

## CREATING THE 'ENGLISH' SOUND

**John Riley**

In a companion article 'Blending Traditions', I suggested ways in which improvised or composed organ interludes could realise a 'Scottish flavour'. This could be achieved by certain characteristic rhythmic traits, but most particularly through the use of the Pentatonic mode, this being the basis of a large proportion of traditional Scottish melodies.

In attempting to distil certain characteristics to create an 'English' or, if preferred, 'Anglican' or 'Episcopalian' style, one must immediately define *which* 'English' style; there is obviously a vast range; also, acknowledge the inevitable over-generalisations, over-simplification, and caricature that this will involve. Few satisfying pieces of music can be created with simple formulae alone.

Nevertheless, the aim for this article is to provide some starting points, or pegs to which can be attached further details and resonances as experience grows. Our stylistic starting point will be elements with a strong modal base, notably the Dorian and Aeolian modes, albeit modified with some elements of diatonicism and 20th-century harmony, and as found in works – and not just for organ – by such composers as Vaughan Williams, Howells, and to a much more limited degree, Parry and Stanford, (an Irishman but active within the Anglican tradition). In Vaughan Williams in particular, we find references to much earlier traditions within English choral music, such as the rich harmonies of Dunstable with their use of thirds and sixths, together with traditions of English folksong.

As well as being an identifiably 'English' sound, music based on the Dorian and Aeolian modes, and with an extensive use of parallel thirds and sixths, provides an idiom that is rich in possibilities, but relatively easy to manage; at least when compared to working within a diatonic style in a romantic idiom.

Improvising involves drawing upon a largely subliminal 'toolbox' of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and textural elements. Experience in improvising will furnish both the wealth of possible ideas, but also the stylistic boundaries; an improvisation in the style of J.S. Bach, for example, will not then merge with, or oscillate between, a rather incongruous style, such as that of Howells!

There is value sometimes therefore in working firmly within pre-determined parameters, with a specific set of tools to employ. Here are some useful tools that should provide the basis for a rich variety of ‘English’ style improvisations. Why not use each section as a template on which to create your own improvisations? You could continue the given examples or create something afresh in related style.

### 1: MELODY, BASS, AND ACCOMPANIMENT IN PARALLEL THIRDS

Use the following: (a) A firm pulse and metre. (b) Music based on the Dorian and Aeolian modes (white notes D to D' and A to A'). (c) Groups of parallel thirds in the accompaniment, moving independently of the melody. **(Ex. 1).**

♩ = 72

etc.

Ped.

### 2: PARALLEL SIXTHS WITH MELODY, SUSPENSIONS AND CADENCES

The first example used groups of parallel thirds as an independent accompaniment to the melody. Now, introduce parallel thirds and sixths in the melody itself, interspersed with suspensions and accented passing notes. **(Ex. 2).** Add to this the occasional major chord to punctuate a cadence, in contrast to the minor thirds of the modes. This also contributes to the tonal ambiguity, and blend of archaism with more modern harmonic styles, characteristic of music of this style. Again, note also the use of parallel thirds and sixth chords. **(Ex. 3).**

Another useful device to achieve harmonic variety, particularly as part of a cadence, is the flattened supertonic triad with an added seventh—on top of which is also an appoggiatura, in this case resolving on to the G; a characteristic device of Howells in particular. **(Ex. 4).** (Chord labelling is useful, if perhaps a shade intimidating at times! Far more important though is an instinctive grasp and memorisation of characteristic chords, and in their various transpositions).

3

Ex.2

$\text{♩} = 108$

3

5 etc.

5 etc.

Ex.3

$\text{♩} = \text{c.}60$

$\text{♩} = \text{c.}60$

3

4 etc.

4 etc.

## Ex.4

♩ = 84

etc.

## 3: CONTRAPUNTAL TEXTURES

Another characteristic, in conjunction or contrast with block harmony are free-flowing, almost vocal-like melodic strands and counterpoint. The Dorian and Aeolian modes in particular, with minimal amount of clashing notes will help facilitate this, for example in imitative part-writing. Create a contrapuntal interlude. The opening might be quasi-fugal in character, such as in **Ex. 5**.

## Ex.5

♩ = 80

etc.

#### 4: PARALLEL TRIADS - FANFARES AND MARCHES

In addition to the use of thirds and sixths, we often find extensive use of parallel fifths and triads, not least when invoking a more extrovert style, for example in fanfares and intradas. Using the Mixolydian mode (G to G') with its major third provides a lighter mood than the Dorian and Aeolian modes with their minor thirds. Create a fanfare or march. (Ex. 6).

##### Ex. 6

#### 5: INTRODUCING BLACK NOTES AND TRANSPOSED MODES

Staying within the safety of white-note modes is more limiting when using parallel triads; a triad on 'B' will lead to a rather ugly and incongruous diminished fifth. To preserve the purer interval of a fifth, whether with a major or minor third, we need to introduce black keys and notes from outside a single mode. Think of it as 'melody-led' harmony, the top melody note determining the harmony underneath, rather than the underlying bass note determining the harmony above. The melody and harmony notes below it might still be modal, retaining the same intervals between the notes, but in transposed form.

As well as being used as chords moving in parallel, these can also be used in contrary motion. This can create a strong sense of tonal gravity with a chord of relative consonance, for example a triad, acting as a resolution and pivot to surrounding dissonant chords. Writing of this kind is reminiscent of some of the music of Walton, even of Mathias or Leighton. Here are some different permutations of a basic fanfare structure. Create your own fanfares using the techniques demonstrated here. (Ex. 7).

## Ex.7

♩ = 96 **Parallel fifths**

♩ = 96 **Pairs of fifths moving in contrary motion**

♩ = 88 **Pairs of fifths with added thirds moving in contrary motion**

♩ = 88 **Two parts, centred round a fifth moving in contrary motion**

## 6: STACKING THIRDS

A further characteristic of Walton in particular is layering stacks of thirds beneath the melody note to create seventh, even ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords. Ultimately this leads to a complete cancellation of any tonal centre. Walton did not write any original organ music, but these features are readily evident in the organ accompaniments to his choral works. In the following example we see seventh chords used in parallel and in contrary motion. Build on the previous example by adding an extra layer or two of thirds to create a march or fanfare. (Ex. 8).

♩ = 172      **Ex. 8**

5

Ped. *sfz*

These examples are but a small stylistic snapshot of music composed within the Anglican tradition over the centuries. Nevertheless, within the styles and techniques outlined, there is potential for a useful variety of short interludes, from the reflective to the more extrovert, regal even. Most of the above examples are for manuals only with some optional pedal, so working on a home keyboard or piano is equally possible.

Once immersed in the particular idioms and techniques outlined you should soon find that you become focussed into these styles. Further useful exercises in helping achieve this include: harmonising melodic phrases in thirds and sixths; in triads (major and minor); repeating these melodic phrases in transposed form, starting on various notes. The ability to transpose, and work outside single modes will help enlarge the repertoire of styles towards such composers as Walton, Leighton and Mathias. The ability to focus into, and differentiate between different styles, is indeed an accolade within any organist's skill-set, and one that greatly adds to any listener's pleasure, and overall impact within the liturgy.