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"Lanes of Severn": Ivor Gurney, as illustrated by his war songs, 1915–1918

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The University of Arizona, 1993
"LANES OF SEVERN": IVOR GURNEY,
AS ILLUSTRATED BY HIS WAR SONGS, 1915 - 1918

by

DAVID WARREN HERENDEEN

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DEDICATION

Walt Whitman said "Why are there men and women that while they are nigh me sunlight expands my blood".

To Helen Hodam and Elizabeth Mosher:

You expanded my blood, my heart, my mind and taught me that the sweetest sound I make is when I teach.

To my wife and family:

All I cannot say in words, I say to you in song.
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ABSTRACT

Ivor Gurney was born in Gloucester on August 28, 1890; he died on December 26, 1937, age 47, in a London asylum. Though he had a relatively short life, he lived during a most dynamic time in British history; he was a part of the rebirth of British song and the trauma of World War One. These events, by dint of his experiences, are given a unique voicing through his songs, for Gurney was in no way a normal composer. He was an unbalanced genius whose turbulent life and endearing personality touched many of the central figures of British music in this period. His 300 songs and song sketches fall into roughly four periods of composition and parallel this dramatic life from schooling, to war, to mental breakdown.

This study examines his considerable song output through the investigation of his second and most intense period of composition: 1915-1918, the war years. Although the war period is nowhere near his most prolific, the songs composed during war's chaos provide a good departure point for ordered investigate; they are a microcosm and in many ways his best and most innovative work. Six songs from this period are investigated: ‘By a Bierside’, ‘The Fiddler of Dooney’, ‘In Flanders’, ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’, ‘The Scribe’, and ‘Severn Meadows’. These songs, written “in the trenches” strongly reflect Gurney’s stylistic tendencies, define his compositional importance and personal values.
The analysis for each song will begin with the circumstance in which it was composed. Gurney’s choice of text, approach to declamation, harmonic language, use of the piano, and aesthetic intent will then be related to his environment, as this significantly influenced song composition. Since he was an avid writer and also considered one of Britain’s best war poets, Gurney’s war correspondence and poetry will be used to support and clarify these analytical and aesthetic observations.
I. INTRODUCTION

Purpose Of The Study

Ivor Gurney was born in Gloucester on August 28, 1890; he died on December 26, 1937, age 47, in a London asylum. Though he had a relatively short life, he lived during a most dynamic time in British history; he was a part of the rebirth of British song and the trauma of World War One. These events, by dint of his experiences, are given a unique voicing through his songs, for Gurney was in no way a typical composer. He was an unbalanced genius whose turbulent life and endearing personality touched many of the central figures of British music in this period. His 300 songs and song sketches fall into roughly four periods of composition and parallel this dramatic life from schooling, to war, to mental breakdown.

This study examines his considerable song output through the investigation of his second and most intense period of composition: the war years, 1915-1918. Although the war period is nowhere near his most prolific, the songs composed during war’s chaos provide a good departure point for ordered investigation; they are a microcosm and in many ways his best and most innovative work. Six songs from this period will be examined: ‘By a Bierside’, ‘The Fiddler of Dooney’, ‘In Flanders’, ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’, ‘The Scribe’, and ‘Severn Meadows’. These songs, written “in the trenches” strongly reflect Gurney’s stylistic tendencies, define his compositional importance and personal values.
The analysis for each song will begin with the circumstance in which it was composed. Gurney’s choice of text, approach to declamation, harmonic language, use of the piano, and aesthetic intent will then be related to his environment, as this significantly influenced song composition. Since he was an avid writer and also considered one of Britain’s best war poets, Gurney’s war correspondence and poetry will be used to support and clarify these analytical and aesthetic observations.

Need For The Study

Ivor Gurney was a remarkable composer in the era popularly referred to as the “English musical renaissance”. This was a particularly rich period for British music, notable for the compositions of such enduring figures as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, Michael Head, and Peter Warlock. In contrast, Gurney enjoys no such place in standard repertoire, except for perhaps one song from his first period -- ‘Sleep’. This is ironic, for he was intensely championed and respected by his contemporaries. Despite some renewed interest in his works (1990 was the centennial of his birth) his fragile, manic personality and large song output have proved cumbersome to broad traditional evaluations of his worth. The efforts of Michael Hurd, Stephen Banfield, and Michael Pilkington, which have recently done much to further the reputation of Gurney, are still considerably stifled by his nonconformity, a quality which evoked hasty commentary, exemplified by
this quote from Frank Howes' book *The English Musical Renaissance*:

Gurney's songs...are not contemporary in idiom: they are diatonic, limpid, rarely touched by modal influence, backward-rather than forward-looking, individually exquisite, but hardly significant historically. ¹

The preceding criticism is rather short sighted. It is somewhat correct if discussing some songs in Gurney's third period, but not all of them are so transparent. The comment ignores Gurney's first period "Elizas" and the writer seems unaware of his amazing second period songs created while isolated in the trenches of World War One. It is difficult to articulate Gurney's place in music within one single sentence.

Gurney possessed an uncanny ability to function in contrary motion to any established norm. He could not hold a job, nor could he function as a normal student. Likewise, his music fits uneasily into traditional expectations. His current place in the standard repertoire, or rather lack thereof, seems to support this. The scope of this study, the war years, uses this contrary tendency as a point of departure. World War One, disruptive to society, seemed to focus Gurney's talent and unstable personality. In the trenches he voiced images of England from the heightened perspective of a soldier:

Only the wanderer
Knows England's graces,
Or can anew see clear
Familiar faces.

And who loves Joy as he
That dwells in shadows?
Do not forget me quite,
O Severn Meadows.2

The preceding poem is 'Severn Meadows' written by Gurney in late March 1917; it is the only poem of his own creation which he set to music. It is a key to the function of poetry and music in his life and the value he placed on his home of Gloucester. This and his other war songs, properly evaluated, reveal compositional inclinations which relate as much to those composers reconsidering traditional song settings as they do to the traditional Germanic approach which he inherited. Gurney wrote his songs not as experiments in music, but as a response, in the most Romantic terms, to war. This study intends to be a new approach, and an additional step, towards raising Gurney's high quality and varied selection of songs to their deserved level.

---

II. PERIODS OF DEVELOPMENT

Though there was much chaos in Gurney’s life, there is a great deal of correspondence which helps to delineate influences and periods of artistic development. The difficulty, therefore, is not in the tracking of his output, but in deciding what aspect of his music defines the parameters of a compositional period. In this sense, dividing Gurney’s songs into periods is rather elusive.

The quality of Gurney’s song compositions varied greatly, from song to song, throughout his entire career. His compositions lack a sense of chronological improvement, in either technique or maturity, which are traditional tools with which to divide periods. With Gurney, one would be hard pressed to relate stylistically the highly-touted and original ‘Sleep’ (1912) with the traditional ballad setting of ‘Edward’ (1913). Rather, Gurney wrote his songs as a response to both text and his environment, all filtered through a personality uncomfortable with the common expectations of society or music theory. In Gurney’s case, it is more efficient to relate his compositions to the locale in which he lived and view his music as a reaction to this environment. The resulting four periods are:

1st period - 1911 to 1914, schooling at the Royal College of Music
2nd period - 1915 to 1918, the war years
3rd period - 1918 to 1922, Gloucestershire and a return to the R.C.M.
4th period - 1922 to 1937, the asylum years.
1st Period (1911 - 1914)

The 21 year old Gurney received a scholarship to the Royal College of Music (R.C.M.) located in London. This is an extremely important period in every way, except, ironically, in terms of compositional influences. Although in music school as a composition scholar, this period is not one of very many notable works. It is, though, his first extended period away from his beloved Gloucester and a time when he met many of the people who would champion his talent during his life and after his death.

Gurney met Marion Scott at the R.C.M. It was she who saved and collected his correspondence. She was his greatest advocate and informally, during the war years, managed the collection of his poems and songs for him. This role was eventually formalized since Gurney was never interested in, or able to keep his own affairs in order. Her first impression:

...what struck me more was the look of latent force in him, the fine head with its profusion of light brown hair (not too well brushed!) and the eyes, behind their spectacles, were of the mixed coloring – in Gurney’s case hazel, grey, green and agate – which Erasmus once said was regarded by the English as denoting genius. ‘This,’ I said to myself, ‘must be the new composition scholar from Gloucester whom they call Schubert.’^3

---

Marion Scott's importance cannot be overstated. The extensive collection of Gurney's manuscript, letters, poetry, are a result of her forethought and her devotion to his talent.

Gurney's composition teacher was Sir Eugene Stanford; how big an influence he was, is debatable. Dr. Ralph Vaughan Williams' contribution to the *Music and Letters* symposium on Gurney, attributes a great deal to the compositional heritage that Stanford offered:

...he (Gurney) inherits the great tradition from his master Stanford, who in his turn inherited from Brahms as he from Schubert and then through Beethoven, Haydn, C.P.E. Bach, J.S. Bach, Schutz and Palestrina back to the unknown beginnings of music.4

An alternate view comes from Stanford himself, via Gurney's schoolmate Herbert Howells: "But Stanford himself, speaking to me of Gurney, said 'Potentially he is the most gifted man who ever came into my care. But he was the least 'teachable'.".5 "Unteachable" in this context should read contrary to the School's established approach. In the second decade of the twentieth century this cannot be considered entirely bad. A point illustrated by this comparative quote from the diary of Benjamin Britten. Britten's


genius was considerably more stable, yet similarly uncomfortable with the
status quo within the Royal College of Music:

Hair cut - & then lunch with William Walton at Sloane
Square. He is charming, but I feel always the school
relationship with him - he is obviously the head perfect
of English music, whereas I'm the promising young new boy.
Soon he'll leave & return a member of the staff - [Vaughan]
Williams being of course the Headmaster....Anyhow apart
from a few slight reprimands (as to musical opinions) I
am patronised in a very friendly manner.6

If anything could be labeled a compositional influence on Gurney in this
first period, it would be the cultural environment of London, a drastic change
from Gloucester. Excerpts from letters to Marion Scott reveal her early
cultural nurturing and how the city sparked Gurney's critical perspective:

...did you hear Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony? I crawled
out of bed to hear it, and afterwards went back for three
days more -- but it was worth it.7

Dear Miss Scott

Thank you very much indeed for the concert ticket,
which of course I used, and which gave me a great deal
of enjoyment. Do you know they are doing the Trio we
all have to fag through - Beethoven's String Trio in C mi
- next time? I enjoyed all I heard save the Scherzo

6 Benjamin Britten, qtd in Donald Mitchell. Britten and Auden in the

7 Ivor.Gurney, Collected Letters. 2.
and Slow Mov: of the Brahms.

Again thank you very much. With kind regards
Yours sincerely,
Ivor Gurney

...Have you seen Saint-Saens’ new work? If not, forbear; there is no fool like an old fool. It should be entitled ‘Reminiscences of the Old Apprentices -- Mendelssohn and Gounod’ dedicated by the composer to the designer of the Alpert Memorial.

His own compositions reflect the academic environment; his letters of the period often refer to quartets or sonatas -- the studies of a typical student. There are two notable songs from this period in a traditional, narrative ballad style: ‘Edward’ and ‘The Twa Corbies’. These songs are powerful and challenging works. They certainly deserve performance.

The most significant compositions of this period are Gurney’s five Elizabethan songs. “The Elizas”, as he called them, were progressive and a surprise to even Gurney., as seen in this letter to his best friend F. W. Harvey.

Dear Willy
It’s going, Willy. It’s going. Gradually the cloud passes and Beauty is a present thing, not merely an

---

8 Gurney, *Collected Letters*, 1.

abstraction poets feign to honor.
Willy, Willy. I have done 5 of the most delightful and
beautiful songs you ever cast your beaming eyes
upon. They are all Elizabethan - the words - and
blister my kidneys, bisurate my magnesia if the
music is not as English, as joyful, as tender as any
lyric of that noble host. Technique all right, and as
for word setting - models. 'Orpheus', 'Tears', 'Under
the Greenwood Tree', 'Sleep' and 'Spring'. How did
such an undigested clod as I make them? That, Willy,
I cannot say. But there they are - 'Five Songs' for
Mezzo Soprano - 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, a harp, and
two bassoons.10

Michael Hurd, Gurney's biographer, reinforces the group's originality:

Moreover, there are no obvious 'models' for the
'Elizas'. John Ireland was only just emerging as a
songwriter, and Peter Warlock had not begun his
difficult career. By comparison, Parry, Stanford,
and even Vaughan Williams are more formal and more
obviously beholden to classical tradition.11

It is notable that 'Sleep', the song for which Gurney is best known, is
one of the five Elizabethan songs. The "Elizas" were exceptional, with them
Gurney achieved his success in song and in the creation of an "English"
sound.

These songs are distinct because of Gurney's lucid response to the
Elizabethan poetry. He also found, in his piano reduction of the chamber

10 Gurney, Collected Letters.10.

11 Michael Hurd, The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney. (Oxford: Oxford University
orchestra setting, a supportive approach to accompaniment, yet free and responsive to shifts in mood. No other works in any of his periods equal their originality. The orchestral flavor to his piano accompaniment as seen in the “Elizas” is even more developed in the war songs. In the war, forced to compose away from the piano, an orchestral timbre seemed to remain in his ear as his source of accompanimental color.

2nd Period (1915 - 1918)

Gurney wanted to enlist to serve in World War One; for him the answer to his country’s call was also an odd search for mental stability.

...It is a better way to die; with these men, in such a cause: than the end which seemed so near me and was so desirable only just over two years ago. And if I escape, well there will be memories for old age; not all pleasant, but none so unpleasant as those which would have come had I refused the call.12

War’s environment seemed to stabilized his senses, or it could be said, his unique senses were stabilized by the war and it gave him a purpose. As a result, this period contains Gurney’s most compelling expressions. The few songs from this period that were written in the trenches: ‘Even Such Is Time’, ‘In Flanders’, ‘Severn Meadows’, ‘By A Bierside’, ‘The Fiddler of Dooney’, are a

testament to Gurney's adaptability and artistic drive. Focus upon the resulting songs provides a clear view of the powerful stylistic and textual inventions which appeared when he was stripped of all but poetry, purpose, and imagination.

In the war, Gurney touched again the freshness which he expressed through the 'Elizas' of his first period. Gone though, is the innocent wash of pianistic sound which supported those five first-period songs. The accompaniment instead became a connecting, autonomous presence of dense orchestral texture. Gone too, was his innocence because Gurney saw considerable conflict and death on the front lines in France. He was wounded, shot in the arm April 1917, and after being hospitalized for six weeks, he was sent back to the front only to be gassed during an assault. He was then sent to convalesce in Scotland for the rest of the war.

3rd Period (1919 - 1922)

With the war behind him, two collections of poems published (Severn and Somme, War Embers), acceptance as a composer, and a resumption of study at the Royal College of Music, Gurney seemed to have everything he ever wanted. It is in this short, three-year period when most of his songs were composed.

Ralph Vaughan Williams was Gurney's composition teacher at the
It would seem by looking at the music of this period that Gurney was no more influenced by Vaughan Williams, compositionally, than when he studied with his former teacher, Stanford. Gurney's approach to composition, though calmed, was still lacked discipline. What he did gain was a notable and generous supporter who possessed a credibility within the musical world which helped prevent Gurney’s fall into obscurity after his death.

In this period Gurney was still influenced by the poems of the “Georgian” movement, which he set during the war; this will be discussed in more detail later in this study. Notably, this movement’s themes also became the poetic foundation for many of the period’s other composers in the years after the war. They drew upon the living, lyric poets of the era like Robert Graves, Frank Ledwidge, Walter de la Mare, John Masefield and more.

Gurney depended on their poems form, pace, and timbre to guide his song’s compositional structure. The songs of his third period lacked the forced urgency and originality seen in the vocal line and piano of his previous period. This difference between period styles is too radical to be accidental. The melodies of Gurney’s third period journey lyrically over a rarely broken piano accompaniment. In this way, his songs seemed to mirror his freedom from the confines of the trenches and his return to the lanes of the Severn river. Herbert Howells was a witness:

I have walked miles of Gloucestershire ways, with
him singing aloud phrases that would go into ‘the next song’. So many of his melodic lines were born of his walking...\(^\text{13}\)

With this return to normalcy, his songs also became less distinguishable from those composed by others and sharply contrast with his more pressing war expressions.

4th Period (1922 -1937)

Gurney tried to fit in and tried to hold down a few jobs: church organist, cinema pianist, tax clerk; but he could not function in the simplest social situations. Increasing mental decay brought him back to Gloucester to live with his family. He spoke of suicide and was eventually committed to Barnwood House for the insane in September 1922:

In paranoid schizophrenia there tends to be better preservation of personality and of intellectual functioning...This probably explains why Gurney was able to continue writing poetry and to compose music of some quality, not only during the incipient stages of his illness but even after it had become overt.\(^\text{14}\)

There were almost fifty songs written in the year 1925, all, as Hurd puts it, “useless”. He continues: “Though spun from ideas that are coherent and interesting in themselves, they are rambling and diffuse and stubbornly

\(^\text{13}\) Herbert Howells, 15.

incapable of logical connection.”

There is an observable example of his asylum work in ‘The Trumpet’, the last song in his Edward Thomas cycle Lights Out. Lights Out is a grouping of songs written mostly between 1918 and 1922, Gurney’s most prolific compositional period. It was, though, incomplete; it needed an “ender” and a new song was composed for this purpose. ‘The Trumpet’ according to Hurd “seems to have been wrung out of him in 1925 -- probably at her [Marion Scott’s] suggestion,...”16. The cycle offers the only chance to view a published asylum song; alongside the cycle’s earlier composed selections, it provides an interesting opportunity for comparison.17

Though the songs are not published, their existence is nonetheless a fact and testimony to the tragedy of Ivor Gurney’s life. Once again, Gurney’s situation and location are reflected in his songs and his poetry:

In God’s Name
In God’s Name to have Mercy
And to be granted death
Is the most of desire now
Of the giving up of breath

And quite incredible
Madness in pain forgotten

15 Michael Hurd, 206.

16 Michael Hurd, 160.

17 Hurd, 160.
Only, only to die out
Till all things are nothing

Crimes are surely paid for
By a death’s paying
Nothing to be afraid, for
Death is all denying. 18

Gloucester: “A City in the Soul”

The natural beauty surrounding Gloucester, the city of his youth, is the subject of many of Gurney’s most powerful songs and poems; it is also the psychological haven for Gurney throughout his life. In his song text and poetry, Gloucester is a metaphor for all that is good, beautiful, and healing as Gurney journeyed through life in crowded London, the trenches of World War One, or the asylums. The years of Gurney’s youth in Gloucester and before his entrance into the Royal College of Music merit comment because of this strong presence.

The healing powers of the Gloucester countryside were a fact to Gurney. How much is seen in letters to Marion Scott written after Gurney experienced a nervous breakdown in London. His cure was the hill named Framilode:

... Me also behold. A very little work for me. After four days I went to see Dr. Harper, who gave me sealed orders for Homeward Bound (What writing!). I have been here a week. And oh! what a difference!

18 Ivor.Gurney, Collected Letters 543.
And oh! Framilode on good behavior!\textsuperscript{19}

And further upon his return to London:

Well, I had a pretty bad time of it for the first six weeks, and then an increasingly better time of it; and I am still on the mend, thank Goodness. As for Framilode, who could do justice to it?\textsuperscript{20}

The making of Gloucester into this emotional haven had much to do with Gurney’s passion with its natural beauty; it did not have very much to do with his family. The relations between Ivor and his family were distant. Hurd uses the death of Gurney’s father to illustrate this:

If indeed he felt deeply about the matter, he left no account either in poem or letter. Even in the asylum writings, tracing and retracing his life and pain, he made no mention of his family. It is as if life with them did not exist for him.\textsuperscript{21}

Instead, Gurney received his support and nurturing from Gloucester personalities; along with the countryside, they became his alternate family. Certain people: Alfred Cheesman, Emily and Margaret Hunt, Herbert Howells and F. W.(Will) Harvey, are notable, early connections to the music and poetry which blossomed in the later years; each are a thread of the Gloucester

\textsuperscript{19} Gurney, \textit{Collected}. 4.  
\textsuperscript{20} Gurney, \textit{Collected}. 6.  
\textsuperscript{21} Hurd, 133.
fabric in which Gurney wrapped and protected himself.

In the Rev. Cheesman and the Hunt sisters we see the nurturing by adults he needed as a young man. The Revd. Alfred Cheesman was an early and truly pivotal supporter of the young Ivor and the first in a long line of champions; their friendship grew in the years 1905-1911. Cheesman gave Gurney a love of literature and poetry. He coached Gurney in preparation for the university entrance exams and took him to the tests. Upon Gurney’s acceptance into the R.C.M., Cheesman found funds which doubled his scholarship. This devotion is matched only by Marion Scott’s.

Emily and Margaret Hunt were to Gurney’s love of music as Cheesman was to literature. The sisters were musicians and former music teachers. By them he was befriended and mothered, gaining the gentle inspiration to create music and song.

It was the younger sister, Margaret, delicate of health and always fragile, who became Gurney’s particular confidante... She breathed encouragement as he poured out his dreams. He wrote music for her and together they played and sang it.\textsuperscript{22}

Will Harvey and Herbert Howells were boyhood friends of Gurney. Poet and musician respectively, their association with Gurney spanned nearly his entire life. Their love of nature and of Gloucester were identical to Gurney’s

\textsuperscript{22} Hurd, 17.
own, but not nearly as manic. The two were also Gloucester connections to the two pivotal experiences in Gurney’s life: service in World War One and study at the Royal College of Music.

Harvey served in the same Gloucester company as Gurney during World War One. He was captured while on patrol and taken prisoner; Gurney thought he was dead. This incident inspired two of Gurney’s most beautiful songs:

> The thing that fills my mind most though is, that Willy Harvey, my best friend, went out on patrol a week ago, and never came back. It does not make much difference: for two years I have had only the most fleeting glimpses of him, but we were firm enough in friendship, and I do not look ever for a closer bond...²³

At the R.C.M., Howells, who didn’t serve in the war, was instrumental in introducing Gurney’s war compositions into performance circles. Gurney’s many letters to Howells during the war are invaluable when discussing his songs. He was a trusted friend and more traditionally inclined in actions and musical taste. Gurney took his compositional advice to heart and Howell’s reactions to his songs are helpful when gauging their originality and innovation.

The Gloucester which existed as Gurney’s purest symbol of good was a composite image. It was a mixture of nurturing personalities, old friends,

²³ Ivor Gurney, Collected Letters 137.
hills, and the lanes of the Severn river. He considered this facet of England as sacred as he held music and carried it as a constant in his life. Even in his asylum writings:

On A Memory

There was a boy, his earlier sins were past,
Walked all one March into a Joy at last,
Music waking in him, Music outwelling
From the good soil, That Western land, fulfilling
All hopes of the mind, all spirit's deep desire.
There were continual tending of the fire
Which is to God most dear...  

23 Ivor Gurney, Collected Letters 137.
III. Vocal Music’s Response to the “Georgians”

Gurney’s love for the Gloucester countryside goes beyond simple personal expression; it typifies an entire movement when it is viewed in relation to the Georgian poets and the song settings of their texts. In this context, Gurney’s contribution to British song is more easily appreciated.

Though not on the cutting edge of the era’s vocal music innovation, the early 1900s mark the British composer’s withdrawal from its two models of vocal expression: the sentimental, popular Victorian Ballad and the dominant, in respect to art song, German lieder. Though song expression was still tethered to the traditional voice and piano combination, the powerful British literary tradition, exemplified by the Elizabethans, inspired many notable composers. Parry, Stanford, Vaughan Williams, Ireland, Butterworth, Quilter, Warlock and, of course, Gurney all possessed flexible, individual styles sensitive to the English language. Coupled with a superior English text, they reacquainted the British ear to an equally sophisticated melodic quality relatively silent since the lute songs of Dowland or the airs of Purcell.

The vocal music composed after World War One responded deeply to just such a literary movement – that of the contemporary “Georgian” poets, particularly when their subject was the British countryside. The post-war composer united music and words to evoke direct images of nature. These images of home, in turn, acted as the departure point, in simile or metaphor, for deeper artistic messages:
The first world war... held the door open for composers to step through to a final phase in which the expression of Romantic states of mind was achieved through the images of nature and identification with national traditions of folksong and poetry. 25

The Georgian movement, named after the current monarch George V, began late in the year 1912. Initially, the term was a general classification for the period’s poetry, but it eventually came to represent poetry expressing “a retreat to the country and the fantasy world of childhood” 26.

Gurney’s place in this period is particularly important since he was both a composer and a “Georgian” poet. His ability in both these disciplines was considered quite notable among his peers. Indeed, the symposium of articles in the January 1938 Music and Letters gave equal status to his poetic gift:

> I have known composers with a fine literary sense and poets and who loved music but could neither compose or play. I have known no man, save Gurney, who had the double creative gift that Rosetti had in his two arts. 27

Yet it wasn’t his poetic ability alone which set Gurney apart from the other composers of this period. His war songs themselves were prophetic. He preceded the post-World War One compositional trend of setting Georgian


26 Banfield, 208.

texts by nearly a decade and, as Herbert Howells relates it, he even preceded the poets' own recognition of their common themes:

Before the 'Georgians' got together in 1912 he had already found out their settable verse. His very finest songs are not only settings of their poems, but they form the subtlest existing musical commentary upon them.28.

His sensitivity to pastoral text, with its inherent nationalism, and his charged artistic drive were channeled by the war background and produced intense song settings, literally, in the trenches. These war songs amplify both his uniqueness and that of the Georgian subject matter. In them, he ranked the expression of nature and its beauty over a traditional approach to song composition: "What the artist needs is not so much technique, as a greater appreciation of beauty so generally overlooked."29

His war compositions are a resounding expansion of pastoral subjects set in Romantic textures. Since his post-war settings of the Georgian's were a continuation of these themes, his influence and relationship to the late, albeit important, onset of British song's post-war Romanticism is significant.

Even after the setting of the Georgians was common, Gurney was still considered the quintessential Georgian composer of his time and a notable

28 Howells, 12.

29 Gurney, Collected Letters 171.
contributor to English song. This is at odds with his relative obscurity today. Herbert Howells, in associating Gurney’s worth with the musical response to Georgian poetry, inadvertently touches on the principle cause of his devaluation in this 1938 tribute to Gurney in *Music and Letters*:

> His music is a revealing light upon the Georgians - and it is this and the intimate relationship with their work, that will help to determine the place of Gurney in the development of English song.\(^{30}\)

Howells seems naive to history’s capriciousness when speaking of a musical era in which, he himself was involved. It all must have seemed more enduring at the time. Yet, this post-World War One song period was part of the piano and voice combination soon to be discarded for more progressive, often larger, combinations of instruments and voice. In this atmosphere, vocal music was broken down and lightened, reworked and revitalized; culminating in Benjamin Britten’s progressive, yet embracing unification of British language, melody, and affections. English music in Benjamin Britten’s hands, was no longer an import, but a twentieth-century influence – quite an achievement in just over three decades. Though Gurney was a spirited part of British song’s rapid rise in quality, the brightness of his efforts dim within the full historical perspective. Adding to this was Gurney’s short and tumultuous life. Unlike

\(^{30}\) Howells, 12.
Vaughan Williams, whose development spanned this rebirth of British song, Gurney’s compositional life was short. The extremes of his compositional productivity were 1907 to 1925, from his most youthful songs to his “useless” compositions in the asylum. His hundreds of songs and poems were created within only an eighteen-year period.
IV. THE WAR SONGS

Analysis of Gurney's war songs gives further definition to a very concentrated compositional life. The war period 1915-1918 is Gurney's most dramatic personally and most original compositionally. It is within this period that his love for the Gloucester countryside in his settings of the contemporary Georgian poets is expressed with an urgency not seen in any of his other periods. These settings, composed in a situation which stifled other composers, established him, in the eyes of his contemporaries, as the lyric voice of the last poetic movement of British Romanticism. Yet these songs, because of Gurney's response to his compositional scenario, also possess qualities which shake traditional approach to song. The six songs analyzed in this study illustrate the variety of forces working on Gurney which compelled him to write what he did, the way he did.

Two Songs of the Severn

None of Gurney's war songs are more personal or as entwined than 'In Flanders', poem by F.W. Harvey, and 'Severn Meadows'. The binding element in each song is the natural surroundings of Gloucester. Gurney's recollection of home in these songs is heightened because of his friendship with F.W. Harvey, their common background, and their war experiences. Each song clearly, though very differently, expresses the images of home and purpose held by a young soldier:
After all my friend, it is better to live a grey life in mud and danger, so long as one uses it - as I trust I am doing now - as a means to an end. Someday all this experience may be crystallized and glorified in me; and men shall learn by chance fragments in a string quartett or a symphony, what thoughts haunted the minds of men who watched the darkness grimly in desolate places. Who learnt by the denial how full and wide a thing Joy may be, forming dreams of noble lives when nothing noble but their own nobility (and that seemed tiny and of little worth) was to be seen. Who kept ever the memory of their home and friends to strengthen them, and walk in pleasant places in faithful dreams.31

In Flanders

Poet: F.W. Harvey
Publisher: Oxford University Press
From: A Fourth Volume of Ten Songs (out of print)

Range: \[p^zr\]

Date: January 11, 1917

Place of composition: Crucifix Corner, Theipval

First Lines:
I'm home sick for my hills again
My hills again

31 Gurney, Collected Letters 171.
The circumstances which surrounded the creation of 'In Flanders' are dramatic and poignant. The song's text was written by Gurney's boyhood friend F.W. Harvey who, at the time of the song's composition, was thought to be dead -- killed in action. The loss of his friend was a huge blow to Gurney's heretofore remarkable endurance of war's trials. He expressed his remorse first in a poem:

TO HIS LOVE

He's gone, and all our plans
Are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswold
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick
Is not as you
Knew it, on Severn river
Under the blue
Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now...
But still he died
Nobly, so cover him over
With violets of pride
Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers -
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.32

32 Gurney, Collected Letters 397.
Gurney then set Harvey’s poem to music. The creation of ‘In Flanders’ is not only a response to his personal loss, but also a chance to speak as a man “who watched the darkness grimly in desolate places...”.

‘In Flanders’ is the quintessential setting of a lyric Georgian poem. The text, loaded with strong visual images of nature, are supported by vocal and piano lines which are equally image-evoking. With these tools, Gurney creates a topographical song which depicts, literally, the contours of Cotswold and Malvern -- the hills of Gloucester:

It pleases me that you are pleased with my latest output. Tell Herbert that the Malverns in “Flanders” are the Malverns. As I stand off from the song, the hills swim in sunlight like that, to the plucking of harps and a sustained sound of wood and strings. And somehow the thing does seem to hang together, n’est ce pas?33

This short excerpt, from a letter to Marian Scott, is quite revealing. Isolated and without a piano, it seems that the background he heard while composing his songs was that of an orchestra. This orchestral flavor, which translated so well to piano in the “Elizas”, is mentioned in other war letters, particularly those pertaining to ‘By a Bierside’, his first war song.

The letter also shows that he had no preconceived framework to bind his setting; indeed, he seemed surprised that it does “hang together” -- but they do. They “hang together” because of Gurney’s very accurate musical

33 Gurney, Collected Letters. 197.
description of his home’s natural beauty in a quasi-rondo form. The vocal line and emotional statement of “I’m homesick for my hills again” is expanded into the long, lyric and contoured phrase about the hills, Cotswold and Malvern. This is the primary theme of the song and its return, in variation, in either the voice or the piano, it alternates with wholly new material. Gurney uses a variety of textures when introducing new material. He uses a touch of impressionism to depict the clouds royal movement with open chords in the Dorian mode. (Ex. 1)

Ex. 1

When the clouds mingle with “jagged Malvern” he abruptly, yet not unpleasantly, switches the mode and closes the chords.

Gurney even employs text painting; the music describing the lowlands possesses the lowest tessitura and the warmest sound, it is also placed exactly in the middle of the song. (Ex. 2)
In Harvey's poem, the hills are the natural figures against which the sky and countryside are related and they are the catalyst for the poet's emotional outburst. Gurney reinforces this in his setting. The melodic shape and spirit used in the setting of "blue high blade of Cotwold lies" (Ex. 3a) is also used to express the peaks of the poet's cry "I'm homesick" (Ex. 3b).
Both phrases climax on the ii$^7$ chord of the c minor home key.

Throughout the song the ii$^7$/c appears at meaningful moments, it is obvious that it meant something to Gurney. Not only is it the climatic chord which underscores the important emotion "homesick" and natural beauty "Blue High Blade of Cotswold", but it appears significantly in the early fragile moments of the song. The ii$^7$ chord appears immediately before the first line "I'm homesick for my hills again" and the vocal line itself outlines the ii$^7$/c chord.

Ex. 4

In 'In Flanders" Gurney uses the ii$^7$/c chord as a restless sonority which underscores the memory of Gloucester when it is mentioned in the text. This particular chord seemed to remain with Gurney as a symbol of Gloucester and appears in the same way in other war songs. When encountered in this function, the ii$^7$ will be labeled the "Gloucester" chord.
Severn Meadows

Poet: Ivor Gurney

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Source: Fifth Volume of Ten Songs

Range: 4

Date: March, 1917

Place of Composition: Caulincourt

Text:

Only the wanderer
Knows England's graces,
Or can anew see clear
Familiar faces.

And who loves
Joy as he that dwells in shadows?
Do not forget me quite
O Severn meadows.

'Severn Meadows' is unique for several reasons: it is the only song for
which Gurney wrote both the lyrics and music, the two page song seems
uncommonly short and rather delicate when compared to the two war songs
which preceded it ('In Flanders' and 'By a Bierside') -- and it lacks the strong
visual images which are central to the poetry Gurney usually sets. All these
aspects of the song indicate an extraordinary composition within a period that
is itself extraordinary.

England, specifically the meadows along the Severn river, is again the
central theme for Gurney. The poem (which he labeled merely as ‘Song’),
was first seen in a letter to Marion Scott written within a week of his sending
her the manuscript of ‘In Flanders’. The loss of F.W. Harvey was certainly on
his mind and it is likely one of the “familiar faces” mentioned in the poem is
that of the friend he thought was dead.

As always with Gurney, the text rules the musical setting. The song
revolves around the poetic images of wandering, distance, home, and friends.
Immediately, Gurney evokes the memory of home by sounding its signature
Gloucester (ii7) chord in measure 1 of the piano, he uses it again in measure
12. As he did in ‘In Flanders’ (see Ex. 4), the initial vocal line, the song’s
principle melodic figure, uses the Gloucester chord as its foundation. If the
initial vocal lines of each song are compared, a connection between the songs
is becomes apparent, as does Gurney’s use of the ii7 as a symbolic and motivic
tool. (Ex. 5).

Ex. 5

After the initial chord, the voice and piano set off, each in their ownway,
in search of a home, in the tonal sense, in D Major. The walking tempo of
the piano line, is quite different from the sustained intensity of the vocal line; they are contrary, yet interdependent. (See example 5)

Both voice and piano touch briefly on the home tonality of D Major in measure 13, on the word "Joy". Yet, the wandering never seems to end until measures 21 - 24, on the final line "O Severn meadows". Here the vocal line outlines the home key of D Major over the piano's sustained dominant to tonic bass line. (Ex. 6)

Ex. 6

The piano finishes the piece with an archetypical ascent towards heaven, not unlike the ascending figure he uses to end 'In Flanders'. The final cadence, seen above, is deceptive, vi\(^7\)/c in its second inversion. The journey home, it seems, was an illusion.

'Severn Meadows' is an artful miniature, loaded with symbolism and
meaning. Yet the song itself does not contain the information needed to achieve its full emotional potential. Through 'In Flanders', Gurney and Harvey voiced a mutual longing. In 'Severn Meadows', without Harvey, he remained emotionally and thematically attached, and composed what is essentially an epilogue to that first collaboration. In support of this, the two songs should be performed together. Doing so supplies the needed background that turns the wistful mood of a first hearing into a darker experience.
The War Style

Gurney's war songs are quite different from the songs of his other three periods. These differences evolved during his isolation in the trenches. Without a piano, a more organic and purposeful musical expression emerged from Gurney's mind. Once out of the trenches and the war atmosphere, the urgency of Gurney's war songs is not seen again.

This war style is most easily seen in a song's texture, propulsion, and use of piano, as well as Gurney's obvious motivation to compose and urgent response to the poetry. Though he liked the result of his new style of composition, Gurney was not totally isolated from the commentary of his friends (Scott and Howells), nor uninfluenced by it. They, it will be shown, were uncomfortable with his new approach and sound. Scott and Howells had legitimate concerns, but Gurney also showed his genius; he composed both successfully and unsuccessfully in this style. An analysis of 'By a Bierside' and one of 'The Scribe' illustrate these extremes.

By a Bierside

Poet: John Masefield

Publisher: Oxford University Press

From: Ivor Gurney: A Fifth Volume of Ten Songs

Range:
Date: August, 1916

Place of Composition: France

First Lines:35

This is a sacred city, built of marvelous earth.
Life was lived nobly there to give such beauty birth.
(here) (this body)
Beauty was in that heart and in that eager hand.
(Something) (this brain) (this)
Death is so blind and so dumb,
(dumb and blind)34

‘By a Bierside’ was Gurney’s first war song. With it he began his second period; all the songs that followed in the years of World War One grew out of it. It is a strong response to his surroundings and situation, evidence also of his valor: “What news! What a time to live in. And, if it must be as a soldier, What a time to die in! And for what a cause!”35.

In his setting of Masefield’s poem, Gurney directly addresses the topic of death, not a surprising choice given the situation. In a series of letters to his friend Marion Scott (July 27, 1916), we hear him describe the mood surrounding the creation of ‘By a Bierside’.


35 Gurney, Collected Letters 141.
We are all fed up. How fed up you must gather from the fact that anyone who mentions home is howeled down at once. (O, of course, do as you like with the memorial verse.) But Gloster [sic], like Troy in a Masefield’s poem, has become a city in the soul.36

In a postscript to this letter, he asked Marion Scott to send him a copy of the poem ‘By a Bierside’, as well as manuscript paper. He wanted to set the words into song. Gloucester, his “city in the soul”, inspired its first composition.

‘By a Bierside’ is a second period song, but its texture is reminiscent of his first period’s narrative ballads, ‘Edward’ and ‘Twa Corbies’. The dramatic delivery of a ballad scena is used by Gurney to depict the very real drama of World War One:

I have just finished of Masefield’s ‘By a Bierside’, and this will come to you either now or when we get back out of trenches. I hope you will like it. I will praise it so far as to say I believe there was never anybody could have set the words ‘Death opens unknown doors’, as it is set here. The accompaniment is really orchestral, but the piano will get all that’s wanted very well. It came to birth in a disused Trench Mortar replacement, and events yesterday evening gave full opportunity to reflect on one’s chance of doing this grand thing.37

The last line of the letter refers directly to the last line in Masefield’s poem: “it is most grand to die”. In this song, “Death” is not a poetic metaphor.

Gurney seems quite proud of his composition “I crow over it, a

36 Gurney, Collected Letters. 125.

37 Gurney, Collected Letters. 133.
confession"\(^{38}\), but the composition was so different that it drew comment from his two supporters, Marion Scott and Herbert Howells. They seemed to feel there were some problems with the song. It is surprising that Howells and Scott did not connect the shifting textures of the common Ballad style with the spontaneous, albeit concentrated, approach Gurney used when responding to his new environment. There is a great deal of discussion about this style in Gurney's letters, thus he was responding to their comments. Based on his responses, a general idea of their concerns is re-constructed.

They felt it needed some motivic cohesiveness. This is one of his responses:

I'm not sure you are not right about the figure being repeated after 'Death opens unknown doors'. It may mean a couple of extra bars. About the extra bars that Howells finds - I should need a piano to find that out.\(^{39}\)

There were also four notes which drew a disproportional amount of comment; the following is one of three versions Gurney suggested for the setting of the text "It is most grand to die":

The 4 Es must stand, even if the lady should need 4 trumpets to back her up. She is supposed to make a row like a brass band there. This only is admissible beside the repeated notes, and it is from an unwilling

\(^{38}\) Gurney, *Collected Letters*, 148.

\(^{39}\) Gurney, *Collected Letters*, 160.
The criticism by his friends is understandable, particularly when 'By a Bierside' is compared to the more cohesive Elizabethan settings of his first period. Gurney too seemed somewhat intrigued by his composition when he heard it for the first time, but this was well after the song started to make its rounds in England.

For the sum of one franc I got an hour on a faint toned piano yesterday; but that was not good enough, and there was no Bach, my fingers were stiff and my mind wandering always... there was not much pleasure in it; even though it was my first chance of hearing 'By a Bierside', which contains even more of 'strangeness' than I had thought.41

This "strangeness" is certainly the fragmented quality of the song; 'By a Bierside' lacks a traditionally propelling form or memorable tune in the vocal line. Gurney also, understandably, changed as a person:

...Sometimes it is necessary to be wary and forethoughtful,... So it is to set 'By a Bierside'. It would not do to try to set anything very big, like 'By a Bierside' at once, perhaps. But who knows? I had only the first

40 Gurney, Collected Letters, 160.

41 Gurney, Collected Letters, 194.
two lines in my mind, or perhaps three, when I began to write, and did not finish till my idea was complete. I did not trouble about balance or any thing else much; it came. And after 5 years or so, I will write sonatas in the same way. The points of vital importance are

(1) A poem; that is a collection of words that have inexplicable significance, and gives one visions and vistas And

(2) You. (the right 'you').

War changed the person that Marion Scott and Herbert Howells knew. Gurney wasn’t prepared for what he experienced and his letters are full of his efforts to translate into words sensibility within war. ‘By a Bierside’ is merely a musical attempt at this.

The fear of death in sickness is widely different from that in a strafe. The most of us do not fear death very much. Hardly at all, in fact. It is hearing the shells and mortar soaring down to wipe you out, and the spiteful gibbering of the machine guns which may get you that does the trick. If a hypochondriac in the last stage of depression were to stand by a river, having fully made up his mind to drown himself when his waistcoat would come off; if a boy were to throw a stick at such a time he would dodge it. It is the same instinct that makes war dreadful, but, by a merciful dispensation, relieves the flat boredom of living among sandbags.

Gurney’s approach to all song composition began with his memorization of the text. He often, inadvertently, changes a word. The Oxford University Press editions identify, parenthetically, all text discrepancies. In Gurney’s

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42 Gurney, Collected Letters, 152-153.

43 Gurney, Collected Letters, 133.
setting of Masefield's poem there are alternate words, but not all the word changes are a result of a memory slip. Rather, there are two versions of the text. One was entitled 'The Chief Centurians' published in 1924, the other was entitled 'By a Bierside' which was published in 1915. This was the version of the poem which Gurney knew and set 44.

The text has three sections through which the poet ponders the transience of life's efforts in respect to death's undiscerning force. Ultimately, the poet declares the inevitability of death as a "grand" reality.

In the first section (lines 1-3) the beauty and nobility of a fallen hero on the bier is viewed. The poet states that the hero's beauty is rooted in the city which bore him, Troy in the poem, Gloucester in Gurney's concept. When the poet speaks of the noble and beautiful warrior, Gurney speaks in equivalent musical terms. (Ex. 7)

You please me in saying that it gives you the impression of looking down at a bier. In my mind I saw a picture of a young poet-priest pronouncing an oration over the dead and lovely body of some young Greek hero. No song writer ever wrote a better phrase for Beauty than the one at the beginning. At least I begin to fulfill some part of my desire - to see and tell the ultimate truth of things...45

44 Michael Pilkington, Gurney, Ireland, Quilter Warlock. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.) 22.

45 Gurney, Collected Letters 146.
The vocal line is long and lyrical; the text setting is excellent, so much so, that the octave and a half range seen in example 7 is barely noticable. This is typical of Gurney.

It is interesting to note that the chord which supports the word "Beauty" is identical, in key and voicing, to the chord used by Gurney as the opening chord of 'Severn Meadows', e-minor. As mentioned earlier, it is clear from his letters that Gurney is writing about Gloucester, that he had thought out the first few lines, and that he was particularly happy with his setting of the word "Beauty". With this chord, we see the sonority and voicing (though not
the theoretical function) of the minor which becomes the catalytic "Gloucester" chord in his next two songs, 'In Flanders' and 'Severn Meadows'.

In these two war songs, the "Beauty" of the fallen hero on the bier was given the face and name of Will Harvey. Gurney carried the "Beauty" chord through and connected the songs. This was a meaningful response, not a motivic ploy. He layered classic images of nobility with memories of home and real sadness.

The second section (lines 4-9) begins the poet's evaluation of death; it is here Gurney becomes reactionary in his word setting, rather than premeditative. Towards this, he assigns new musical material to each description of death. The overall effect is halting and therefore disconcerting to a musical taste accustomed to the normal regularity of a traditional song. Instead, through his many pauses and shifts in momentum, Gurney gives the great responsibility of propulsion to the singer.(Ex. 8a, b, c)
Line 10 of the poem is the declaration: "It is most grand to die". It is the moment of the most vocal power, also the location of the much quibbled-about "4 Es". Gurney finally settled on 3 Gs to an E. (Ex. 9)

On measure 38 (Ex. 10c) the voice and piano reach their combined peak, but as dynamic as the declaration is, the true climax of the song is reserved for the piano. Three measures later the eighth-note figure which has been
brewing motivically since measure 12, intensifies to a triple forte progression reminiscent of church bells. This motif first appeared after the initial description "Death is so blind and dumb" (Ex. 10a). The motif expands throughout the song paralleling the poet's growth in reasoning; through this development, the piano figure functions as the song's binding element. (Ex. 10a, b, c.)
The Scribe

Poet: Walter De La Mare
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Source: Ivor Gurney: A Second Volume of Ten Songs

Range: 

Date: 1918
Place of Composition: unknown
First Lines:

What lovely things
Thy hand hath made
The smooth-plumed
In its emerald shade,
The seed of the grass,
the speck of stone
Which the wayfaring ant
Stirs, stirs and hastes on!

'The Scribe' is an interesting song which was written in the later part of the second period, 1918. It contains many of the recognizable traits seen in the three previous works: the vocal line is lyric and broad in range, the piano is a orchestral and independent, the form is spontaneous and nontraditional. However, 'The Scribe' possesses a frenzied quality in the use of these aspects which is unseen in the other songs of this period.

The exact date of 'The Scribe's' composition is not clear; it was during 1918.
What is known is that Gurney’s mental health was quite inconsistent during this time period; he even contemplated suicide, as seen in this note to Marion Scott written in July:

“My Dear Friend
This is a good-bye letter, and written because I am afraid of slipping down and becoming a wreck. - and I know you would rather know me dead than mad…” 46.

The Fall of 1918 is marked by Gurney’s increased agitation and mood shifts, eating binges of sweetcakes until his money was gone and disappearances for days hiking. In short, “His behavior when he returned home was decidedly erratic and his friends became very alarmed” 47. ‘The Scribe’ shows this frantic side of Gurney which, oddly, accompanied his transition into peacetime and “normal” life.

In ‘The Scribe’, the listener and performer are presented with two personalities because the song switches from wistful to agitated in a matter of one measure of silence. Considering this, Gurney’s approach in composing ‘The Scribe’ seems similar to that which he used in setting ‘By a Bierside’ when “I had only the first two lines in my mind, or perhaps three, when I began to write, and did not finish till my idea was complete”. 48 This

46 Gurney, Collected Letters 430.

47 Hurd, 128.

48 Gurney, Collected Letters 152.
technique is, of course, flavored by his mental instability and is apparent in his treatment of the text and piano accompaniment, usually cohesive components.

The poem by de la Mare supplies a text of true Georgian values. The poet voices his amazement at God's creations and his inability to express these beauties no matter the time spent. Gurney’s delicate opening of 'The Scribe' is clearly anchored to the earlier war songs and his homeland because his opening ascending figure evolves into the "Gloucester" chord (Ex. 11). True to form; the chord supports a text of pastoral description.

Ex. 11

The voice and text are bound by a bit of text painting. It first appears harmonically in his support of the text: "the wayfaring ant Stirs, stirs and hastes on!". Starting in D major, Gurney interrupts an eventual modulation to B minor to stray for a moment towards Eb on the word "wayfaring" before he "hastes on to" complete the modulation. The reflective moment lasts for seventeen measures until Gurney stops all sound for a full measure (Ex. 12)
The pause erases the preceding musing section. The music then resumes in a turbulent Brahmsian style in both the piano and the voice. It is here that Gurney's response to the text bends before our eyes. Gurney's text setting now becomes overwrought. In these 32 measures Gurney churns out a lyrical, albeit agitated, vocal line which lacks his usual sensitivity to prosody and meaning. The most powerful line in the song "Leviathan told and the honey fly:/ And still would remain/ My wit to try" exemplifies this.(Ex. 13).

Nothing about the poetic line merits the intensity given the voice and piano parts. Until now, force like this was reserved for declarations like "It is most grand to die", or a soldier's cry "I'm homesick". In this Gurney setting, the texture in both the voice and piano seem in conflict with a poem whose text is
closer to pensive than anguished. Furthermore, in representing the meaning of the word “Leviathan” dynamically and making it the climax of the song, Gurney seems more concerned with text painting than his usual text interpretation.

Gurney does not support the song in his usual ways either; the vocal line is a lucid setting of the text, but not tuneful and the piano is assigned a pure accompanimental function. In this way ‘The Scribe’ lacks the binding force, in either component, we have come to expect. Without a thematic core or a binding form to link its ideas, ‘The Scribe’ sags under its own weight.
Two Songs on Texts By Yeats

Ivor Gurney's poetic, musical and personal voice is inseparably entwined with Gloucester, nature, and the soldier's experience. This fusion of life and art strongly reflect the philosophical influence of William Butler Yeats, a contemporary writer whose prose, poetry, and plays interested Gurney as material for musical settings. In a 1910 lecture, Yeats defines this new role for the contemporary poet:

I have no sympathy with the mid-Victorian thought to which Tennyson gave his support, that a poet's life concerns nobody but himself. A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather the better his poetry the more sincere his life; his life is an experiment in living and those that come after have a right to know it. Above all it is necessary that the lyric poet's life should be known that we should understand that his poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man.

Gurney's music strongly reflects this turn-of-the-century attitude. In 'By a Bierside' he openly confronts the topic of death after an early and close encounter with it. 'In Flanders' and 'Severn Meadows' certainly express

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49 Hurd, 38.

something very personal. Gurney's songs clearly represent "the speech of a man".

Gurney is consistent with this art and life relationship in his setting of Yeats', 'The Folly of Being Comforted' and 'The Fiddler of Dooney'. Here he created two songs which are extremely different in style, but better understood when viewed in relation to Gurney himself.

The Folly of Being Comforted

Poet: W.B.Yeats

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Source: The Fifth Volume of Ten Songs

Date: October - December, 1917

Place of Composition: Bangour-Seaton Delaval

First Lines:

One that was ever kind said yesterday
'Your well beloved's hair has threads of grey,
And little shadows come about her eyes;
Time can but make it easier to be wise,
Though now it's hard, till trouble is at an end;
And so be patient, be wise and patient, friend.'
While in hospital in Edinburgh, Gurney fell in love with an attending nurse. His letters to his friends were filled with the descriptive language he usually applied to his beloved Gloucester; he now applied it to Nurse Drummond:

Annie Nelson Drummond is older than I thought - born sooner, I mean. She is 30 years old and most perfectly enchanting. She has a pretty figure, pretty hair, fine eyes, pretty hands and arms and walk... In hospital the first thing that would strike you is 'her guarded flame'...51

The preceding letter was written in January 1918 and confirms Gurney’s fascination with Nurse Drummond. His infatuation is, at times, mentioned in the discussion of ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’, providing an an obvious motivation for the composition.52 Though the song was indeed composed during his hospital stay, his attachment to Nurse Drummond, at the time of composition, is overemphasized:

I have 3 Poems, and O - a new song for Mezzo soprano. One of my best, madam; that being the setting of those wistful magical words of Yeats - ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’.

There is one passage
‘O she had not these ways
When all the wild summer was in her gaze’
which will raise your hair. And the full completion of meaning in the words at the cry
‘But heart, there is no comfort, not a grain’

51 Gurney, Collected Letters 395.

Of course it cannot be as fine as 'By a Bierside' but it is more difficult and hard to form than 'In Flanders', and quite as successful. Perhaps 'In Flanders' is slightly more beautiful as a whole, but there is a sorrow of wasting beauty and such tragic passion here that puts it above anything but 'By a Bierside'. Yet what hard luck! (It was written in one sitting the night after I had been up all night helping in the wards. Some stunt!) Well, I finished a fairly completed written sketch, and then found out I had left out 'The fire that burns about her when she stirs Burns but more clearly'.

O Blasphemy! My balance upset! Well there is not enough MS to copy this out, it shall come next time.53

This very revealing letter was written on October 31, 1917, a month after he arrived at the Edinburgh Hospital. It clears up some of the confusion which surrounds the song. First, it establishes the composition date; Pilkington seems to feel that it was written in the trenches54, this is correct only if the intent is to insult Scotland.

The letter also confirms the need for caution and perspective when analysing a Gurney song in a traditional manner. Stephan Banfield likens the "ponderings occasionally" to a Wagnerian monologue but, he states, that "...his [Gurney's] fundamental technique is of Brahms's 'developing variation', as Schoenberg described it."55 Though not incorrect, such earnest

53 Gurney, Collected Letters 359-360.

54 Pilkington, 13.

55 Banfield, 194.
analysis and declarations that he "build a musical structure" become diluted when Gurney admits in a letter that he forgot to set the poem's climactic phrase. Gurney had to go back and put it in; this is why the song has two peaks of intensity, gone is any idea of premeditation beyond that which he felt and heard.

Most importantly, the preceding letter and the letters surrounding it put into question the motivation. With no mention of Nurse Drummond on record until late November, and that only for a questionable dedication of a poem, it seems unsupported that the song is a result of love, unrequited love at that. All this seems a little too normal for Gurney. Instead, his fascination with Annie Drummond escalated to the more overt level only after he left the hospital and was sent away, in November, by the military, to a signaling course. The January letter, from which the adoring quotation is taken, was written during, or shortly after, Gurney's leave from the class and after he had visited Annie Drummond. His level of adoration also becomes a bit mercenary, and suspicious, later in the same letter:

A not unimportant fact was revealed by one of the patients at hospital - a fine chap - I believe she has money. Just think of it! Pure good luck, if it is true

56 Banfield, 192.

57 Gurney, Collected Letters 373.
The actual motivation for the song was something more consistent with the war period's already established themes. Gurney had a habit of quoting the poem he was setting in his letters. This is seen in 'By a Bierside', 'In Flanders', and 'Severn Meadows'. It was a great part of his creative process; it was how he made the text his. He started peppering his correspondence with couplets from 'The Folly of Being Comforted' in letters dated October 23rd, and 29th. The most important is the first, his recollection of an evening spent with a "Scottish Rifle". They talked late into the night until 12:30 am. and "illicitly" stole out into the night from the confines of the hospital and:

walked under the stars, watching Orion and hearing his huge sustained chord

\[ \text{\} \] through the night.

...that's true and memorable enough. And what of

'But heart, there is no comfort, not a grain. 
Time can but make her beauty over again. 
The fire that burns about her when she stirs burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways 
When all the wild summer was in her gaze. 
O heart, O heart, Should she but turn her head 
You'd see the folly of being comforted.'

---

Gurney, Collected Letters. 395.
The great test of Art - the Arts of Music, Writing, Painting anyway is to be able to see the eyes kindly and full of calm wisdom that would say these things behind the pages.\footnote{Gurney, \textit{Collected Letters}. 356-357.}

The preceding letter is consistent with the many musings on art and life he expressed in letters from the trenches. Yet, the night sky which inspired this letter was one witnessed in his first month away from immediate conflict and with the war, in its most overt sense, behind him. This letter, because of the large quotation from the Yeats’ poem, becomes significant. It provides a tangible date for the beginning of his assimilation of the poem towards song and motivation for the song itself. Significant by its absence, within the letters written during these early weeks in hospital, is any mention of Nurse Drummond. What is seen, however, are recurring themes of nature, purpose, art, camaraderie and hope for the future – all common thoughts in his war expressions. Considering the above, it is far more supportable that Gurney wrote not of a person, but of England itself when he set the words “time can but make her beauty over again”. In the letter announcing his one-night creation of ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’, Gurney spoke of “Beauty” and Britain in exactly the same terms:

\begin{quote}
Indeed, Britain is the rock of hope now....With the selfish fear I have, mingles still sorrow for all humanity suffering under the strain. Some day men will read history books, and say with Brett Young,\end{quote}
'Poor savages that wrought in stone, 
poor savages that fought in France'.

How shall formal religion console me? It is only
Music that will comfort the heart - mine does already, 
and when more dross is burnt out of me, perhaps then
I shall see Beauty clearly in everything. Yet O, that 
this purification should come by war! Obscene and 
purely dreadful. 60

The Yeats poem possesses a certain bittersweet resignation. In the poem, a 
friend attempts to "comfort" one who has been rejected by stating that his 
beloved is growing old and time will make it easier. The poet responds, 
stating that age (time) can only make her more beautiful, thus "the folly of 
being comforted".

Love songs do not make up a very large part of Gurney's output. When 
he did compose in that vein it was often maudlin: 'Down by the Salley 
Gardens', 'an Epitaph', 'The Aspens'. 'The Folly of Being Comforted' certainly 
fits into this category except it has a delivery of text and affections not seen in 
any of these songs. Gurney's second period evolutionary technique of song 
composition, as response to the text, is evident here. 'The Folly of Being 
Comforted' is connected to Gurney's trench songs 'By a Bierside' and 'In 
Flanders' in more than just form. This relationship is seen in his letters 
comparing their worth.

'The Folly of Being Comforted' is the third in the line of song settings,

60 Gurney, Collected Letters. 361.
beginning with 'By a Bierside', in which prosity and phrase declamation are placed above a traditional four measure phrase or uninterrupted flow of the music. The second in the trio is Gurney’s setting of Sir Walter Raleigh’s last words, ‘Even Such Is Time’. Each of these songs possess the uneven quality which Herbert Howells and Marion Scott found so disturbing.

'The Folly of Being Comforted' is Gurney’s furthest departure from traditional cohesiveness. It is through-composed and Gurney gives the vocal line no memorable tune or melodic signature. Furthermore, he offers no compositional assurance of melodic motion with his frequent pauses and unaccompanied singing. Despite all this, Gurney’s lyric tendency is not at all stifled by his strong response to the text. Indeed, there is no phrase in ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’ which is less than an octave in range and, with the exception of one instance “Because of that great nobleness”, this is achieved rather conjunctly. Still, the phrases are expansive and rewarding to the singer and to the listener.(Ex.14)
Gurney's habit of traveling through several different keys is seen in every period, but it takes on a new dimension in this late second-period song. His chromatic activity supports the image of change expressed in the poem. Gurney begins and ends in c# minor, but cadences then passes through several different keys before returning to the home tonality:

key: c#minor - C Major - E Major - c minor - c# minor - a minor - c minor - c# minor

mm.: 1-16 18-19 20-22 25-34 38-51 53-70 71-76 81-end.

As in 'By a Bierside', the piano in 'The Folly of Being Comforted' provides a sonorous accompaniment to the vocal line. It is also assigned a dramatic function. The poet's theme of his love's beauty changing with time and becoming more beautiful, is realized though the piano. This is achieved by the development of the piano's opening phrase as a tuneful metaphor for the facets of the love object and the poet's feelings. These variations connect or reinforce phrases that would otherwise fragment the piece. Gurney, helpfully, inserts a particularly distinct rhythmic turn , a pang, in the core phrase which draws attention to the use of the motif as it proceeds on to its many variations or expansions (Ex.15a, b, c, d).
Ultimately, this motif ends in the vocal line as a low, sustained cry over the piano's heartbeat chords. Appropriate, as it follows the unaccompanied phrase: "O heart! O heart! If she'd but turn her head,"

(Ex. 16).
The preceding is a poignant conclusion to what would be best called a reflective monologue. In this song we see Gurney’s unique approach to text setting at its most successful. His approach to text setting is more aligned with Debussy’s, though not nearly as refined and understated, than to any models in the sphere of German lieder or Gurney’s English contemporaries. If a German parallel exists it would be, as Banfield mentioned 61, Wagner’s treatment of text in his operas, though neither composer can be considered a direct influence. ‘The Folly of Being Comforted’ is the last of this style and a masterpiece; it defines Gurney’s uniqueness as a composer of British song.

61 Banfield, 194.
The Fiddler of Dooney

Poet: W.B. Yeats

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Source: Ivor Gurney: The Fourth Volume of Ten Songs

Range:  

Date: 1917

Place of Composition: France

First Lines:

When I play on my fiddle in Dooney
Folk dance like a wave of the sea;
My cousin is priest in Kilvarnet,
My brother in Mocharabuiee.

I passed my brother and cousin:
They read from their books of prayer;
I read in my book of songs
I got at the Sligo fair.

'The Fiddler of Dooney' occupies a position at the opposite pole of Gurney's songs from that of 'The Folly of Being Comforted'. It is a clear, straightforward setting, but not inferior. It merely represents another compositional facet.

The Yeats' poem speaks of music and death, two important topics in both the songs and letters of Gurney during the war period. The difference in
treatment of these subjects, and between this song and Gurney’s other war songs, reveals the strange dichotomy of humor and horror that exists in war.

In his letters, Gurney found and related the humor in his situation:

3 February, 1917.
My Dear Friend,

...Today there was an inspection by the Colonel. I waited trembling, knowing there was six weeks of hospital and soft-job dirt and rust not yet off; no, not by a long way. I stood there, as sheep among the goats (no visa versa) and waited the bolt and thunder. Round came He-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, looked at me, hesitated, looked again, hesitated and was called off by the R.S.M. who was afterwards heard telling the Colonel (a few paces away from me), ‘A good man, sir, quite all right. Quite a good man, sir, but he’s a musician, and doesn’t seem able to get himself clean.’

Or, he reveals a war perspective which made the horrific become humorous:

In hospital there was a Warwick man who described in the gravest tones, how a German officer on a raid against them while bombing dugouts, bombed the bomb store and blew himself to bits; an event which seemed to me very funny indeed - for War.

So it isn’t surprising that one of Gurney’s war songs also reflects the important humor which is present in war. The story of the fiddler entering heaven before the priests is obviously attractive to Gurney and a balance to

62 Gurney, Collected Letters 201.

63 Gurney, Collected Letters 146.
the more somber tones voiced in his first other war songs.

'The Fiddler of Dooney' is rhythmically based on the $6/8$ pulse of a folk dance. Many recognizable Gurney traits are evident in the song: long phrases, odd phrase length, broad range, independant piano line, excellent proosity, odd modulations. The result is quite spirited and folk-like; reinforced when Gurney departs from his usual approach of through-composition and when he uses a more traditional aba form.

The opening piano figure provides an example of the folk-like pattern which binds the entire song. (Ex. 17a) The vocal line, too, uses this pattern, but often works against the triple meter with a duple figure. (Ex. 17b)
Gurney sets the fiddler's entrance into heaven in the b section, which begins two measures before the line "When we come at the end of time / To Peter sitting in state...". The transition to death is quick and is represented in the music by a modulation of C major to f# minor. The key of f# minor is far from the primary key of Eb Major and clearly expresses in the music the idea of "the other side".

The song as it is published now is probably not exactly the song Gurney composed in the trenches. He was noted for reworking his songs, and correspondence indicates he had been doing so with the 'Fiddler of Dooney' between March and September of 1918. Hurd feels that the war version of the song even "existed in some form before he reached the trenches." 64 Nonetheless, it is a beneficially light addition to a period of song composition prone to heavier affections.

64 Hurd, 80.
V. PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS

The war songs of Ivor Gurney have a distinct quality about them which separates them from the songs of his other periods. Still they possess many of what could be called typical Gurney aspects of setting texts.

One important aspect, obvious in all his periods of composition, but is particularly highlighted because of his approach to composition in the war period, is the relationship between singer and accompanist. It is a crucial one, as they coordinate the song and performance particulars because Gurney's songs do not synchronize easily. His opposing rhythms of three against four or two against three are often and dramatically used in his songs; "In Flanders' and By a Bierside" provide numerous examples. He often displaces the alignment of the piano and voice lines through the use of hemiola; a good example being 'Severn Meadows' (see example 6). In their working relationship, the pianist has the responsibility of creating an independent, yet supportive accompaniment to the sensibility of the text; the singer, and this is probably the highest calling in performance, is responsible for clear declamation of the poem's affections.

The singer of Gurney songs should possess a medium high voice, lyric baritone or mezzo-soprano often seem most appropriate. The climax of the songs usually depend on a peak range within F - A^b/f - a^b, not particularly high, but power is often expected, as we see in his 'By a Bierside' and 'The Scribe'. Transpositions are possible, but power, associated with tessitura and
timbre, as well as the orchestral quality of Gurney's writing should not be
diluted by doing so. 'By a Bierside' would suffer if transposed up beyond a
minor third.

The song ranges in all his periods are consistently over an octave. What is
difficult in a Gurney song is that the range of the entire piece is often
represented in a single phrase, as seen in 'The Folly of Being Comforted' and
'In Flanders'. These phrases are lyric and conjunct, but at times seem endless,
as Gurney chooses not to interrupt an emotional expression for mere oxygen.
The singer, before the performance, must clearly identify the moments for
breath with a sense of Gurney's poetic concept in mind. Gurney controls the
poetic interpretation in this way.

This forethought is required in 'Severn Meadows'. The phrase "And who
loves Joy as he that dwells in shadows" is identical melodically to the opening
phase "Only the wanderer Knows England's graces,'. Gurney provides a
moment for a breath in the opening phrase, but refuses the singer the same
moment in its repetition. This is no doubt dramatic in purpose. By doubling
the phrase length, at even a moderate tempo, Gurney supplies the singer with
a sense of real longing by the end of the phrase.

Gurney's compositions test the singer with songs that seem short, simple
and lucid upon first viewing. This is not true, and the singer is introduced to
a composer whose focus was emotion. The performers are simply tools
towards accurate expression.
VI. Conclusion

The general music world during the first 30 years of the 1900s possessed a charged atmosphere of change. British music's national development began later than that of other counties whose departure from Romanticism was pioneered by the likes of Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Debussy. Still, it did develop and within a very concentrated time period. Gurney’s part in this “Renaissance” of English music is unfortunately obscured because of the speed of the musical change and his own short creative life. Therefore, a fair discussion of Gurney as a composer and force in England’s song development is one necessarily based on these contextual considerations. This is not solely because he was such a troubled rebel, but because the period in which he lived was also in transition artistically and in upheaval socially.

Gurney’s impatience with craft and his unwillingness to refine songs towards more traditional expectations becomes understandable in the context of war, where time and mortality are equally uncertain. The stubborn, “unteachable” drive of his student years maintained him in the desperate scenario of World War One and speaks of a fortunate alignment of ability and inclination which could, and did, express events often considered inexpressible. Gurney’s true moments beyond the ordinary exist within his war songs. Any discussion of his music as an influence, and beyond the mere pleasant, begins with these few extraordinary selections. It is in the war songs that he became, for a brief time, an innovator. He challenged accepted
structure, tonal progression, propulsion, cohesion, language, and compositional environment. This innovative span was represented through only a few songs within the expressive parameters of Romanticism and it lasted only as long as the war itself was an immediacy with which he had to reckon. This should not matter, as there is no rule that innovation must manifest itself in abundance or endurance, merely in existence.

The Songs I Had

The songs I had are withered
Or vanished clean,
Yet there are bright tracks
where I have been,

And there grow flowers
For other's delight.
Think well, O singer,
Soon comes night.65

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12 January 1993

Mr. David Herendeen
118 West State Street
Albion, PA 16401

Dear Mr. Herendeen:

Songs of Ivor Gurney (1915-1918)

Thank you for your 5 January letter. You have our permission to reprint excerpts from the songs you listed (for your doctoral lecture-recital):

- BY A BIRDSIDE (c. 1980, Oxford University Press)
- SEVERN MEADOWS "
- IN FLANDERS (c. 1959"
- FIDDLER OF DOONEY (")
- THE SCRIBE (c. 1938, Oxford University Press)
- THE FOLLY OF BEING COMFORTED ("

How many of these songs do you wish to print in full in your monograph? And what excerpts will you be using? How many copies of your monograph will be made, and to whom will they be distributed?

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Sincerely yours,

SUSAN BRAILE
Manager, Music Department
The Cottage, 
Tilson Green, 
Dymock, 
Gloucestershire. 
GL18 2AP. 
Tel: 0331-890422
25th Jan. 1993

Dear Mr. Henderson,

Thank you for your letter. I am delighted that yet another student from the U.S. has discovered Ivor Gurney and as you rightly say the letters and poetry are essential for the true understanding of his music.

I am happy to give my permission for the use of the sources you mention - I assume that there will be a full bibliography detailing the printed sources to which reference should be made. It would be your acknowledgement that permission granted by "The Trustee for the Ivor Gurney Estate".

Of course should you or your students consider publishing your work, I would be delighted to be contacted again but I am happy to accept your assurance that the monograph will not be published.

With all good wishes for a satisfactory conclusion to your work - I hope you will encourage others to come to know Gurney's work.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

B. The Ivor Gurney Estate
REFERENCES


Scholus, Percy A. The Mirror of Music 1844-1944: A Century of Musical


