

The early solo songs – the 1920s

Milford's musical style was not innovatory in terms of melody, harmony, texture or tonal development. His style did not include the influence of Romanticism, it was not completely based upon an 'English' style (with such influences as English folk-song or Renaissance music), nor was it influenced by any particular European style (for example, Sibelius or Mahler – of whom Milford was particularly fond – or the French or second Viennese school). Milford's musical style was simply 'European' in the broadest sense.

A strong sense of communication through music, however, was all-important to Milford. The majority of his compositions are programmatic to some degree (either through title or the through the illumination of texts or quotations). Thus the critical analyses to follow, in this and the following chapters, will focus upon the interaction between Milford's musical features and his texts and, indeed, titles. Again, there is nothing innovatory in such interaction but the analyses will also seek to highlight not only Milford's craftsmanship in his songs and commitment to English literature but also a correlation between the composition of the songs and the composer's temperament and social/musical backgrounds.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Milford composed songs throughout his life. Showing succinct development, Milford's main songs for solo voice and piano can be considered in three groups - early, middle and late. The early group consists of those songs composed during the 1920s, as shown on the following page.

Song	Composition Date	Publication Date	Publisher
'The Moor'	pre-1924	1925	OUP
'The Fiddler of Dooney'	pre-1925	1925	OUP
'On His Mistress'	1925	1926	OUP
'Old Age'	pre-1928	1928	OUP

Developing from the style of Stanford and Parry, the main aspect of interest with these songs is the manner in which they each develop within their individual style. Such development involves melody, tonality, harmony and texture.

The many letters written by Milford to Kirstie during the years of their engagement supply a wealth of information about the composer and his temperament. In some of these the composer expresses some of his deepest and most personal feelings, including the need for security. Kirstie's importance to Milford also involved composition, emphasised by Anne Ridler who has stated, "Among the influences of the 20s [was] that of his [Robin's] wife; and it was her beautiful soprano voice that inspired him to write his best songs".¹ Musically, Kirstie had a profound influence on Milford throughout their married life. As a solo singer, she not only discussed poetry and the settings of poems to music but she also sang a number of her husband's works.

Describing the occasion of their engagement, Anne Ridler wrote, "I well remember the Christmas when Robin and Kirstie Newsom were engaged, and he brought her to stay,

¹ Anne Ridler letter to Peter Hunter, 31 March, 1991

and accompanied her as she sang his hymn to the words ‘God who has created me nimble and light of limb’ – written for the new hymnbook, ‘Songs of Praise’”, 1931.²

The songs of this period reflect the composer’s joy in his marriage to Kirstie, his philosophical and humorous temperament, his appreciation of poetry ranging from the Jacobean period to that of the twentieth century, and his respect for his uncle and housemaster at Rugby.

The first main song for solo voice and piano is entitled ‘The Moor’. It belongs to *Three Songs of the Moors*, a set of songs written before 1924 and published by Oxford University Press in 1925. The first and third songs, ‘The Gipsy Girl’ and ‘Meg Merrilies’, are not truly representative of solo song as an art form, emphasised by the fact that both have been published by Banks Publications as unison songs for choir. ‘The Moor’, the second and most important song, can be considered as truly belonging to the genre of solo song because of its depth and breadth.

The song is a setting of a three-verse poem by Ralph Hodgson (1871-1962) in which the poet reflects on what life has to offer an elderly man in terms of the remainder of his days, his death and the life hereafter. The intensity of the poem is highlighted by a comment made by Siegfried Sassoon “R.H. has the most religious mind I know. By that I mean he is passionately concerned with goodness. Poetry is the central point of his religion.”³ The mysticism and spirituality inherent in Hodgson’s poem would, most certainly, have greatly appealed to Milford.

Following the established tradition of English song by Parry and Stanford, Milford shows himself a competent composer of solo song. In ‘The Moor’, Milford specifically

² Ibid

³ Roberts 1999: ‘Siegfried Sassoon’ p255

highlights the movement of time and the ageing man; the anticipation of death; death's arrival and, finally, the relief given by death. These aspects are set within an E Aeolian implication.

The image of time moving on is depicted through the use of a repeating tonic octave, rising and falling melodic contours in conjunct movement (using constant syllabic rhythm), continuous crotchet rhythm and a slow harmonic rhythm. The anticipation of death is suggested through constant use of a neighbour-note motif using tones (e.g. BAB in bars 1-2). Apart from the earlier use of this neighbour-note motif (which could be interpreted as a 'death' motif), death's anticipation is given prominence by Milford (sadly, ironically prophetic) in the development in the song. This commences at the interlude between verses two and three (bars 42-48) through movement from the tonic to tension created through a rising chordal texture in the upper accompaniment (followed by a rising bass melody), use of top registers, a gradual crescendo to fortissimo and a pre-empting of the next melodic phrase in the middle texture (bars 47-48). The arrival of death, the climax of the poem, in verse three (bars 49-end) is, however, in dramatic contrast to the fortissimo grandeur of the previous two bars. The song introduces death with 'pianissimo' and 'una corda' markings, almost as an apparition appearing quietly. The image of the "Heavenly Seraphim" in bars 49-50 continues with the melody moving into the left hand of the piano while the right sounds chords in the bright upper register. Although the harmony is not innovatory, the style of harmony assists in the illumination of words or phrases (for example, the harmonic progression VII –IV allows the texture to suggest the 'Heavenly Seraphim'). The mystery of old age and impending death are suggested through the constant return to the principal E chord and small use of chromatic added-note chords.

Hodgson's poem ends with the poet seeking out death, saying "Unbody me – I'm tired – and get me home". Milford creates the contrast between being alive and reaching "home" by moving the lower part of the accompaniment from the treble register to the bass (itself suggesting burial) and returning to the haunting material of the song's introduction. The reasons why Milford selected such a dark philosophical poem, with its shadows of old age and death, are intriguing given the composer's youth and relatively optimistic prospects. Its selection may highlight the pessimistic side of Milford's nature and his known affinity with older people. His empathy with the poem may even point to the fact that Milford was already suffering from the form of depression which ultimately claimed his life.

Milford's second song, 'The Fiddler of Dooney', highlights the other extreme of his temperament. This song is a pre-1925 setting of the famous and light-hearted poem by W. B. Yeats (1865-1938). It employs an Irish folk-style through the use of off-beat harmony (possibly painting the movement of an Irish 'jaunting car'), melodic flattened 7ths and pentatonic implications. This song suggests the possible influence of the 'Celtic' movement, fashionable during the early years of the twentieth century (commencing with Stanford and reaching a climax with Bax and Moeran).

The third song of the period, 'On His Mistress' (1925) is more complex, suggesting a development in Milford's musical style. It is a setting of a poem by Sir Henry Wotton in praise of Elizabeth of Bohemia. The poem was not published until 1651, but was probably written about 1620. Since James I died in 1625, it can be accurately described as Jacobean. Elizabeth was James' daughter. She married the Elector Palatine, hence the reference to Bohemia.

Milford's setting of Wotton's poem demonstrates the breadth of the composer's youthful literary interest. Clearly, interest in historical themes and literature outweighed his personal emotional anxieties and expressions. Through his setting of 'On His Mistress', Milford displayed not only his breadth of knowledge of English literature but also of mythology. During the poem, Wotton repeatedly compares the weaknesses of lesser beings to Elizabeth's superiority, all culminating in her grand appearance. Milford clearly wanted to give emphasis to the grandeur of Elizabeth and highlight the contrasts in the poem. His setting of Wotton's text may be considered commonplace in relation to the many similar songs which were composed during the 1920s. However, if a song successfully illuminates its text, adding to its power of communication and poetic imagery, it should not be simply dismissed as just another 'miniature' of the age. The secret behind Milford's setting is in its vivid but subtle textural contrasts which become all the more inventive within their strophic setting.

Elizabeth's grandeur is first presented in the introduction through falling diatonic harmony, neighbour note figures and flattened harmony, culminating in anticipation through chords IV7, Vd7. Poetic and musical contrasts now commence. In verse one, the "common people" are likened to the stars and Elizabeth to the moon. The "common people" are painted through diatonic harmony without middle texture decoration while the rising moon is depicted by an obvious rising melody and word-painting on "Moon" derived from flattened submediant and dominant harmony. Milford's falling melodic contour on the words "shall rise" is questionable. However, the rising moon is heralded by a simple but effective quasi-fanfare using unaccompanied tonic and dominant notes in verse two. From verse two the song starts to develop. Now the comparison is between ordinary birds of the wood (depicted

by sustained notes suggesting a drone middle decoration in thirds) and Philomel the nightingale (painted by dotted rhythms and off-beat harmony). In verse three, the contrast is between lesser violets and the perfect rose. The poetic illumination of the violets involves delicate textures, involving a 3-note figure in imitation, (bars 39-42). Indeed, the imitation between the registers in the accompaniment suggests the violets appearing one after the other. The climax phrase “What are you when the Rose is blown?” is painted through a culmination of the textures employed in the previous contrasts – sustained harmony, the middle texture dotted rhythm – in addition to rising quaver figuration, broken IIb, IC, IVb harmony and middle texture melody.

The topic of “proud virgins” may have given cause for concern in the 1920s and, certainly, a composer such as Milford with his upbringing and sensitivities would have given this image some careful consideration. Milford surmounts the problem by employing a continuation of the “violet” figuration derived from flattened dominant harmony (bars 44-45).

Milford clearly wanted to continue the emphasis on the grandeur of Elizabeth as the interlude between verse three and four (bars 53-57), a repeat of the introduction, is appropriately placed in anticipating the appearance of Elizabeth during verse four.

As Milford progresses through the story within Wotton’s poem his music becomes more imaginative. Thus verse four dramatically presents the appearance of the adored one. Detached harmony (chords Ib and II7) in bar 59 helps to create anticipation of something different to follow during the phrase “So when my Mistress shall be seen”. Milford does not disappoint the listener as Elizabeth’s “form and beauty” are wonderfully suggested through rising and sustained arpeggiation derived from now well-established prolonged supertonic

harmony. The flattened chord VII emphasizing “virtue” is excitedly pre-empted by an octave bass Eb due to the altered poetic metre extension at the start of the phrase “By virtue first”. The phrase “Tell me if she were not design’d” (bars 65-66) serves not only as a preparation to the final phrase (which becomes the climax of the entire song) is decorated by accented passing notes and a rising upper middle texture in contrary motion to the voice-line. The final phrase of the song (“Th’e-clipse and glory of her kind”) is one of the greatest surprises of the song or, perhaps more correctly, one of the disappointments. Here Milford uses the same ending as that of verse one (including the right hand quasi-fanfare).

‘On His Mistress’ demonstrates Milford’s strengthening musical imagery, not only through melodic contours and harmony, but also through variation within the accompaniment of a strophic song. The accompaniment of ‘On His Mistress’ is a fine example of the ‘dialogue’ form of accompaniment which Milford subsequently introduced into his songs. Although looking back to an ayre form of accompaniment, the replacement of the chordal accompaniment with lighter and more independent textures in verse three, looks ahead to the form of texture which becomes such a feature in the songs of the 1930s. ‘On His Mistress’ and other songs in this style reflect the period’s obsession with Tudor and Jacobean music (including its rediscovery) and its source as an inspiration for setting English. Finally, the characteristic melodic neighbour-note structure in this song can also be found again in *Prelude, Air and Finale* for piano (1935) [Anthology 2, p 1]. In this work, Milford develops the structure into a prevalent melodic unit, consisting of a lower mordent.

While he was at Rugby, the Bradby family was an important emotional anchor for Milford, particularly H. C. Bradby, the composer’s uncle by marriage, and Anne - who later became the poet Anne Ridler. H C Bradby was also Milford’s Housemaster at school. Of

the relationship between pupil and teacher/uncle, Anne Ridler explained, ‘Robin was very fond of my father.’⁴ Milford used to visit the private part of the School Field, where the Bradby family lived, each Sunday. Recently, Anne Ridler recounted “I remember my mother telling me that he [Robin] would sit for hours at the $\frac{3}{4}$ size Broadwood Grand Piano in our drawing-room, playing the common chord (which she had taught him) over and over again: she supposed that wonderful harmonies were floating through his mind as he played”.⁵ Anne became particularly close to Milford through her belief in his musical ability, support of his musical aspirations, the appeal of her literary writings and through her philosophical outlook. The two cousins maintained this relationship throughout Milford’s life.

‘Old Age’ (pre-1928) shows Milford being prepared to tackle a more independent and challenging setting. This song was written and dedicated to H C Bradby, a devotee of J. S. Bach, on his retirement from Rugby. It is a setting of a poem by Edmund Waller (1686). Milford’s response to setting Waller’s poem ‘Old Age’ (1686) was a song which employs a texture similar to a Bach organ chorale-prelude. He creates the use of a three-stranded texture in which the left hand depicts the pedal part, the upper part of the right hand corresponds to the chorale melody, while the inner quaver movement represents weaving counterpoint (perhaps suggesting passing time). Against this texture, the voice-line is strategically placed.

Milford deliberately did not commence the Bach chorale-prelude style until the end of the introduction, debatably bar 5 but definitely bar 6. Marked ‘calmly’, the introduction commences with a chordal texture, possibly suggesting the slower, plodding pace of old age

⁴ Anne Ridler letter to Peter Hunter, 31 March, 1991

⁵ Ibid

(as in *The Moor*). Or his idea may have been to simply hold back the chorale-prelude image until after the start of the melody - heightening the element of surprise.

In writing this song Milford, presumably, had a number of parameters in mind. Firstly, the obvious Bach connection; secondly, the fact that the dedication involved someone who was growing old and that the song, independently of the poem needed to reflect not only this fact but, possibly, also the person's temperament, not to mention the composer's possible gratitude for past days at Rugby; and, finally, the need for the song to reflect the actual poem.

Waller seems to construct his two verses in two parts, the first consisting of lines one and two and the second being the remainder of the verse. For example, in verse one, the statement in the opening part of each line is governed by that which happens after the word "when". Thus the word "when" serves as a hinge. Milford, imaginatively, responds to this by beautiful rising and falling melodic contours within tonic C minor and Eb harmony. The second half of each poetic verse seems to make bold statements ("For then we know how vain it was to boast" in bars 14-17 and "Stronger by weakness, wiser men become" in bars 42-45).

The development of each verse involves the second half of the poetic verse. This includes a melodic ascent using the top of the C minor scale with treble register accompaniment only in bars 14 and 42, a chromatic side-step (i.e. the C chord in bars 17 and 45), a false relation (bars 20 and 48), a decorated suspension in bars 21 and 49, a delayed melodic entry in bars 22 and 50 and the impressive undulating melodic contour ending on a repeated fifth degree of the scale during the last phrase of each verse, involving a passing modulation to Bb and return to C minor through V-I closure (bars 28-29 and 56-57).

In writing 'Old Age' Milford may well also have been encouraged to write in the style of Bach because of the prevailing influence of renewed English interest in Bach during the 1920s and the vogue for young composers to compose in the style of Bach. Howes traces the renewed interest in Bach on these shores back to the work of Samuel Wesley; Mendelssohn's 1829 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*; the formation of the Bach Choir (including the work achieved by Hugh Allen, Vaughan Williams⁶, Adrian Boult, Reginald Jacques and David Willcocks); performances at the Promenade Concerts, universities and schools; the work of Parry and Stanford; and the organ revolution, influenced, of course, by Lady Jeans and Albert Schweitzer. The influence of Vaughan Williams and Bach can be found in Milford's two oratorios *A Prophet in the Land* (1929) and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1931).

The 'Bach Revival' had its culmination during Milford's lifetime in Dame Myra Hess's popularisation of Bach through her well-known arrangement for piano of the chorale prelude "Jesu, bleibet meine Freude" (known in English as "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring") from Johann Sebastian Bach's Cantata No. 147 *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*. Many English composers responded to the cause by composing entire works and movements influenced by Bach.

The song 'Old Age' (1928) was not Milford's first response to the neo-Classical movement which was greatly in vogue during the decade. Prior to 1924 he composed the *Suite in D minor* for oboe and strings. This work consists of four movements: Overture, Gavotte, Minuet and Musette, and Air.

⁶ the present writer possesses the scores of the St. Matthew and St. John Passions from which Vaughan Williams conducted the Bach Choir at the Albert Hall performances, gifts from Miss Marion Milford

It seems clear that in the solo songs of the 1920s, melody and accompaniment (texture and harmony) interact profoundly together. In terms of the former such features include repeating units, specific contours, word-highlighting, word-decoration, climax, and register. Accompaniment interaction involves repeating units, particular forms of figuration, light texture, thick texture, imitation, suspensions, pedals, arpeggiation, chord progressions, high-register chords, low-register chords and chord spacing. Other features related to the interaction between musical features and text include the colour of specific keys and modes, dynamics, tempo, rhythmic patterns, syncopation, and rhythmic repeating units.

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