

Review: *English Pastoral Music: from Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955.*

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English pastoral music has not been given the proper scholarly attention it deserves. It has been one of Eric Saylor's academic objectives to draw scholarly attention to this repertoire. He has published articles on this topic before¹, but *English Pastoral Music: from Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955* is the first recent major publication that takes musical pastoralism seriously and dives into its intricate subtleties. Music critics have often described pastoral music as sentimental, nostalgic, and escapist (Saylor 2017, 3). Moreover, they deemed it inappropriate and horribly out of fashion amid the tumultuous new developments of modernism, especially after the Second World War. Critics were, for instance, more interested in works written in serial and neoclassical idioms, which were perceived as being more progressive (ibid., 171-2). As a result, pastoralism is misunderstood; pastoral music evokes certain bucolic landscapes, whether in topic or musical style, but its manifestations and its composers' motivations vary widely. Contrary to these misconceptions, pastoral music encompasses a variety of styles, idioms, timbres, forms, and signifiers, and has been subject to diverse influences. Moreover, its composers all had their own motives to write their pieces.

There is thus a need to contest the general conception of pastoralism and to define it more clearly. This is exactly what Saylor tries to do in his book. Saylor starts by briefly discussing pastoralism and how it has manifested in literature. Literary pastoralism has evolved throughout the centuries. It ranges from the 'purely' Arcadian pastoral, derived from classical Greek and Roman poetry to the more sentimental Romantic pastoral. The former variant features Arcadia, an imaginary rural location, based on a real province in Greece, in which characters such as nymphs, gods, and shepherds live. Arcadia has two sides to it. Firstly, it is a place where people retreat from the

burdens that urban life has brought them; life in Arcadia is fulfilling, and more balance as nature provides everything its visitors need. At the same time, however, Arcadia shows the primitive and wild side of this sort of life; death and other dangers are always lurking and are threatening this way of life, rendering it even more valuable. The main concepts that Saylor adopts are that of 'soft pastoralism' and 'hard pastoralism,' taken from Annabel Patterson's (1987) study on the history of pastoralism in both literature and visual art. These categories roughly correspond to the two sides of Arcadia. In soft pastoral works, Arcadia represents an idyllic place where modern technology, and the difficulties that come with it, are absent. Hard pastoralism is a reaction to this sentimental vision of rural life and embraces the hardships of this existence, the hard work and the unnerving adversities (Saylor 2017, 9-17).

Saylor then illuminates how pastoralism in English music is constituted by diverse approaches, both new and revived. Pastoral in this sense is thus not a genre, but a way of expressing one's relationship with a real or imagined landscape. Robert Hatten and Ted Perkins have identified various musical characteristics of English pastoral music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hatten 1994, 97-9; Perkins 1988, 25-7). These include the use of modal scales, parallel thirds, rhapsodic melodies, and pedal points, drones, or sustained chords that create a sense of motionlessness, to name just a few distinguishing marks. Not all of these have to be present to call a piece pastoral, but they do help in identifying it as such (Saylor 2017, 17-23).

For the remainder of the book, Saylor discusses various topics concerning English pastoral music. These encompass Arcadia, utopia, war and the (English) landscape. The author gives a general context and discusses a few case studies in relation to each of these topics. The (music) historical developments and case studies that are described in these chapters are generally set in chronological order, which helps readers who are not familiar with this particular repertoire.

English composers and poets (both those staying in England and those sent out to the trenches in France) dealt with and tried to make sense of the devastating aftermaths of the First World War in different ways. Saylor highlights pastoralism as one of these ways. He gives the example of Ralph Vaughan Williams, who had experienced life in the trenches firsthand. He wrote *Pastoral Symphony* (1922) not merely as a form of escapism, but as a quiet memorial for all victims of the

Great War. However, Saylor also draws out how this piece has often been misinterpreted as purely sentimental and old-fashioned due to a variety of reasons. Before the war, Vaughan Williams was already known for his pastoral music. As a result, critics did not notice the subtle stylistic transformations in this symphony, and simply deemed it a continuation of his old ways of composing.

Moreover, the music is not accompanied by lyrics that pertain to the war. Lastly, Vaughan Williams, like many other veterans, was reluctant to speak about his experiences during the war and did not publicly link *Pastoral Symphony* with his personal memories. Nevertheless, Saylor's analysis shows that his motivations for writing the symphony were more complex than they were frequently believed to be. While the symphony was heavily inspired by the mesmerizing landscape of the otherwise tranquil French countryside, suggesting soft pastoralism, it also reflected Vaughan Williams's harrowing memories of working for the Royal Army Medical Corps – where he saw many of his friends and colleagues getting wounded or killed severely disrupted the perception of an idealized French landscape. From this perspective *Pastoral Symphony* could be seen as a reminder to survivors of the war why this should never happen again and that the piece spoke for all those who could not speak about the war (2017, 83-92).

In contrast, Saylor argues that the works by George Sainton Butterworth were seen through much more jingoistic eyes after his untimely death at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Compositions like *A Shropshire Lad Rhapsody* (1911), consisting of musical settings on pastoral poems by Alfred Edward Housman, were seen as fiercely defending England and its culture. Collected memoirs, reviews, and other archived documents suggest that Butterworth was admired for his noble spirit, work ethic and promising future as a composer. His death thus made him part of the perceived Lost Generation of England. Saylor proposes that performances of Butterworth's pastoral compositions made people realize the sacrifices he and many other young soldiers had made to preserve England's culture and idyllic landscape. This adoration was so prominent that Butterworth could never be mentioned again without also referring to the Great War (2017, 71-8).

Saylor also examines the fascination for English bucolic landscapes, which intensified from the 1800s onwards due to the increasing urbanization and industrialization. The idea that living in the

countryside was healthier for the mind and the body than urban life emerged during the *fin de siècle* and was very popular among urban social elites. The latter stimulated the artistic and political promotion of England as an idealized, mostly rural country. The artistic manifestations of that idea differ somewhat from Arcadian pastoralism because they refer to actual rural places and situations in England, not to an imagined past (ibid., 98-101). Saylor interprets *A Somerset Rhapsody* (1910) as one such piece. Gustav Holst adapted three English folk songs for this rhapsody. According to Saylor, this work can be perceived as mainly soft pastoral. Holst's own interpretation of *A Somerset Rhapsody* illustrates how human activities increasingly transform a landscape and how it ultimately withstands those changes. Saylor argues that in using conventional techniques to create his unique style, Holst contributed to the development of a distinctive 'national' English music. Saylor's analysis suggests that Holst evoked an idealized vision of a bucolic English landscape with these means, exemplifying the perception of England as a pastoral country, not as affected by urbanization and industrialization as it indeed was (ibid., 135-39).

Eric Saylor is a musicologist, and this book would, therefore, appeal to fellow musicologists. In my opinion, he has succeeded in keeping his text understandable for a general academic audience. Although some case studies include music theory, Saylor's analyses are to the point and accessible to most readers. Moreover, the genesis and reception of a piece is sometimes of greater importance than its technical intricacies. *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955* is a short, accessible book on musical pastoralism, and one that has long been overdue. Surely, Saylor's work will garner more serious attention to pastoral music. He has reopened the field, and hopefully, more authors will follow up on exploring pastoralism in eras and areas that have hitherto been ignored. The composers mentioned in *English Pastoral Music* have struggled with the same environmental and social issues with which we still struggle today. The threat of wild and rural landscapes disappearing due to increasing urbanization and industrialization, war taking its toll on innocent victims, and the sense that the relationship between humans and nature has been thoroughly disturbed have all motivated English composers to write their music. Saylor illuminates how people perceived and dealt with these concerns artistically. Possibly, it inspires us to see these persistent problems through a different lens.

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- ¹ See, for example, his articles on folk song in Vaughan Williams's operas (Saylor 2009), and English pastoral music in relation to the First World War (Saylor 2008).