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‘Every impulse and spring of art seems to have died in me, except for music’: Gerard

Manley Hopkins as Composer

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is best known as a poet, a convert to Roman Catholicism, and a Jesuit priest. He also composed music.¹ Given both Hopkins’s status as a poet, and the musicality of his poetry, interest in his musical compositions, on first sight, would appear well justified. Hopkins, however, came only late in life to composition, writing music sporadically from the age of 36, until the end of his life. He wrote merely 27 compositions, of which only 15 are extant. Hopkins himself believed that he had created a new musical style, writing to his friend Robert Bridges (1844-1930) in June 1880 that ‘I wish I could pursue music; for I have invented a new style, something standing to ordinary music as sprung rhythm to common rhythm: it employs quarter tones’.² He also claimed, in his final letter to Bridges (who also composed), that in music he had created ‘a new art’.³ Others, however, have tended to look somewhat less favourably on his endeavours. Humphry House, for example, has described his compositions as: ‘The most elementary work which would have been undertaken by a beginner in Composition. The settings of songs are judged to be very ordinary, and rather surprisingly showing no marked talent or even eccentricity.’⁴

¹ I am grateful to my colleague Dr Guy Cuthbertson for drawing Hopkins’s compositions to my attention. A preliminary version of this article was first read at the ‘Hopkins at Hope Symposium’, organised at Liverpool Hope University on 28 April 2015 to commemorate Hopkins’s time as a Jesuit priest at Saint Francis Xavier’s Church, Liverpool. I am also extremely grateful to the Master and Community of Campion Hall, University of Oxford, who very generously allowed access to Hopkins manuscripts in their possession. I would like particularly to thank their Archivist, Professor Peter Davidson, for his kind assistance.

² Hopkins to Bridges (18 June 1880); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, Second Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 103. Having initially trained and practised as a doctor, Bridges was also a poet. He served as poet laureate from 1913 to 1930. He composed many hymns. Hopkins and Bridges first met at Oxford in 1863. They remained close friends and corresponded until Hopkins’s death. Due to his status as a Jesuit priest, few of Hopkins’s poems were published during his own lifetime. Bridges ensured their posthumous publication.

³ Hopkins to Bridges (29 April 1889); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 305.

⁴ Cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed), *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1955), 169.

It is difficult to agree with House's assessment that there is nothing 'eccentric' in Hopkins's extant compositions, however. As is acknowledged, many of Hopkins's poetic innovations – the most well known of which is probably 'sprung rhythm' (discussed further below) – prefigure those of the literary Modernists. Christopher R. Wilson, for example, has commented that 'his poetic style is so unusual and idiosyncratic that it seems to belong to the modern rather than Victorian era.'⁵ Kevin O'Connell, meanwhile, has referred to Hopkins as the 'Victorian poet [who] was the day-star of the modern'.⁶ In a similar vein, in his search for new means of musical expression, particularly with regards to rhythmic and melodic innovations, Hopkins's musical preoccupations actually foreshadow many of those of the early Modernists. As O'Connell has further remarked, 'Hopkins can be credited with anticipating the metrical shifts of Stravinsky and the free-verse poets of the 1910s and 1920s.'⁷ Hopkins's lack of technical expertise, however, prevented him from realising his aesthetic goals in musical terms. Before judging his music too harshly, however, it is very important to remember that when we consider Hopkins's music, we are considering the work of a fledgling composer, who came to composition late in life, had limited training and technical means, and whose pastoral and liturgical duties as a priest severely curtailed the amount of time that he was able to dedicate to musical study and composition. To date, Hopkins's music has received little attention. Laura Gutman's PhD thesis – 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry', completed at the University of St. Andrews in 1988 – currently represents the only full-length study of Hopkins and music.⁸ His musical works are

⁵ Christopher R. Wilson, 'Nineteenth-Century Musical Agogics as an Element in Gerard Manley Hopkins's Prosody', *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Winter, 2000), 72-86: 72.

⁶ Kevin O'Connell, 'The Second Muse of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 148, No. 1901 (Winter, 2007), 49-62: 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ Laura A. Gutman, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry', PhD Thesis, University of St. Andrews (1988); available at <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/2625> (accessed 22 May 2017). Beyond Gutman's thesis, Hopkins's music has largely attracted only shorter (article-length) considerations, by a range of scholars from both Music and Literary Studies, some of which are now somewhat dated. Particular contributions include John F. Waterhouse, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and Music', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 1937), 227-235; John Stevens, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Musician', Appendix II in Humphrey House

worth a closer consideration, if not only for their curio value, but also for the important place that music held in Hopkins's life.

Musical Training and Background

Despite the fact that Hopkins is not commonly widely acknowledged as a musician, music occupied an important place for him throughout his life. Beyond his practical interests, he also drew upon musical terminology – particularly ‘counterpoint’, ‘diatonism’, and ‘chromaticism’ – in his writings on poetry.⁹ Although Hopkins did not turn to composition until towards the end of his life, he originally acquired a rudimentary training in music – covering solfège and musical notation – during his early years, from his Aunt Anne, at home.¹⁰ He also inherited an interest in British folksong from his parents.¹¹ Surprisingly, although Hopkins's family was musical, and he appears to have had a good voice, he did not learn to play an instrument as a child. Music formed no part of his formal education at either Highgate School or at Balliol College, Oxford. At Oxford, however, as Gutman has discussed, his interests in English folksong developed; his growing interest in religion, and involvement in the Oxford Movement,¹² sparked an interest in Medieval plainsong; and his studies in Classics introduced him to the theories of Ancient Greek music.¹³ He also regularly

and Graham Storey (eds.), *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 457-497; William L. Graves, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins as Composer: An Interpretive Postscript’, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 1963), 146-155; Eugene Hollahan, “‘most secret catgut of the mind’: Hopkins, Music, and the Erasure of History”, in *Hopkins Against History* (Omaha, Nebraska: Creighton University Press/Association of Jesuit University Presses, 1995), 157-190; Christopher R. Wilson, ‘The Idea of “Musicality” in Hopkins’ Verse’, *The Hopkins Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1/2 (1999), 27-55; Christopher R. Wilson, ‘Nineteenth-Century Agogics as an Element in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Prosody’, *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Winter, 2000), 72-86; and Kevin O’Connell, ‘The Second Muse of Gerard Manley Hopkins’, *The Musical Times*, Vol. 148, No. 1901 (Winter, 2007), 49-62.

⁹ For a critical discussion of Hopkins’s use of musical terminology, see Christopher R. Wilson, ‘The Idea of “Musicality” in Hopkins’ Verse’, 3. Wilson, however, has cautioned that interpreting Hopkins’s use of musical terms as having ‘precise musical meaning is misleading’ (30).

¹⁰ For an authoritative biographical study of Hopkins, see Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

¹¹ In addition to writing poetry, Hopkins’s father, Gerard Hopkins (1818-1897) also composed amateur songs.

¹² Hopkins was received into the Roman Catholic Church, by John Henry Newman, on 21 October 1866, whilst still an undergraduate at Oxford.

¹³ Laura A. Gutman, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry’, 6-14.

attended concerts. After Oxford, he took some lessons on the violin in 1867, while he was teaching at the Edgbaston Oratory, Birmingham. This study appears to have been short-lived, however, as, beyond one reference (to an unfulfilled ambition of one day being able to play first or second violin in a chamber work by Bridges) there are no further references to violin studies in his writings.¹⁴ Eight years later, whilst he was pursuing his Jesuit philosophical studies at Stonyhurst,¹⁵ Hopkins attempted to teach himself the piano; an interest that he persisted with, in the limited free time available to him, until the end of his life. He also sang at Jesuit social gatherings.

It was his new-found interest in composition during the last nine years of his life that eventually prompted him towards a more formal study of music. In particular, he found his ability only to write melodies, and being forced to rely upon his sister, Grace, to harmonise these for him frustrating. He found Grace's harmonisations too tame and wished that she could be bolder. He wrote to Bridges in June 1880 that 'I sorely wish I knew some harmony.'¹⁶ He followed this in April 1881 with the remark that 'I am gropingly making my way into harmony and may come to harmonise some of my airs.'¹⁷ This longing to be self-sufficient eventually drove him to study harmony and counterpoint. Initially, he attempted to teach himself, purchasing Stainer's *Harmony Primer* and J.F. Bridge's textbook on counterpoint.¹⁸ Whilst he was Professor of Latin and Greek at University College Dublin,¹⁹ he also took some formal music theory lessons with Sir Robert Prescott Stewart (1825-1894),

¹⁴ As William L. Graves has noted, it is possible that Hopkins was influenced in his choice of the violin by Newman, who was an accomplished amateur violinist and regular performer of chamber music. William L. Graves, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Composer: An Interpretive Postscript', 146.

¹⁵ Hopkins began his novitiate as a Jesuit in 1868, studying variously at Manresa House, Roehampton; Stonyhurst; and St Beuno's, North Wales. He was finally ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1877. The fact that he failed his final theology exam, however, meant that he could not progress within the order.

¹⁶ Hopkins to Bridges (18 June 1880); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 103.

¹⁷ Hopkins to Bridges (27 April 1881); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 125.

¹⁸ John Stainer, *Harmony Primer* (London: Shaw, 1884); J. Frederick Bridge, *Double Counterpoint and Canon* (London: Novello, 1881).

¹⁹ Hopkins spent the last five years of his life in Dublin, from 1884 to his death at the age of only 44 in 1889.

the Irish composer, conductor, organist, and choirmaster.²⁰ A number of Hopkins's harmony and counterpoint exercises, corrected and annotated by Stewart, along with a limited amount of correspondence between the two survives. Hopkins's extant exercises are in first four species counterpoint. John F. Waterhouse has commented that these reveal that Hopkins was 'still battling to master the first elements. The exercises have the usual beginner's faults – motionless parts, great gaps between alto and tenor, hidden octaves, even strange confusion of scales'.²¹ However, as Waterhouse further notes, the exercises are also 'strewn with indications of his enterprise and his enthusiastic impatience'.²² Hopkins grudgingly submitted to Stewart's tutelage; William L. Graves has described him as 'compliant and rebellious by turns'.²³ Hopkins defended his own mistakes by pointing out that none of Bach's compositions fully conformed to the rules either. As Graves has further commented, 'Stewart's attitude, judging from his few letters to Hopkins, seems to have been one of condescension and half-amusement at his pupil's views'.²⁴ An extant letter to Hopkins's from Stewarts, contains some interesting feedback on Hopkins's stubborn belief in his own ability:

You always excuse yourself for anything I object to in your writing or music, so I think it a pity to disturb you in your dream of perfect ability. Nearly everything in your music was wrong – but you will not admit it to be the case.²⁵

Hopkins's Musical Output

Hopkin's self-belief in his musical talents were not as firm as his claim of having invented a 'new style' and Stewart's sarcastic comments on his 'dream of perfect-ability' would suggest,

²⁰ During Hopkins's time in Dublin, Stewart held both Chairs of Music in Dublin, at Trinity College and the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He was also organist at both of the two Protestant cathedrals: Christ Church and St Patrick's.

²¹ John F. Waterhouse, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and Music', 231.

²² *Ibid*, 231.

²³ William L. Graves, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Composer: An Interpretive Postscript', 147.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 147.

²⁵ Stewart to Hopkins, cited from *ibid*, 148. It is intriguing to note in passing Stewart's presumption in critiquing Hopkins's poetry, as well as his music.

however. In reality, he was plagued by self-doubts, and often lamented his technical limitations and lack of competence as a pianist. Despite this, Hopkins (as noted above) left a body of 27 works, of which 15 are still extant. It is possible that further works have been lost or destroyed. Table 1 details Hopkins's known compositions.²⁶ All of his musical works are vocal compositions. Given Hopkins's dual creative occupations as both a poet and a composer, this emphasis upon vocal music appears natural; for, as Wilson comments, 'the closest link between music and poetry is in song.'²⁷ Intriguingly, Hopkins set very few of his own poems to music: 'Spring and Fall', 'Hurrahing in Harvest', 'Morning Middy and Evening Sacrifice', and 'What shall I do for the land'. Of these, only 'What shall I do for the land' is still extant. His favourite poets for setting to music were: Shakespeare (six settings), Robert Bridges (five settings), and Richard Watson Dixon (four settings). Beyond this, there is one setting each of poetry by William Collins, William Barnes, Thomas Campbell, and John Bridges. The author of one text set by Hopkins is unknown. There is also one setting of Latin and three of Ancient Greek texts (one each by Sappho, Sophocles, and Pindar). Equally intriguingly, given his occupation as a Jesuit priest (and discussed in further detail below), all of his extant compositions are secular. The vast majority of his works are unaccompanied melodies. Many are highly fragmentary in nature. Only three of Hopkins's extant melodies have accompaniments composed by himself, the others are all by his sister, Grace. His most ambitious work is his setting of 'The Battle of the Baltic' (after Thomas Campbell) for piano and two choruses (one representing the British and the other the Danes). Clearly this is the output of a novice composer.

²⁶ Hopkins's extant musical works (several of which are preserved with his letters) are held at the Bodleian Library and Campion Hall, University of Oxford.

²⁷ Christopher R. Wilson, 'Nineteenth-Century Musical Agogics as an Element in Gerard Manley Hopkins's Prosody', 84.

Table 1: Hopkins's Known Musical Compositions²⁸

First Line	Title	Author of the Text	Extant Settings by Hopkins
Again with pleasant green	Spring Odes 1	Robert Bridges	melody
Behold! The radiant Spring	Spring Odes 2	Robert Bridges	2 bars of melody
Does the south wind	Ruffling Wind	Richard Watson Dixon	none
Done to death by slanderous tongues	Song from <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	William Shakespeare	melody without words
Get you hence, for I must go	Song from <i>The Winter's Tale</i>	William Shakespeare	melody
If aught to oaten stop	<i>Ode to Evening</i>	William Collins	none
I have loved flowers	–	Robert Bridges	none
I love my lady's eyes	Song	Robert Bridges	melody
Margaret, are you grieving	Spring and Fall	Gerard Manley Hopkins	none
Of Nelson and the North	The Battle of the Baltic	Thomas Campbell	Two choirs with piano
Orpheus with his lute	–	William Shakespeare	none
Past like morning beam	Past like morning beam away	John Bridges	melody
Silent fell the rain	Fallen Rain (The Rainbow)	Richard Watson Dixon	melody
Sky that rollest over	Wayward Water	Richard Watson Dixon	melody
Summer ends now	Hurrahing in Harvest	Gerard Manley Hopkins	none
The crocus while the days are dark	The Year (The Crocus)	Coventry Patmore	none
The dappled die-away	Morning Midday and Evening Sacrifice	Gerard Manley Hopkins	none
The feathers of the willow	Song	Richard Watson Dixon	none
–	'Swan'	unknown	none
Thou didst delight my eyes	–	Robert Bridges	none
What shall I do for the land	–	Gerard Manley Hopkins	melody

²⁸ The information reproduced in this table is derived from John Stevens, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Musician', Appendix II in Humphrey House and Graham Storey (eds.), *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 464-5.

Who is Sylvia	–	William Shakespeare	two melodies
–	–	–	melody without words
–	–	–	melody without words
Setting of Barnes	–	William Barnes	none
Setting of Ancient Greek	–	Sappho Sophocles Pindar	none melody none
Setting of Latin	–	–	none

Liverpool and the Musical Outpouring

Although Hopkins had experimented with composing a liturgy as early as March 1873, and he mentioned in a letter to Richard Watson Dixon in June 1878 that he had written a tune to the latter's poem 'Feathers of the Willow',²⁹ he began to compose in earnest in 1880.

Intriguingly, Hopkins's late interest in composition first dates from his time in Liverpool, when he worked as one of several curates at St Francis Xavier's – a large Jesuit church in Everton – from January 1880 to July 1881. Liverpool in the early 1880s suffered particularly from over-crowding, due substantially to the successive waves of immigration from Ireland instigated originally by the potato famines of the 1840s. This large-scale Irish immigration was also significantly responsible for the city's substantial Roman Catholic population (to cater for which St Francis Xavier's, amongst other churches, had been built). Liverpool was also especially blighted by the poverty and squalor associated with nineteenth-century industrialisation. Everton, in the 1880s, was marked by poverty, misery, and frequent outbreaks of often lethal diseases, such as cholera, typhus, smallpox, dysentery, and tuberculosis. As a parish priest, Hopkins's life was hard, and his workload heavy; he was surrounded by abject poverty, and was in constant danger of catching a potentially lethal

²⁹ Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, 3.

infectious disease whilst tending to his parishioners.³⁰ His parish duties in Everton consisted of hearing confessions, teaching catechism classes, pastoral visiting to homes and hospitals, and (very occasional) sermons (for he was not a popular preacher). His biographer Norman White has commented that Hopkins's pastoral efforts were 'work for which he had no talent or inclination.'³¹ Hopkins himself felt that his parish work was futile: 'the drunkards go on drinking, the filthy, as the scripture says, are filthy still: human nature is so inveterate.'³² The misery of Hopkins's surroundings affected him profoundly. White has further observed that 'it came as a shock to this patriotic southerner to see the ghastly cost of his country's prosperity, to which Liverpool had largely contributed.'³³ Hopkins himself wrote to A. W. M. Baillie in May 1880 that 'I do not think I can be long here [...] I am brought face to face with the deepest poverty and misery in my district.'³⁴

Hopkins felt largely unable to write poetry whilst in Liverpool, although he did find solace in composing his airs (as he referred to his vocal compositions).³⁵ He wrote to Bridges in April 1881 that: 'Every impulse and spring of art seems to have died in me, except for music, and that I pursue under almost an impossibility of getting on. Nevertheless I still put down my pieces, for the airs seem worth it'.³⁶ His reference to the 'impossibility of getting on' reminds us of his heavy workload as a parish priest, which made finding time for writing music (or, indeed, poetry) very difficult. This is also affirmed in a letter to Dixon in which he complained that 'the parish work of Liverpool is very wearying to mind and body and leaves

³⁰ Hopkins's itinerant lifestyle as a Jesuit – between his ordination in 1877 and his appointment at University College Dublin in 1844, he worked as a priest in Chesterfield, London, Oxford, Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow – took a heavy toll on his health (both mental and physical). After suffering bouts of ill health for several years, he finally died in Ireland of typhoid fever. He also suffered from what would probably be diagnosed today as depression during his final years.

³¹ Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, 320.

³² Cited from *ibid.*, 323.

³³ Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, 319.

³⁴ Cited from *ibid.*, 321.

³⁵ Only two of Hopkins's poems were written during his time in Liverpool: 'Felix Randal' (April 1880) and 'Spring and Fall' (September 1880).

³⁶ Hopkins to Bridges (April 1881); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 124.

me nothing but odds and ends of time. There is merit in it but little Muse, and indeed 26 lines is the whole I have writ in more than half a year'.³⁷ And again when he wrote that 'Liverpool is of all places the most museless. It is indeed a most unhappy and miserable spot. There is moreover no time for writing anything serious – I should say for composing it, for if it were made it might be written.'³⁸ Hopkins again reiterated the growing importance of music to him in Liverpool and his frustration at having so little time to pursue it in a letter to Bridges of April 1881:

And in general I have become very musical of late, but graviter invita Minerva; rather I am afraid it may be Almighty God who is unwilling: for if I could conscientiously spend even a little time every day on it I could make great progress – not in execution: that is past praying for – but in composition and understanding. Who is the Muse of music by itself? Well, she is the only Muse that does not stifle in this horrible place.³⁹

Music became a welcome form of release during his challenging time in Liverpool. White has remarked that 'his music, the occasional Hallé orchestral concert, and the exchange of poems and comments with Dixon and Bridges were the only constant pleasures.'⁴⁰ Waterhouse has also commented, moreover, on the therapeutic value that composition held for Hopkins during this difficult time in his life:

He seems to have found in musical activity a release, which his poetry could never afford, from the bitter spiritual struggles which filled the later years of his life; struggles whose nature and course we can only dimly discern, but which burn the lines of 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' and the 'terrible sonnets'.⁴¹

³⁷ Hopkins to Dixon; cited from Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, 320.

³⁸ Cited from *ibid.*, 323.

³⁹ Hopkins to Bridges (27 April 1881); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 126.

⁴⁰ Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, 323.

⁴¹ John F. Waterhouse, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and Music', 228.

Those who would criticise Hopkins's music might do well to remember both the physical and the psychological context within which it was written. Beyond the wretchedness of his immediate surroundings, Hopkins, as a Jesuit, had submitted himself voluntarily to a severe and austere life, marked, in his case, by self-imposed penances. And there were long periods during his dark last years in which he felt totally estranged from his God. Writing music provided him with a form of much-needed and welcome escape.

Hopkins's Musical Aesthetic

Given Hopkins's commitment as a Jesuit priest, it might initially appear curious that his music consists entirely of settings of secular poetry. There is no extant sacred music. So, if writing music for religious purposes formed no part of his reasons for composing, what was he trying to do? As is apparent from his claim that he had invented a 'new style', Hopkins seemed truly to believe that he was following a new direction. In the same letter to Bridges in which he explained that in Liverpool 'every impulse and spring of art seems to have died in me', he also claimed that his airs 'have something in them in which other modern music has not got'.⁴² In relation to 'other modern music', Hopkins was most probably thinking of the sorts of parlour songs composed in Victorian England. These tend to be marked by regular, foursquare meters, rhythm, and phrasing; conservative forms; unadventurous harmonies; and simple text-setting and piano accompaniments.⁴³ In a letter to Coventry Patmore, Hopkins complained that, 'I am rather struck with the tameness of modern songs.'⁴⁴ Gutman has observed that Hopkins also 'disliked the more sophisticated and what he would call "artificial" types of music such as the Romantic music of his own day, because here the basic

⁴² Hopkins to Bridges (April 1881); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 124.

⁴³ On Victorian parlour music, see Derek B. Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour*, Expanded Second Edition (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

⁴⁴ Hopkins to Patmore; cited in William L. Graves, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Composer: An Interpretive Postscript', 148-9.

structure and interest is found in harmonic progressions, tone colours, mood – everywhere but the melody.⁴⁵ He particularly opposed the Austro-German music of his day.⁴⁶ Hopkins had high ideals for musical composition, believing great music to be the purest product of his notion of ‘inscape’.⁴⁷ As Gutman has commented: ‘In the mature Hopkins [...] music becomes the natural and spontaneous expression of the soul’.⁴⁸

Hopkins clearly wanted to create something completely different to the standard music of his day. He also expressed himself as being deeply frustrated with the musical ‘rules’ of harmony and counterpoint, which his long-suffering tutor Stewart tried to guide him through, writing that:

I took to counterpoint not for itself but as the solid foundation of harmony. But I soon began to suspect it was only an invention of theorists and a would-be or fancy music, for what is written in it? Not even the preludes of Bach’s fugues. There are two-part preludes which seem as if they ought to be in the second or third species and are not, the rules are in smithereens; then what is in true counterpoint?⁴⁹

As in his poetry, Hopkins sought to liberate himself from the musical conventions of his day, and developed a highly individual and experimental style. His compositional experimentations – despite their obvious short-comings as music – are actually based on a number of highly innovative ideas. These are particularly apparent in the areas of rhythm,

⁴⁵ Laura A. Gutman, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry’, 25.

⁴⁶ Kevin O’Connell links Hopkins’s dislike of contemporary Austro-German music to his own sense of English identity and even English nationalism. He has commented that ‘what is singularly missing in his [Hopkins’s] extensive musical observations is any acknowledgement of the central line of German music from Bach through Mozart and Beethoven to the romantic composers of his own time. This omission cannot have been a matter of ignorance for such an omnivorous polymath as Hopkins [...] The omission could of course be a matter of taste; but taste is never as disinterested a matter as it pretends to be. It is as if acknowledgement of musical supremacy would have meant conceding too vital a point to the country whose imperial ambitions most threatened those of England.’ Kevin O’Connell, ‘The Second Muse of Gerard Manley Hopkins’, 61.

⁴⁷ ‘Inscape’ is a term used by Hopkins to define the unique design and characteristics of every individual thing. He derived the idea from the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus. For Hopkins, ‘inscape’ was a fundamentally religious concept, revealing how and why God created each thing.

⁴⁸ Laura A. Gutman, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry’, 21.

⁴⁹ Cited from John F. Waterhouse, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and Music’, 232.

melody, the influence of plainchant, and his interest in Ancient Greek music. (Each of these is discussed in further detail below.)

Rhythmic Innovations

Similar to his well-known poetic innovation of ‘sprung rhythm’,⁵⁰ Hopkins longed to move away from four-square, balanced musical rhythms. Although O’Connell has asserted his view that ‘Hopkins’s idea of rhythm was conservative’,⁵¹ it is difficult not to claim that, as in poetry, his views on rhythm were actually amongst his most innovative. For Hopkins, traditional, four-square, symmetrical, balanced rhythms are analogous to regular or ‘running’ (poetic) rhythm. In a letter to Bridges of January 1881, Hopkins complained that:

The principle whether necessary or not, which is at the bottom of both musical and metrical time is that everything shd. [sic] go by twos and, where you want to be very strict and effective, even by fours [...] this is insisted on and recognised in modern music [...] Now this principle of symmetry and quadrature has, as I think, been carried in music to stifling lengths [...] and needs reforming [...] at least there is room, I mean, for a freer musical time.⁵²

The musical equivalent to ‘sprung rhythm’ is asymmetrical or syncopated rhythms. Thus Hopkins sought (though was not entirely successful) to get away from symmetrical, balanced rhythms, and to experiment with more unusual and less balanced rhythmic writing. In

⁵⁰ ‘Sprung rhythm’ is a metrical system used by Hopkins. It is based on one to four syllable feet (as opposed to the two or three found in regular English metrics), starting with a stressed syllable. Thus a number of stressed syllables are placed within a line, which allows a variable number of unstressed syllables. The number of unstressed syllables also varies significantly between lines. The rhythm is said to be ‘sprung’ as stressed syllables often occur sequentially (rather than in alternation with unstressed syllables, as in regular verse). ‘Sprung rhythm’ is intended to imitate natural speech (unlike the iambic pentameter). Although the term is often most closely associated with Hopkins, he claimed to have theorised, rather than invented, the concept, as he had observed its usage in folk song and old English poetry.

⁵¹ Kevin O’Connell, ‘The Second Muse of Gerard Manley Hopkins’, 59.

⁵² Hopkins to Bridges (26 January 1881); Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 119-120.

Hopkins's music, as Graves has commented, 'the conventional rhythmic framework is the basis for Hopkins's musical means; within this framework his "sprung" effects are occasionally placed.'⁵³ Example 1 reproduces Hopkins's setting of the poem 'Past like morning beam away' by John Bridges, brother of his friend Robert Bridges, in his own hand, which he completed in Liverpool in 1881.

Insert Example 1: Hopkins, 'Past like morning beam away' (after John Bridges, Liverpool 1881)⁵⁴

John Stevens has suggested that Hopkins might have been attracted to set this poem because of its rhythm.⁵⁵ The musical rhythm of 'Past like morning beam away' is marked by Hopkins's attempts to get away from symmetrical, balanced patterns. Thus he puts long note values on traditional weak beats of the bar (particularly beat two) and incorporates rhythmic variety by employing dotted rhythms. He also avoids creating symmetry by not using the type of simple, repeating rhythmic patterns, which one would expect to find in music of this type. The air is cast in ternary form; Stevens believes that the first verse is 'evidently intended to form a coda as well as an introduction'.⁵⁶

Melodic Innovations

Hopkins also sought innovation in his melodic style, in particular through his use of quarter-tone intervals (which he denoted by the use of a backwards flat sign).⁵⁷ As he complained about the conventional rules of counterpoint, he was also not a fan of the conventional rules

⁵³ William L. Graves, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Composer: An Interpretative Postscript', 150-151.

⁵⁴ Hopkins's manuscript copy of 'Past like morning beam away' is reproduced by permission of the Master and Community of Campion Hall, Oxford.

⁵⁵ John Stevens, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Musician', 459. For a discussion of the poetic rhythm of 'Past like morning beam away' and Hopkins's response to it, see Stevens, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins as Musician', 459-461.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁵⁷ Hopkins is well known for annotating his poetry manuscripts with diacritical markings. (He intended these to guide readers in the placing of the rhythmic stresses, as he repeatedly emphasised that his poetry should be read aloud.) Thus it is not surprising to encounter his use of additional (invented) musical notation.

of tonal harmony. His melodies are particularly characterised by an almost total lack of modulation. Bridges actually pulled Hopkins up on this, but Hopkins retorted in a letter that: ‘I look on modulation as corruption, the undoing of the diatonic style.’⁵⁸ In his melodic writing, Hopkins was highly influenced by folksong, plainchant, and the music of Ancient Greece. Gutman has observed that, in his music, Hopkins consciously sought ‘a type of naturalistic art’; further commenting that each of ‘the three types of music so important to him from his college days – English folk song, Greek music, plainsong [...] has a claim to being a naturalistic art.’⁵⁹ It is known that Hopkins particularly admired the music of the seventeenth-century English composer Henry Purcell.⁶⁰ His extant music, however, does not show any obvious influence of Purcell.⁶¹ Rather, his melodic lines – and the modes he often based them upon – frequently appear to be influenced by plainchant.

Plainchant

Hopkins’s interest in and knowledge of plainchant probably stemmed from his circumstances as a priest. Medieval plainchant was revived in the Roman Catholic Church during the nineteenth century, and Hopkins seems to have had an awareness of this.⁶² The influence of plainchant on Hopkins’s compositions can be seen, for example, in the melismatic passage of ‘Past like morning beam away’ on the words ‘scatter roses, roses, roses, roses’ (see Example

⁵⁸ Hopkins to Bridges; cited from John F. Waterhouse, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and Music’, 233.

⁵⁹ Laura A. Gutman, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry’, 22.

⁶⁰ In April 1879, Hopkins wrote a poem entitled ‘Purcell’, intended as a tribute to the earlier composer. He prefaced this with the words: ‘The poet wishes well to the divine genius of Purcell and praises him that, whereas other musicians have given utterance to the moods of man’s mind, he has, beyond that, uttered in notes the very make and species of man as created both in him and all men generally.’ ‘Purcell’ is briefly discussed in Michael Allis, *British Music and Literary Context: Artistic Connections in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 38-39; and also analysed in more depth in Eugene Hollahan, “‘most secret catgut of the mind: Hopkins, Music, and the Erasure of History’, 177-181.

⁶¹ Kevin O’Connell has associated Hopkins’s fondness for Purcell with his view that Hopkins sought a particularly English musical identity. He has commented that ‘Hopkins grew up in the midst of the Purcell revival and, unusually perhaps for a Victorian, considered music from a possessively English standpoint.’ Kevin O’Connell, ‘The Second Muse of Gerard Manley Hopkins’, 59-60.

⁶² On the plainchant revival in Victorian England, see Bennett Zon, *The English Plainchant Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

1, bars 21-34). Hopkins commented himself upon the influence of plainchant on his setting of 'Past like morning beam away' in a letter to Bridges of April 1881: 'I have a good setting of "Past like morning beam away" by your brother and am trying to harmonise it in four parts. But as it is partly in the Gregorian minor (which has no leading note) I expect I shall find it no easy task.'⁶³ Plainchant's emphasis on melody and lack of modulation particularly appealed to Hopkins. Gutman has observed that Hopkins was most likely also attracted to plainchant because it 'derives its melodies and rhythms not from artificial conventions [...] but from the natural sounds of speech [...] the most spontaneous human expression.'⁶⁴ We could take this further by drawing an analogy between his search for a medium close to natural speech in both poetry and in music. Ironically – given his dislike of German romantic music – Hopkins's pursuit of a melodic musical style close to natural speech is strikingly similar to Wagner's (despite the obvious difference in scale of application). O'Connell has commented that 'Hopkins was aware of Wagner and of his possible affinity with him, which would have caused him as much unease as his affinity with Walt Whitman, whom he described as "a very great scoundrel".'⁶⁵ Beyond being a general influence on his own melodies, Hopkins also set one fragment of ancient Greek by Pindar in plainchant. The biggest influence of plainsong on Hopkins, however, is probably its modality. This interest in modal writing liberated him from the problem of modulation (and the rules of tonal harmony). Hopkins was clearly aware of this advantage, writing to Bridges in April 1889 that: 'I allow no modulation: the result is that the tune is shifted into modes.'⁶⁶

⁶³ Hopkins to Bridges (27 April 1881); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 125. It is doubtful that Hopkins ever realised his ambition of making a four-part setting of 'Past like morning beam away' as no such piece is extant.

⁶⁴ Laura A. Gutman, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry', 24.

⁶⁵ Kevin O'Connell, 'The Second Muse of Gerard Manley Hopkins', 60.

⁶⁶ Hopkins to Bridges (29 April 1889); Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 305.

Ancient Greek Music

Hopkins's interest in the modes was not drawn exclusively from plainchant, but also from his interest in Ancient Greek Music, to which, as a classics scholar, he was naturally drawn.⁶⁷ As Gutman has observed, 'The foundations of Hopkins's musical philosophy, like those of his philosophy in general, are Platonic.'⁶⁸ Derived from Pythagoras, Hopkins was intrigued by the logical, mathematical foundations of musical acoustics. For him, as Gutman has further commented: 'Music becomes the natural and spontaneous expression of the soul, but also a mathematically verifiable system which through its ratio and proportion embodies universal truths.'⁶⁹ Beyond the acoustical foundations of sound, of course, Hopkins was sailing into murky waters here. Knowledge of Ancient Greek Music, and the modes on which it was most probably based, was very scant and speculative indeed in Hopkins's day. From his theoretical writings on music, it would appear that Hopkins's ideas on modes referred more to those of Ancient Greece than those of the Medieval Church (or rather, what Hopkins imagined them to have been). In particular, he often used a quarter-tone interval (notated by the backward flat sign, as noted above), which he believed to have been common in Ancient Greek Music.

However spurious Hopkins's theories and ideas about Ancient Greek Music might have been, his interest in it and knowledge of plainchant is obvious from his writings. He clearly believed that following this direction would enable him to create his new style. He wrote to Bridges in November 1884, for example, that:

Before leaving Stoneyhurst I began some music, Gregorian, in the natural scale of A [Aeolian mode], to Collins' 'Ode to Evening'. Quickened by the heavenly beauty of

⁶⁷ Hopkins was particularly interested in the incidental music which Sir Walter Parratt (1841-1924) composed for the historic modern-day performance of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* which was given at Balliol College, Oxford in June 1880. (This is generally credited as the first performance of the original version of an Ancient Greek tragedy in England.) Hopkins discussed his interest in Parratt's incidental music in a letter to Bridges of January 1881. See Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 123.

⁶⁸ Laura A. Gutman, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Music of Poetry', 15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

that poem I groped in my soul's very viscera for the tune and thrummed the sweetest and most secret catgut of the mind. What came out was very strange and wild and (I thought) very good. Here I began to harmonize it, and the effect of harmony well in keeping with that strange mode (which though it is, as far as notes go, the same as the descending minor, has a character of which the word minor gives you little notion) was so delightful that it seems to me (and I think you would find the same) as near a new world of musical enjoyment as in this old world we could hope to be. To the novelty of effect the rhythm and a continued suspense natural to the mode and easy to carry further contribute too. It is meant for a solo and a double choir singing in unison, the organ or a string band bearing all the harmony.⁷⁰

Hopkins's confidence in his innovations is once again evident here, though it not clear if he actually realised this ambition, as no extant copy of 'Ode to Evening' (which he apparently began before he left Stonyhurst early in 1884) survives. Given the influence of both Medieval plainchant and Ancient Greek Music (generally believed at that time to have consisted of unaccompanied melodies) we can actually consider it most appropriate that Hopkins concentrated on producing unaccompanied airs. Having abandoned tonality in favour of modality, harmonisation would have caused further problems, as he would have had to have come up with a new system, which was not based on the rules of tonal harmony (which he so despised). On the aesthetic level, Hopkins was clearly trying to do something very interesting with his music. Indeed, his desire to move away from regular, symmetrical rhythm and to liberate music from the tonality of the common-practice period by experimenting with modality actually foreshadows many of the key concerns of musical Modernism. Two key problems beset him, however. Firstly, he lacked the technical skills to

⁷⁰ Hopkins to Bridges (11 November 1884); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 199-200.

achieve these high ideals and ambitions in musical turns; secondly, such concerns were at least twenty years ahead of the times.

Conclusion: Reappraising Hopkins

As music, Hopkins's compositions might not be the uncut diamonds which lovers of his poetry might hope for. In general, as noted above, Hopkins's music has not been well received. Haldane Stewart – the English composer and former organist and choirmaster of Magdalen College, Oxford – has commented that 'his technical training was admittedly slender'.⁷¹ As noted above, Humphrey House has described it as 'elementary work' which shows 'no marked talent'.⁷² John Dykes Bower, the former organist of Durham Cathedral, meanwhile, has described Hopkins's airs as being of 'no particular interest'. Ironically, given Hopkins's conscious efforts at asymmetrical rhythmic experimentation, Dykes Bower has further criticised Hopkins's tendency to start his verses with 'a glaring false accent'.⁷³ Even Bridges – usually one of Hopkins's staunchest defenders – reproached him over his musical compositions on several occasions. Criticism from Bridges in fact prompted Hopkins to defend himself with 'I do not see that the music to the Spring Odes is monotonous. Rather it seems to me cheerful' in a letter of January 1881.⁷⁴ More recently, Hollahan has rebuked Hopkins for 'pretending to possess a cultural competence, in music, where he had little or none'.⁷⁵ Wilson, moreover, has described the music as 'unsophisticated, even mundane'; giving his opinion that 'Hopkins is certainly not among the best'.⁷⁶ Despite Hopkins's limitations, however, we should, as cautioned above, be very wary of judging his music too

⁷¹ Haldane Stewart on Hopkins; cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, 168.

⁷² Humphrey House on Hopkins; cited from *Ibid*, 169.

⁷³ John Dykes Bower on Hopkins; cited from *ibid*, 169.

⁷⁴ Hopkins to Bridges (26 January 1881); cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 119.

⁷⁵ Eugene Hollahan, "'most secret catgut of the mind": Hopkins, Music, and the Erasure of History', 157.

⁷⁶ Christopher R. Wilson, 'The Idea of "Musicality" in Hopkins' Verse', 29.

harshly. In considering his compositions, we must remember that Hopkins was a novice composer, with a limited technical training and very limited time available to hone his skills. To this we must add that he never heard any performances of his own works. Hearing workshops and performances of one's own compositions is, of course, a vital part of the training and development of any composer, as is receiving feedback from performers. Commenting on Hopkins's creative absorption in music at the close of his life, Claude Colleer Abbott has remarked that 'one is tempted to think that music instead of poetry became his dominant passion [...] had he reached that stage in poetry when music rather than words seemed the natural creative continuation?'⁷⁷ Abbott has even gone so far as to speculate further that 'my feeling is that music would have absorbed him [Hopkins] had he lived.'⁷⁸

As noted above, many of Hopkins's musical aesthetics – particularly the search for new rhythms and melodic materials, and experiments with modality – actually foreshadow the innovations of musical Modernism (as his poetic innovations do in the field of literature). Haldane Stewart has actually commented that Hopkins's 'treatment of Gregorian melody was more adventurous than purists would have approved, as if he were jumping a generation and anticipating the modern modal style'.⁷⁹ This is remarkably perceptive, as Hopkins's ideas on modality certainly chime very strongly with the modal experiments which many early twentieth-century composers (as diverse as Bartók, Stravinsky, and Vaughan William) were fascinated by. Stewart, continuing in this perceptive mode, intriguingly further comments that 'his [Hopkins's] artistic attitude was that of reaching forward beyond the restrictions of [...] his time'.⁸⁰ It is hard not to agree strongly with this. Indeed Hopkin's aesthetic ideas – if not

⁷⁷ Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, xxxiii.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, xxxiii.

⁷⁹ Haldane Stewart on Hopkins; cited from Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, 168.

⁸⁰ Haldane Stewart on Hopkins; cited from *ibid*, 168.

his musical realisations of these – reached forwards into the realms of Modernism. His true musical significance, indeed, seems to lie here, in the aesthetic sphere. Unfortunately, he lacked the technical abilities to achieve his aesthetic goals in his own musical works, or, to borrow Graves’s astute comments, ‘his imagination outstripped his means’.⁸¹

The musicality of Hopkins’s poetry has been acknowledged by many commentators on his writing. Wilson, for instance, has suggested that this is because ‘Hopkins’s mode of thinking and talking about poetry, his “mindset”, was that of the musician’.⁸² Linking the musicality of his poetry to his innovative approach to poetic rhythm, Wilson has further observed that ‘it is in the use of Romantic musical agogics – tempo modifications, rhythmical inflections, and emphasis (including dynamics) – that Hopkins’s poetic voice is most obviously musical.’⁸³ Abbott has also commented that ‘some of his [Hopkins’s] earlier poems seem to aspire to the state of music.’⁸⁴ For Hollahan, Hopkins’s use of sprung rhythm embodies the most musical aspect of his poetry, as it ‘can be understood as a “convergence” of the music of poetry and the poetry of music’.⁸⁵ As also noted above, there is also a shared desire to emulate natural speech in both Hopkins’s poetic and his musical output, and his innovative use of rhythm – in both art forms – is crucial to this. Intriguingly, the poetry of Hopkins has fascinated many composers, as diverse as Michael Tippett, Earl George, John Paynter, Lennox Berkeley, Martin Shaw, Franz Reizenstein, Grace Williams, Elizabeth Maconchy, and his fellow writer-composer Anthony Burgess, who have all been inspired to set his poetry to music.⁸⁶ Although his poetry, with its use of archaic and arcane vocabulary,

⁸¹ William L. Graves, ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins as Composer: An Interpretive Postscript’, 148.

⁸² Christopher R. Wilson, ‘Nineteenth-Century Musical Agogics as an Element in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Prosody’, 76.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸⁴ Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, xxxiii.

⁸⁵ Eugene Hollahan, ““most secret catgut of the mind”: Hopkins, Music, and the Erasure of History”, 162.

⁸⁶ Grace Williams’s *Six Gerard Manley Hopkins Poems* (1958) are particularly noteworthy. As a composer, Williams actually shared a number of musical concerns with Hopkins, especially a strong interest in modality and rhythmic experimentation, which, in her case, led her to following the natural inflections of the Welsh language. (Coincidentally, Hopkins himself was also influenced by the Welsh language, which he learnt during his time at St Bueno’s.) For her song-cycle, Williams chose to set: ‘Pied Beauty’, ‘Peace’, ‘Spring and Fall’,

sprung rhythm, complex syntax and imagery, resonant alliterations, and startling juxtapositions, pose considerable challenges to composers, the inherent musicality of his verse seems to ask for musical setting and expression.

'No worst, there is none...', 'Hurrahing in Harvest', and 'The Windhover'. Intriguingly, her cycle includes two of the four of Hopkins's own poems that he ever set himself ('Spring and Fall' and 'Hurrahing in Harvest'), although it is highly unlikely that Williams would have been aware of this. On Williams, see Rhiannon Mathias, *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music: A Blest Trio of Sirens* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).