many recordings exist of Eliot reciting his own poetry, with his own rhythmic sense and particular accentuation, musicians now have the ability to improvise a musical backdrop to his reading, much as Tyranny does with Ashley's reading. Once a satisfactory improvisation has been recorded, it can then be easily layered with audio technology onto the poet's recorded reading, resulting in a new piece of electronic music.

Other permutations of this approach then become obvious, such as using another actor's or poet's reading of the poetry, instead of the original poet. Or the music can be pre-arranged instead of improvised to dovetail more closely with the recorded reading. The process could also happen in real-time, with a live recitation and live musical accompaniment. Replacing pre-composed sung delivery of the text with spoken-word recitation might provide a subtler alternative for the rhythmic and interpretive peculiarities of Modernist and Postmodernist verse.

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[54] The same principle can be seen in liturgical music all over the world. Liturgical texts are often highly mysterious and dense in metaphorical symbolism. Liturgical composers therefore select familiar musical styles to facilitate comprehension. This is the case with the simple diatonic harmonies of Kievan four-part choral chant, or the folk-sourced hymn tunes of the English-speaking world.

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