

# American Choral Review

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## The Choral Works of Hamish MacCunn (1868–1916)

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*No one made his name at the Crystal Palace, St. James's Hall, or Hallé concerts:  
it was there that the established reputations were maintained or advanced.  
To attract attention, to gain a hearing from all the critics, with most of the leading lights  
of English musical life in the audience, it was necessary to have a [choral] work performed  
at one of the Leeds, Birmingham, Sheffield, or Three Choirs Festivals.<sup>1</sup>*

The career of Hamish MacCunn illustrates the vital importance of choral music, including festival commissions, to British composers. Even Mendelssohn, whom the British Isles adopted as their own, cemented his reputation with oratorios performed at choral festivals. Since the time of Handel choral music had played an integral role in the musical fabric of British life. In the nineteenth century the rise of tonic sol-fa<sup>2</sup> and the popularity of choral festivals and provincial choral societies provided opportunities for composers to write large works (such as oratorios and cantatas), as well as smaller genres (including partsongs, occasional pieces, and sacred music), to secure their professional reputations.<sup>3</sup> Composers who successfully fulfilled festival commissions for large choral compositions—like Sir Arthur Sullivan, Sir Edward Elgar, and Ralph Vaughan Williams—elevated their careers



*MacCunn by Haines (date unknown). Used by kind permission of the Royal College of Music.*

<sup>1</sup>Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Elgar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1987), 53.

<sup>2</sup>Tonic sol-fa is a music notation system using solfège syllables in place of notes to enable amateur singers to read music. Developed by John Curwen, the system sought to educate the public in terms of musical literacy and morals, and was widely popular in the British Isles and in British missionary work throughout the world. Bernarr Rainbow, "Tonic Sol-Fa," *Grove Music Online*, [www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com); Charles Edward McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-Fa Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>For more on choral music in nineteenth-century British musical culture see: Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966); E.D. Mackerness, *A Social History of English Music* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1964); Peter Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979); *The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music*, ed. by Nicholas Temperley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); *The Romantic Age, 1800-1914*, ed. by Nicholas Temperley (London: Athlone Press, 1981).

to new heights. It was not until well into the twentieth century that instrumental compositions benefited the esteem of British composers more than choral works.<sup>4</sup>

Within this choral-based music culture MacCunn emerged as a leading composer in Britain. His meteoric rise to fame on the back of his Scottish choral-orchestral works performed at London's Crystal Palace shows how successful choral compositions could launch a composer's career. After achieving early prestige with Scottish works, however, he failed to complete an 1890 Norwich Festival commission, which marked the beginning of his slow decline as a composer. Realizing the limitations of his self-created Scottish artistic persona, MacCunn began to explore new genres and styles, though commissions for occasional works generally failed to spark his musical imagination. His later choral pieces for popular music venues, such as the London Coliseum, were well-received at the time, but their imperialistic messages now seem out of date. He returned to Scottish subjects with his *Four Scottish Traditional Border Ballads* of 1913, but failed to revive his career.

MacCunn's twenty-five extant unaccompanied part-songs—all but four of which were written between 1883 and 1893<sup>5</sup>—illustrate what he could write when free from national tendencies and reflect the evolution of his musical style better than his Scottish works. Scholars and performers tend to focus on his larger Scottish compositions and have long overlooked his partsongs. The following exploration of MacCunn's choral works (particularly his *a cappella* choral compositions) provides an interesting perspective from which to view his life, career, and musical output. It also sheds light on the importance of choral music in Britain, the challenges faced by composers of the time, and the complex issues of national identity in the British Isles.

### MacCunn's Early Choral Works and the Royal College of Music

MacCunn was born into a wealthy shipowning family in Greenock, Scotland, then a major port city a few miles west of Glasgow on the River Clyde. In spite of being brought up in the Scots Presbyterian church, which emphasized monophonic psalm-singing over choral music, music making occurred regularly in



MacCunn by Lizzie Caswall Smith (date unknown).  
Used by kind permission of  
the Royal College of Music.

his home. His family, full of amateur musicians, also encouraged his love of literature, particularly Scottish ballads and texts. His earliest compositions were for instruments played by family members or himself, such as piano, cello, and voice. The voice remained one of his favorite instruments throughout his life, perhaps because many close to him sang, including

his mother, his wife, and the circle of singers he met throughout his career as composer and conductor. His earliest choral works consisted of a secular cantata (*The Moss Rose*, 1882), a sacred motet (*Psalm C*, 1883), and two partsongs ("If thou art sleeping maiden," and "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes," both from 1883). While many of MacCunn's earliest compositions suffer from limited harmonic variety, brusque harmonic shifts, and over-repetitiveness, "If thou art sleeping maiden" provides the first glimpse of his mature musical style with its smooth part-writing, minimal repetition, and fluid harmonic movement and transitions.

In 1883, at the age of fifteen, MacCunn moved to London to enter the newly opened Royal College of Music. Here, he wrote two more cantatas: the incomplete *The Changing Year* (for tenor, four-part mixed chorus, and organ; 1884) and a wholly new *The Moss Rose* (1884), his first large work performed in public at one of the regular student concerts.<sup>6</sup> *The Changing Year* marked his earliest use of motives associated with a specific idea, in this case each of the four seasons,<sup>7</sup> a technique he expanded upon in his choral-orchestral works and operas. Though both cantatas show maturity and skill, the gems of his early choral compositions are his seven partsongs composed after he moved to London. "Oh where art thou dreaming?"<sup>8</sup> (1884) illustrates an expansion of MacCunn's harmonic palette and word painting skills. Both verses of the modified strophic piece deftly move from E-flat major to C major before returning to the tonic via a deceptive cadence (m. 17) meant to indicate the absent lover.<sup>9</sup> (Musical Example 1)

<sup>4</sup>As McGuire summarized, "Elgar, for instance, composed four oratorios, a set of orchestral variations ("Enigma"), a tone poem (*Falstaff*), and two symphonies, and made a good start on a third symphony, before his death in 1934. Vaughan Williams, in contrast, completed one short oratorio and nine symphonies (eight of them entirely instrumental in character) before his death in 1958." McGuire, 212. Of Vaughan Williams's many choral-orchestral works, only *Sancta Civitas* is an oratorio.

<sup>5</sup>There are at least two known partsongs that have been lost: "I love my Jean" and "Star of descending night."

<sup>6</sup>The cantata was featured on the 10 December 1885 Royal College of Music Pupils' concert in Royal Albert Hall. RCM Pupils' Concert Programmes, Royal College of Music.

<sup>7</sup>Only three seasons exist in the manuscript, Autumn is missing. MS MacCunn 19, University of Glasgow Library Special Collections Department.

<sup>8</sup>See score in *English Romantic Partsongs*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>Jennifer Oates, *Hamish MacCunn (1868-1916): A Musical Life* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 36-37.

thee; And this fond heart is glow - ing to wel - come thee home, And the  
thee; And this fond heart is glow - ing to wel - come thee home, And the  
thee; And this fond heart is glow - ing to wel - come thee home, And the  
thee; And this fond heart is glow - ing to wel - come thee home, And the

14  
night is fast go-ing, But thou art not come, No, thou com - est not.  
night is fast go-ing, But thou art not come, No, thou com - est not.  
night is fast go-ing, But thou art not come, No, thou com - est not.  
night is fast go-ing, But thou art not come, No, thou com - est not. Tis the

**Example 1. "Oh where art thou dreaming," mm. 9-22.**

**Audio Example** (m. 9 begins at 22")<sup>10</sup>

He further developed his musical voice writing six partsongs in 1886, including five composed over a period of only three days in September. "Child of the summer," "I've been roaming," and "Love thee dearest, love thee!" are concise, two-verse works that make effective use of strophic form. "King death was a rare old fellow" and "Ye little birds that sit and sing" each have four verses, and though musically appealing, the long texts lead to excessive repetition. "Why lovely charmer" is the most interesting of this group, and is one of the earliest examples of MacCunn allowing the text to dictate the form (ABA'). It also exemplifies certain traits that later became hallmarks of his musical style: a penchant for obscuring harmonies through linear chromaticism, the use of flatted seventh chords, and adventurous harmonic progressions. Though clearly beginning in A minor, the unstable cadence that concludes the opening line of the first and third verses (mm. 3-4) returns again in slightly expanded form to close both strophes, ultimately leading to V<sup>7</sup> (mm. 11-

15). (Musical Examples 2a and 2b) The A-major middle section shifts from the playful eighth-note rhythms of the opening to a slower tempo and more stable harmonies to mark the new sentiment of the text: "In vain you strive with all your art/by turns to fire and freeze my heart." The A' section plays with the main melodies of the first verse but provides harmonic closure with iv-V progressions giving way to V<sup>7</sup>-I cadences at the end.

**Launching a Career:  
Scottish Choral-Orchestral Compositions**

Four years after arriving at the Royal College of Music, MacCunn successfully completed his degree requirements. Full of confidence from having his first overture (*Cior Mohr*) performed at a weekday concert at the Crystal Palace, he declined his degree claiming: "musically I did not esteem it, and socially I thought of it and those who conferred it with infinite and undiluted disgust," save for his main teacher, Sir C. Hubert H. Parry.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>All audio examples are taken from the following compact disc: *Selected Partsongs of Hamish MacCunn*, Queens College Vocal Ensemble, James John, conductor, March 2009 (ISBN: 5373825362). Funded by a grant from the PSC-CUNY Research Foundation.

<sup>11</sup>MacCunn to Parry, 11 Jul. 1887, quoted by kind permission of Laura Ponsonby and Kate Russell, from the private archives of Sir C. Hubert H. Parry housed in Shulbrede Priory.

**Vivace**

Why, love - ly charm - er, tell me, why, So ver - y kind, and yet so shy?

iv7     $\flat$ VII    V7/VI    VI    iiø7

**Example 2a. “Why lovely charmer?,” mm. 1-4.**

spair - And why that smile my soul sub-dues, And kin-dles up my flames a - new?

iv     $\flat$ VII    V/VI    VI    iiø7    V

**Example 2b. “Why lovely charmer?,” mm. 10-15.**

In spite of his bold and foolish departure from school, MacCunn rose to fame with three concert overtures<sup>12</sup> and four choral-orchestral works, all based on Scottish topics and texts, first performed in London in 1888 and 1889. All seven exemplify MacCunn’s love of his homeland and illustrate how the Scottish folk style, which appears alongside more Romantic elements, had been absorbed into his music via his penchant for dramatic themes with dotted rhythms, gapped scales (often harmonized

with I-IV-I), I- $\flat$ VII-I progressions,<sup>13</sup> unprepared and unexpected modulations, modally inflected harmonies, and his characteristic storm music. The choral-orchestral compositions (*Lord Ullin’s Daughter*, *Bonny Kilmeny*, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, and *The Cameronian’s Dream*) depict aspects of the texts through descriptive music and make use of unifying themes or leitmotifs, and all but *Lord Ullin’s Daughter* (which is through-composed and does not include soloists) are divided into numbers and feature at least one solo

<sup>12</sup>Hamish MacCunn, *Three Overtures*, ed. Jennifer Oates, *Recent Researches in Music of the Late-Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Century*, vol. 53 (Madison, WI: AR Editions, 2010).

<sup>13</sup>The I- $\flat$ VII-I progression reflects “double tonic,” a common trait in Scottish music in which the tonality moves down a whole step before returning to the tonic, and the bagpipe scale, which features a flattened seventh scale degree. In Scottish folk songs, both traditional and imitated, the cadential sequence I- $\flat$ VII-I is equivalent to I-V-I. Steve Sweeney-Turner, “The Pastoral Celt: Images of the Gàidheal in Lowland Scots Song” *Celtic Cultural Studies: An Interdisciplinary Online Journal*, 1 [n.d.], [www.celtic-cultural-studies.com](http://www.celtic-cultural-studies.com); David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1972), 157; John Purser, *Scotland’s Music: A History of the Traditional and Classical Music of Scotland from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Edinburgh, 1992), 296; Francis M. Collinson, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (London, 1966), 24.

voice. Around this time, he also changed his name from James to the Scots Gaelic version Hamish. He claimed to adopt his new moniker to avoid being confused with his father, James. In spite of his efforts to present his love of Scotland as patriotism rather than a calculated career move, it is clear that he was establishing a Scottish artistic persona.<sup>14</sup>

Even as MacCunn's compositional career took off, he continued to write partsongs. Many reflected his preference for strophic settings, including two dance-like works from 1888 that show a new emphasis on the subdominant and submediant: the charming, two-verse "O mistress mine" and the lively, three-verse "It was a lass." The first two verses of the latter open with a vi-I-IV-I progression and climax on a

delightful, ambiguous cadence with a seemingly "wrong" note in the soprano line (the C-natural in m. 19) intended to reflect the uncertainty of the young lovers. In the final verse, in which the couple embraces their newfound love, this hesitation disappears with a clear B-flat minor cadence in m. 78. (Musical Examples 3a and 3b) MacCunn scales back his harmonic adventurousness in a third partsong from around the same time, "There is a garden"<sup>15</sup> (1888), presumably to reflect the subtlety of the well-known Elizabethan text, which begins, "There is a garden in her face,/Where roses and white lilies blow." With the exception of a quick excursion to E-flat major as each of the strophic verses leads to the climax, the slower harmonic rhythms and largely diatonic harmonies portray the beloved's beauty and grace.

**Example 3a. "It was a lass," mm. 15-19.**

**Example 3b. "It was a lass," mm. 74-78.**

[Audio Example](#) (3a begins at 28"; 3b begins at 2'26")

<sup>14</sup>Though MacCunn never specified when he changed his name, only his manuscripts after 1885 are signed Hamish MacCunn.

<sup>15</sup>*Love Charms: A Trio of MacCunn Partsongs*, edited by Jennifer Oates (Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes Music, 2013).



## 1890 Norwich Festival, Failure, and Opera<sup>16</sup>

Whether it was youthful arrogance or indifference, at this stage in his career MacCunn had little regard for commissions: “good work may be produced under such circumstances, but it is like paying for a piece before it is painted, so to speak; it is a ‘dead horse,’ and is demoralizing to a man!”<sup>17</sup> In spite of this, he eagerly accepted a commission for a choral-orchestral work for the 1890 Norwich Festival, one of the major festivals in Britain that could have improved MacCunn’s already successful career. The resulting cantata, *Queen Hynde of Caledon*, was not finished in time.<sup>18</sup> It met with mediocre reviews when it was first performed in Glasgow in 1892 due to its emphasis on the soloists over the chorus and the operatic nature of the music (and story). By putting his artistic ideals above this commission, MacCunn made a major mistake. His failure to complete the cantata ensured this was the only festival commission he would ever receive.<sup>19</sup>

While Michael Kennedy’s quote from the opening of this article points to the importance of festival commissions and performances, it neglects to explain that opera in Britain was a dead end. MacCunn’s two operas both integrate the chorus into the drama, though his use of voices differs. The chorus in his first opera, *Jeanie Deans* (1894), was restricted to setting the scene (by singing and dancing Scottish traditional tunes and dances in Act 1, set in the rural outskirts of Edinburgh, or the refined *a cappella* madrigal sung by the women of the Queen’s court in the first scene of Act 4) or moving the action forward (as in the off-stage, but audible, riot during Act 3). *Diarmid* (1897) allowed for more use of chorus with its numerous groups: two armies of warriors, the “Immortals” or gods, and bands of hobgoblins, fairies, dwarves, and gnomes. MacCunn exploited this, writing choral music that depicted battles and conflicts,<sup>20</sup> and composed some of his most innovative music to portray the otherworldly nature of the goblins, fairies, and dwarves in the opening of the third act. While *Jeanie Deans* was a moderate success, *Diarmid*, largely due to its poor libretto, disappeared from the stage after its provincial tour.<sup>21</sup> Neither proved to boost MacCunn’s career as he had hoped.

## Popular Music and Back to the Beginning

Like many British composers of the time, MacCunn took advantage of the lucrative world of popular music. His three most successful popular compositions (all commissioned for chorus and orchestra) appeared in the opening decade of the twentieth century: *The Masque of War and Peace* for an event honoring Boer War victims (1900), *The Wreck of the Hesperus* for Oscar Stoll’s London Coliseum (1905),<sup>22</sup> and *The Pageant of Darkness and Light* for the Great Orient Exhibition (1908). The 1913 celebration of the centenary of the birth of the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone resulted in MacCunn’s *Livingstone the Pilgrim*, an effective if modest sacred cantata for SATB chorus and organ. While *The Masque of War and Peace* and *The Pageant of Darkness and Light* explore popular musical styles and exploit outdated imperialist ideals, *The Wreck of the Hesperus*—featuring elements of MacCunn’s stormy and dramatic music of his earlier choral-orchestral works and overtures—introduced him to a larger, more diverse audience, and, even with a Victorian text, remains his most performable choral-orchestral work today. Longfellow’s poem of the same name (on which the work is based)—with its tale of stormy seas swallowing up a ship—resonates with Scottish ballads and MacCunn’s own Scottish compositions in spite of its American origins.<sup>23</sup>

In MacCunn’s final years, he returned to partsongs, a genre he had neglected since 1893, and his beloved Scotland with *Four Traditional Scottish Border Ballads* (1913) (“Kinmont Willie,” “The Jolly Goshawk,” “Lamkin,” and “The Death of Parcy Reed”). All four are through-composed and move quickly through the text with declamatory music. Rapid changes of voice groupings and texture avoid monotony, mimicking how bards employed different voices in telling ballads. While some references to Scotland appear, MacCunn emphasizes the text, evoking sounds from the drama with descriptive music, such as tolling bells in “The Jolly Goshawk” and hunting horns and galloping horses in “The Death of Parcy Reed.” He also defines characters with different musical styles or elements, as in “Kinmont Willie” where diatonic music represents

<sup>16</sup>During this time, MacCunn wrote three partsongs with piano: “In the primrose time of year” (SATB, c. 1890), “Another glass before we go” (ATTBB, c. 1892), and “Shouter to Shouter” (Bar., TTBB, c. 1892). All three feature texts by William Black, a Scottish poet whom MacCunn corresponded with for a time. The odd voicings suggest these were written with specific performers in mind, but there are no details about their genesis.

<sup>17</sup>“Hamish MacCunn,” *Magazine of Music* (Mar. 1888): 55.

<sup>18</sup>MacCunn’s overture *The Ship o’ the Fiend* was performed in place of the cantata.

<sup>19</sup>Oates, pp. 109–116.

<sup>20</sup>At one point unison choral singing signifies unity among the Celts, while two four-part choruses represent the fragmented Norsemen who are subsequently defeated.

<sup>21</sup>For more on MacCunn’s operas see Oates, pp. 117–138; 147–161.

<sup>22</sup>Several British composers, including Elgar, wrote works for popular entertainment venues. For more on popular music culture in Britain, see: Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1895* (London, 1978); Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens, OH, 2004); Deborah Heckert, “Working the Crowd: Elgar, Class, and Reformulations of Popular Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in Byron Adams (ed.), *Edward Elgar and His World* (Princeton, 2007), 287–315.

<sup>23</sup>Oates, pp. 184–187.

the “straightforward, honest nature of the Scot Kinmont Willie,” and chromatic music the “untrustworthy character of the Englishmen.”<sup>24</sup> The influence of Vaughan Williams, Debussy, and Richard Strauss can be seen in the expanded modal harmonies. The most musically diverse, “The Jolly Goshawk,” tells of the illicit love of a Scottish Lord and an English Lady whose union is facilitated by a message-carrying goshawk. After taking a potion to feign her death, the Lady’s family takes her body to Scotland where she had requested to be buried. When she awakens she marries the Lord and abandons her family. MacCunn

enlivens the ballad with elements of Scottish songs to identify Scottish locales, as well as with hymn-like references to church music and sounds of a funeral.<sup>25</sup>

MacCunn reached the apex of his partsong writing in 1914, completing four final works in the genre, all for three-part women’s voices (SSA) and piano: “O my love, leave me not,” “Whither?,” “On a faded violet,” and “Night.”<sup>26</sup> “O my love, leave me not” is an arrangement of the Gaelic tune “Belach na gharraidh,”<sup>27</sup> featuring a soprano solo accompanied by women’s voices and piano. Though the four-verse tune with five

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S 1 Down-wards, and ev - er far - ther, And ev - er the brook be - side; And

S 2 Down-wards, and ev - er far - ther, And ev - er the brook be - side; And

A Down - wards, and ev - er far - ther, And ev - er the brook be - side; And

29

S 1 ev - er fresh - er mur - mur'd, And ev - er clear - er the tide. Is this the way I was

S 2 ev - er fresh - er mur - mur'd, And ev - er clear - er the tide. Is this the way I was

A ev - er fresh - er mur - mur'd, And ev - er clear - er the tide. Is this the way I was

Example 4. “Whither?,” mm. 24-45.

<sup>24</sup>Jane Mallinson, “The Choral Works of Hamish MacCunn,” Ph.D. diss., University of Glasgow, 2007, 254.

<sup>25</sup>Oates, pp. 197-202.

<sup>26</sup>A new edition of these has been recently published: *Four Songs of Love and Longing* for women’s voices and piano by Hamish MacCunn, edited by Jennifer Oates (Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes Music, 2012). Also see Oates, 209-213.

<sup>27</sup>Lucy Broadwood, who sent MacCunn a volume of Gaelic songs in 1912, may have supplied him with this song (MacCunn to Lucy Broadwood, 2 Jan. 1912, Surrey History Centre, 2185/LEB/1/264).

34

S 1 go - ing? With - er, O brook - let, say! Thou hast, with thy soft

S 2 go - ing? Whith - er, O brook - let, say! Thou hast, with thy soft

A go - ing? Whith - er, O brook - let, say! Thou hast, with thy soft

40

S 1 mur - mur, Mur - mur'd my sen - ses a - way.

S 2 mur - mur, Mur - mur'd my sen - ses a - way.

A mur - mur, Mur - mur'd my sen - ses a - way.

Reo.

**Example 4 (continued). “Whither,” mm. 24-45.**

[Audio Example](#) (m. 24 begins at 46")

refrains is highly repetitive, it is exceptionally lovely. “Whither,” a facetious setting based on Longfellow’s English translation of Wilhem Müller’s “Wohin” from *Die Schöne Müllerin*, contains some of the most inventive harmonies and voice leading of the group.<sup>28</sup> While the outer sections firmly begin in G major, B minor inflections quickly make the tonality less clear. The middle section, on the other hand, never comfortably settles in a key, touching upon seven keys in fourteen measures before moving back to G major in preparation for the final verse. (Musical Example 4)

“On a faded violet” and “Night” exemplify MacCunn’s preference for rapid harmonic shifts and exhibit his more mature, elegant technique with the influence of late Wagner, Strauss, and Debussy. The outer sections of the ternary “On a faded violet” fea-

ture straightforward harmonies, quickly moving from G minor through B-flat major (and G major in the last verse), while the center verse delays any sense of tonal stability until an E-flat minor cadence leads to a modified return of the opening. In the two-verse “Night,” MacCunn employs a three-part form, rapidly modulating from D-flat major to E-major during the first two lines of the second verse. Instead of starting the middle section with the second stanza of text (as might be expected), MacCunn allows “the balmy breath of the summer breeze” to “blow in” the formal, tonal, and textural shift. (Figure 1; Musical Example 5) The vocal lines, which are largely independent of the piano, reflect the sparkling stars and silver moon hanging in the sky. Similarly, the piano part gazes upwards with the left hand remaining rooted in the earth-bound bass clef.

<sup>28</sup>Oates, p. 209.



D-flat major	Oh! Sweet and beautiful is Night, When the silver moon, the silver moon is high, And countless stars, like clustering gems, Hang sparkling in the sky.
D-flat major to E major	While the balmy breath of the summer breeze Comes whisp'ring down the glen, And one fond voice alone is heard
E major to D-flat	Oh! Night is lovely then.

**Figure 1: Key Areas and Poetic Form in MacCunn's "Night"**

17

S 1

S 2

A

Piano

22

S 1

S 2

A

Pno.

**Example 5. "Night," mm. 17-25.**  
[Audio Example](#) (m. 17 begins at 1'00")

## Conclusion

MacCunn's career illustrates the limited avenues available to British composers. From the 1870s through the opening decades of the twentieth century, British musical life rapidly changed. MacCunn's generation was the first to benefit from the recently opened Royal College of Music and newly revamped Royal Academy of Music making studying music on the continent now optional. A provincial festival commission remained the most coveted professional accomplishment until the symphony and purely instrumental genres became more important around the turn of the century. The growth of opportunities in the provinces—including amateur choral societies, newly formed professional ensembles, and new schools of music—provided new job opportunities as well as new venues for performances. Opera remained unprofitable for British composers until Benjamin Britten. Throughout this time of change, partsongs provided a nice paycheck when published by major publishers or featured in popular journals, but these largely low-profile works firmly resided in the domestic or private musical sphere exerting little influence on a composer's career.

The dominance of MacCunn's better known Scottish compositions over his more cosmopolitan partsongs (and songs) shows how the biases of the time continue to influence music today. While the novelty of his Caledonian works established his career, critics quickly tired of this one-sided approach. Unlike English composers, for whom England could mean British and English, composers from Ireland, Scot-

land, and Wales interested in writing national music were faced with choosing to pay homage to their homeland, celebrating England, or promoting an all-inclusive, pan-British view of the Empire. Regardless of their choice, these composers were bound to alienate some portion of the British population. The more universal appeal of later generations, such as that of Elgar and Vaughan Williams, quickly eclipsed other expressions of "Britishness" in music.

MacCunn's efforts at achieving a broader appeal were largely restricted to the intimate genres of his partsongs and songs, which remained (and remain) overshadowed by his reputation as a Scottish composer. Having created his Scottish artistic persona to carve a unique niche for himself, MacCunn failed to realize the limiting effect this would have on his career, and how it would hinder his efforts in creating a more cosmopolitan musical style. Perhaps now, with the renewed interest in MacCunn and British music in general among scholars and performers, MacCunn's partsongs can be appreciated for what they are and help move him beyond his restrictive Scottish artistic persona.

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# Complete List of MacCunn's Choral Works

## Chorus with Orchestra

- Bonny Kilmeny* (cantata, James MacCunn based on James Hogg), S, T, B, SATB, 1886; Edinburgh: Paterson & Sons, [1888-9].
- Lord Ullin's Daughter* (ballad, Thomas Campbell), SATB, 1887; Novello:<sup>1</sup> [1888].
- The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (cantata, James MacCunn based on Sir Walter Scott), S, A, T, Bar, SATB, 1888; Novello: [1889].
- The Cameronian's Dream* (ballad, James Hyslop), Bar, SATB, 1889; Edinburgh: Paterson & Sons, [c.1890].
- Queen Hynde of Caledon* (cantata, James MacCunn based on James Hogg), S, S, T, Bar, SATB, 1891; Chappell, [1892].
- The Wreck of the Hesperus* (cantata, Longfellow), SATB, 1905; Novello: [1905].
- Four Scottish Traditional Border Ballads* (dramatic ballads, Francis James Child), SATB, 1913; Weekes, 1913. 1. "Kinmont Willie," 2. "The Jolly Goshawk," 3. "Lamkin," 4. "The Death of Percy Reed."

## Chorus with piano or organ

- The Moss Rose* (cantata, F.W. Krummacher), A, T, SATB, piano, 1882.
- Psalm C* (motet, King James Bible), T, SATB, organ, 1883.
- The Moss Rose* (cantata, F.W. Krummacher), S, T, B, SATB, piano, 1884.
- The Changing Year* (cantata, James MacCunn?), T, SATB, organ, c. 1884
- Psalm VII* (motet, King James Bible), T, SATB, organ, 1890; Edinburgh: Methven Simpson, [1890].
- "In the primrose time of year," (parstong, William Black), SATTB, piano, c. 1890; Augener, 1892.
- "Another glass before we go," (partsong, William Black), ATTBB, piano, c. 1892; Augener, 1892.
- "Shouter to Shouter," (partsong, William Black), Bar, TTBB, piano, c. 1892; Sheard, 1895.
- Livingstone the Pilgrim* (cantata, Rev. Sylvester Home), Speaker, S, Bar, SATB, organ, 1912; Weekes: 1913.

- "Night," (partsong, R.H. Barham), SSA, piano, 1914; Novello, 1914; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.
- "O my love, leave me not!," (partsong, traditional Gaelic), SSA, piano, 1914; Novello, 1914; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.
- "On a faded violet," (partsong, P.B. Shelley), SSA, piano, 1914; Novello, 1914; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.
- "Whither?," (partsong, Longfellow), SSA, piano, 1914; Novello, 1914; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.

## A cappella chorus (All SATB partsongs)

- "If thou art sleeping maiden," (Longfellow), 1883.
- "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes," (Shakespeare), 1883.
- "Oh where art thou dreaming," (Thomas Moore), 1884; Novello, 1887; *Musical Times* (1 Sept. 1887); *English Romantic Partsongs*, ed. by Paul Hillier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- "I've been roaming," (G. Sloane), 1886.
- "King death was a rare old fellow," (B. Cornwall), 1886.
- "Why lovely charmer," (anonymous), 1886; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.
- "Child of the summer," (anonymous), 1886; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.
- "Love thee dearest, love thee," (Thomas Moore), 1886.
- "Ye little birds that sing," (Thomas Heywood), 1886.
- "It was a lass," (Mary E. Wilkins), 1888.
- "O mistress mine," (Shakespeare), 1888.
- "There is a garden," (Robert Alison), 1888; Los Angeles: Yelton Rhodes, 2013.
- "Hark forward," (Sir Walter Scott), 1889; *Musical Times* (1 June 1889); Novello, [1889].
- "Soldier, rest!," (Sir Walter Scott), by 1893; Novello, 1893; *Musical Times*, (1 Jan. 1894).
- "I love my Jean," (Robert Burns), lost.
- "Star of descending night," (James Macpherson), lost.

<sup>1</sup>All published in London unless otherwise noted.

## Recent Books

Anne Smith. *The Performance of 16th-Century Music: Learning from the Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), x, 244 p.: illus., music.

Those who conduct research on music of the Renaissance or any historical period have typically been cautious with music theorists as reliable informants of their time. Do the surviving treatises accurately capture prevalent conceptions of music of the era, or are the theorists articulating their understanding of music as it *should* be? If scholars have been wary of this-or-that theorist's speculation about music, they have been relatively silent on what theorists have told us about how to perform the music, precious information for those who continue to present Renaissance works publically in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Anne Smith's *The Performance of 16th-Century Music: Learning from the Theorists*, which brings details from theoretical treatises to bear on the subject of Renaissance music performance, is thus a welcome contribution to the literature on performance practice of this period.

One of the world's experts on Renaissance flute and a faculty member at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (Europe's epicenter of both early music performance and research on historical performing practices), Smith is in a good position to undertake such a study. The impetus for the book comes from the author's desire to reverse a trend that she has observed of uninspiring performances of Renaissance music and to reorient conceptions of the repertory based on historical documentation that will be useful to today's practicing musicians. The book draws on an astonishingly wide range of contemporaneous music theorists to expose not only rudimentary concepts that shape Renaissance polyphony but also thought-provoking ideas that can be carried into performance. While Smith cannot possibly give performers all the keys to unlock the repertory, she has provided new sources to affirm some first principles that we should consider when approaching this music, and she navigates the topic with language that will not overbear readers from the community of early music practitioners.

The book is organized into nine short chapters. Chapters 2 and 9 provide a frame for the study, reminding the reader that the music of the sixteenth century is the last gasp of a musical culture whose written artifacts are weighted toward individual parts and counterpoint (exemplified by part-book and choirbook formats), eventually giving way to sources that demonstrate a more chord-centered score culture in the advent of *seconda prattica*. Smith uses the interior chapters to guide the reader through several

basic musical parameters along with the more elusive concept of compositional rhetoric. When examined through the writings of music theorists of the period, all of these aspects of Renaissance musical composition can provide a gateway to vibrant, expressive performances of this repertory.

The parade of musical elements begins in Chapter 3 on the topic of "Solmization." Smith reviews the six customary solfège syllables (no *si/ti* yet), their aggregation into overlapping hexachords, and the Guidonian hand as long-standing tools available to practitioners (then and now) for learning music at sight. She offers some tips for setting the syllables properly and follows with a fascinating discussion of the "qualities" of the musical syllables, an issue almost never raised in our pedagogy of the Renaissance, but one that can have significant implications in practice. Smith leans on several theorists (Martin Agricola, Heinrich Glarean, Thomas de Sancta Maria, and Heinrich Finck) who show surprising agreement that the syllables *ut* and *fa* are to be sung with a special gentleness; *re* and *sol* as rather natural ("not too mild or too clear," according to Agricola, p. 26); and *mi* and *la* as harsh (or "hard"). These syllable qualities are actionable descriptions that could be taken into the rehearsal room, and Smith suggests that a singer's awareness of the syllable qualities could also aid in tuning musical passages. What is left unaddressed by both the theorists and Smith is how exactly to produce a line that moves so quickly through the syllables that a performer could not possibly inflect each note with the stipulated quality. Perhaps what is implicit is that the syllable qualities were to be applied for moments of either repose or slow progression, in which a performer could realistically imbue the note in question with its prescribed characteristic.

Clearer instructions for Renaissance performers emerge in chapters 4 and 5 on metric hierarchy and cadences, respectively. Both chapters address problems that Smith has observed widely in early music performances. Chapter 4 is meant to correct rhythmically mechanical performances that do not show proper accentuation in the span of a measure. After some clarification on the meaning of *tactus*, Smith draws on a host of theorists (including Sancta Maria) to solidify the point that successive notes of equal value were to be treated flexibly with different length and weight. The first note is slightly longer and receives greater emphasis, while the second is de-accentuated. This prescription is not to be taken to an extreme, however, to the point that it creates *notes inégales*, an idea typically associated with Baroque music. In Chapter 5, Smith turns our attention

<sup>1</sup>There are only two short essays on music theory, for instance, in *The Performer's Guide to Renaissance Music*, 2nd edition, ed. Jeffery Kite-Powell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 331-376.

to cadences, the musical punctuation not just of Renaissance polyphony but of all musics. Citing (among others) the sixteenth century's most famous theorist Gioseffo Zarlino, Smith explains that cadences articulate the structure of compositions and in texted pieces always occur in conjunction with a rhetorical closure (e.g. the end of a verse, clause, or sentence). The author suggests that, at cadential moments, "a greater differentiation of timbre, dynamics, timing, and articulation" (p. 87) can help the performer communicate textual meanings and the sub-structures of a polyphonic composition. We also learn that the top voice of a prototypical major 6th-to-octave cadence should be sung with a "mi" quality, which is to say harshly, relative to other notes.

Chapter 6 on mode is a logical extension of the foregoing chapters on musical rudiments, but as Smith is well aware, the subject brings contentious territory among scholars. She rightfully points out that the entire topic of mode in polyphony is a thorny one, as theorists were "not only attempting to apply medieval modal theory which was largely restricted to melody to polyphony, but also to correlate this material with their (at times faulty) understanding of the recent humanist discoveries concerning antique modes" (p. 88). Although theorists clearly agree that mode was central to sixteenth-century composition, they hardly achieved a consensus on the various affects associated with the individual modes, a point confirmed by Smith's extensive appendix of theorists' explications of mode.<sup>2</sup> Guided by Zarlino, the author focuses on the tenor as a determinant of mode, and she dutifully reminds the reader that cadential centers in polyphonic works can aid in modal identification. Sancta Maria moreover warns that "it is impossible for anyone deficient in it [mode] to play without making great errors, violating the mode at every step, and wandering over mistaken byways that cause grave offense to the ear" (p. 101). The performance implications of modal recognition could have been strengthened in the chapter. How will proper modal identification with all of its acknowledged pitfalls make for better execution?

Any uncertainty in the muddy waters of mode is allayed in chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 on "The Rhetoric of Counterpoint" addresses the misperception that Renaissance polyphony and expressivity in performance are mutually exclusive. Several quick tips from theorists of the period can assist in more dramatic or "eloquent" performances (particularly of secular or vernacular repertory), including body movement, flexibility of tempi, and memorization of music. The

remainder of the chapter revisits an example from Joachim Burmeister's *Musica Poetica* (1606) in which the theorist parses Orlande de Lassus's motet *In me transierunt irae tuae* according to rhetorical "figures" of the period. Smith secures the link back to performance by suggesting that the stylistic figures are tools to move the listener and that it is the task of the performer to stitch the individual rhetorical gestures into a coherent whole. Chapter 8 breaks the flow of chapters on musical components, centering on the very practical question "What Skills Were Expected of Professional Musicians?" Here, a great dividend awaits the reader, as Smith provides valuable period descriptions of the qualities of proficient performers with emphasis on the ability to focus well beyond one's own line and hear (even improvise) counterpoint with two or more voices. Prescriptions for vibrato, proper diminutions, and vocal quality are particularly indispensable, as are Luigi Zenobi's visceral characterizations of basses and sopranos (pp. 138-40).

Smith has made important inroads on the subject of sixteenth-century performance practice by tapping into an overlooked body of evidence music theory treatises. What makes the study so refreshing is that this approach demands that each treatise with something to offer gets a fair shake. No theorist dominates the monograph, thus giving the overall sense of a level playing field with the evidence at hand. The little-known Spanish theorist Sancta Maria and others hold as much sway as the usual stalwarts like Zarlino when it comes to practical performance advice. Smith has found new territory for us to ponder as we engage with the repertory, and her book profitably transports us beyond the "voices-or-instruments" debate that dominated historical performance scholarship of last two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> *The Performance of 16th-Century Music* will be useful not only to seasoned Renaissance performers (choirs and consorts alike) and directors but also to those who program the occasional Palestrina motet and are interested in a richer understanding of how to approach and execute it. Although there will always be some ambiguity with what theorists are telling us, Smith's study assures us that their practical advice can help our modern performances of sixteenth-century music achieve the expressive musical eloquence they described.

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<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Claude V. Palisca, "Mode Ethos in the Renaissance," in *Essays in Musicology: A Tribute to Alvin Johnson*, ed. Lewis Lockwood and Edward Roesner (American Musicological Society, 1990), 126-39.

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, the emphasis given to this debate in the recent compilation of essays in *Renaissance Music*, ed. Kenneth Kreitner (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).



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