HUBERT PARRY AND ENGLISH DIATONIC DISSONANCE

by Jeremy C. Dibble

A central issue in nineteenth-century music, and one most crucial to its understanding, is the process and development of harmonic practices, leading eventually to the breakdown of tonality. Certainly within the study of harmonic advances made by such innovators as Chopin, Liszt and Wagner, the discussion tends to focus upon the intensification of chromaticism, together with its own complex treatments of dissonance. It would indeed be foolish to dispute that chromaticism has pride of place in musical literature on this period, but in emphasising the point so strongly, we may obscure parallel harmonic developments that were taking place at a similar time.

Because of the historical significance of chromaticism, we have been persuaded to ignore the role and expressive possibilities that were being less overtly explored in the field of diatonicism. Some scepticism may also have a part to play in the neglect of this important area; a diatonic nineteenth-century composer such as Mendelssohn has been disparaged for the sanctimonious use of simple harmony in his motets, songs, and some of the lesser choruses of the oratorios (particularly towards cadential points). Such weak instances cannot be compared with those on an obviously higher plane of inspiration, as found for example in the introductions to both the *Scottish* and *Reformation* symphonies. Examples in Schumann are equally numerous (take the songs *Hochlandisches Wiegenlied* or *Auf einer Burg*, and the 3rd movement of the *Rhenish* symphony), as they are in Brahms (one famous example being the main theme of the last movement of the 1st Symphony) and even Wagner, where diatonicism serves to represent dramatic elements symbolically opposite to those represented by chromaticism; such characteristics can be observed from small beginnings in *Tännhauser* through to a full realisation in *Parsifal*. (This point is most interestingly expounded by Arnold Whittall in his contributory chapter to Lucy Beckett's book "Parsifal".)

From these examples it is evident that even though diatonicism occupied a subsidiary position in terms of a foreground harmonic language, it nevertheless commanded the attention of all the mainstream composers; yet with chromaticism as the main vehicle of increasing harmonic dissonance, the use of diatonicism itself as another source of dissonance has received far less consideration.

One of the most significant developments in diatonic dissonance began to emerge in England in the first decades of the century. Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876) stands as the first major figure in a line of nineteenth-century English composers who began to widen the vocabulary of diatonic harmony. S. S. Wesley, nephew of John Wesley the founder of Methodism, and son of the composer Samuel Wesley (1766–1837), was the result (some might even say the victim!) of a rigorous church upbringing, coloured by a musical education from his father. Consequently his entire career was spent in the service of Anglican Cathedral music, which not surprisingly produced an output dominated by anthems. The quality of these pieces is highly variable, nearly all of them containing passages marred by watery Mendelssohnian imitation or turgid fugal writing; one such example *Ascribe unto the Lord* (c. 1852)

sets out with a strong recitative and chorus opening, only to be flawed by poor cadences and a sentimental solo quartet for high voices sounding rather like a Victorian parlour song. His most harmonically consistent anthems, *Cast me not away from thy presence* (1847), *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace* and *Wash me throughly* (both from an edition of his collected anthems of 1853) are the most concise illustrations of his mature style, exemplifying in concentration, diatonic methods that tend to be more sparsely distributed in other anthems.

In *Cast me not away*, the earliest of the three in question, Wesley can be seen to be making use of several methods of dissonance, some of which can be readily formulated (See Example 1):–

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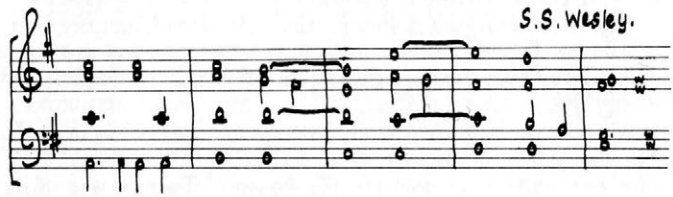
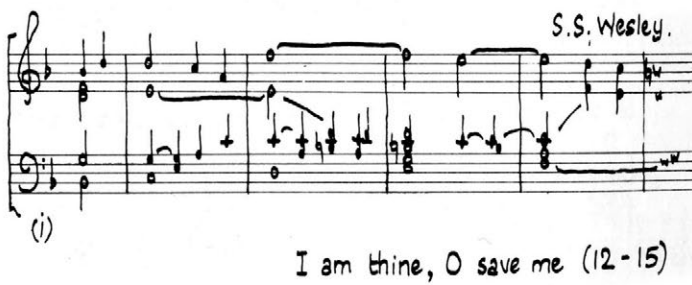


(i) The prominence of double suspensions; take bar 24 as a simple case in point. However, from such isolated moments, passages like 17–20 demonstrate a technique whereby a comparatively slow rising bass line supports a series of these double suspensions (in this case of the $\frac{9}{7}$–$\frac{8}{6}$ variety) for the space of three bars before subsiding. Further use of the method can be found in the anthem *I am thine, O save me* (1857), bars 12–15, and the *Te Deum* from the *Morning and Evening Service in E* (1841–44), see "everlasting Son of the Father" (see example 2).

Ex. 2.



(ii) Needless to say, there are many examples of the same type of rising bass as seen in (i) that use single suspensions; see *Wash me throughly*, bars 75–79 and again the *Te Deum*, "Thou art the King of Glory O Christ" (see examples 3 and 4).

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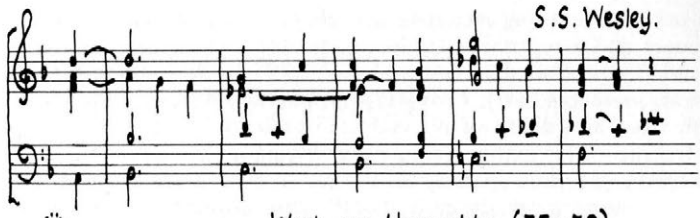

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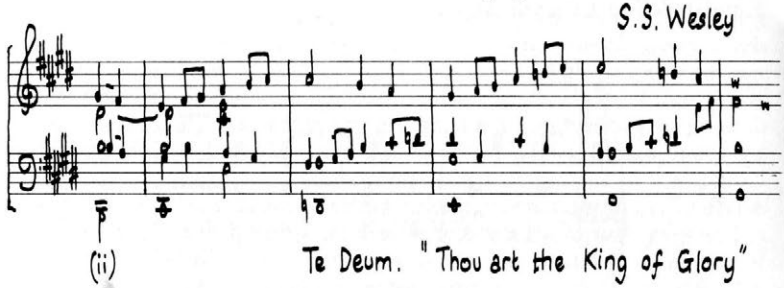

(iii) Wesley is particularly fond of a suspension, be it single or double, on the mediant. First of all, two instances in *Ascribe unto the Lord* and *I am thine* (both in fact thematically and harmonically related, see example 5): both show a progression where the suspension on the mediant is approached by the supertonic 7th with the suspension in the top line. Occasionally this occurs in different voices as in *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace*, bars 3–4 (example 6).

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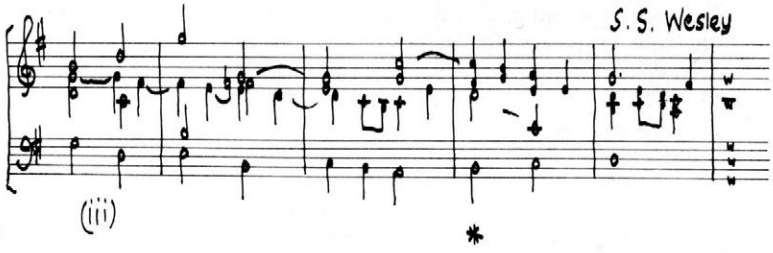

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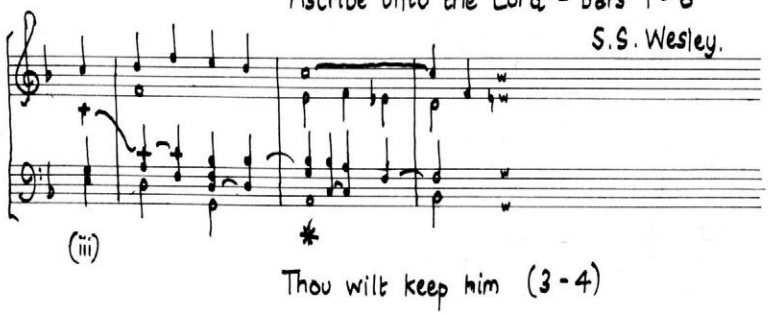

With regard to the double suspensions on the mediant, the anthem *Thou Judge of quick and dead* (extracted from *Let us lift up our heart*, 1853) bars 11–12, and *Cast me not away* 49–50 serve as good examples.

It can be observed that Wesley achieved much of his characteristic type of dissonance by the use of various inversions of dominant and secondary 7ths or 9ths. *Ascribe unto the Lord*, mentioned earlier as having a strong opening recitative and chorus, shows Wesley maintaining a constant level of diatonic dissonance over a period of four bars, the voices frequently clustering (see bars 2 and 3 of chorus) in the sequence of suspensions. Harmonic collisions of this nature are a common feature of Wesley's part-writing, occurring in a variety of situations.

The cadence of *Thou wilt keep him* is one such example (example 7) which is intensified by the brief move to the subdominant; similar moments exist in *Wash me throughly*, bars 28–30 and 51–54 (example 8) and in *I am thine*, bars 9–10. The technique of sequence has already been cited in connexion with suspensions (see *Ascribe unto the Lord* above), but it is further adapted to longer progressions that are often the result of two diverging lines in treble and bass, thickened by parallel and equally conjunct inner parts. Two examples, expressive in their use of the falling 7th, can be found in the *Magnificat* from the *Evening Service in E* (see "He hath put down the mighty") and *Thou wilt keep him*, bars 46–51 (see examples 9 and 10).

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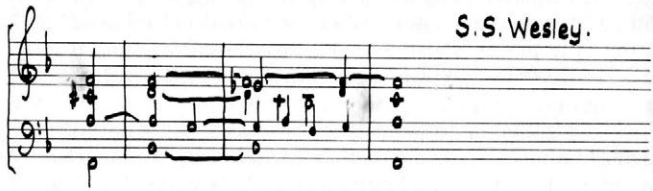
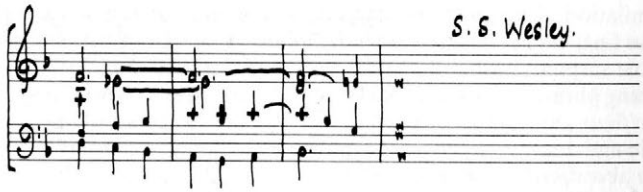


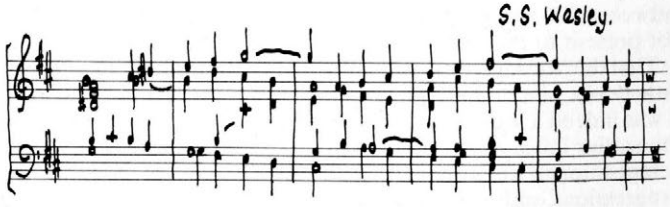
Thou wilt keep him - cadence.

Ex. 8.



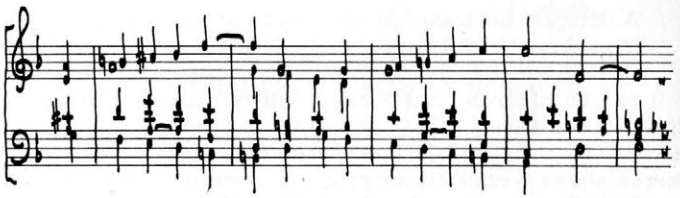
Wash me throughly - bars 28-30

Ex. 9.



Magnificat "He hath put down the mighty"

Ex. 10.

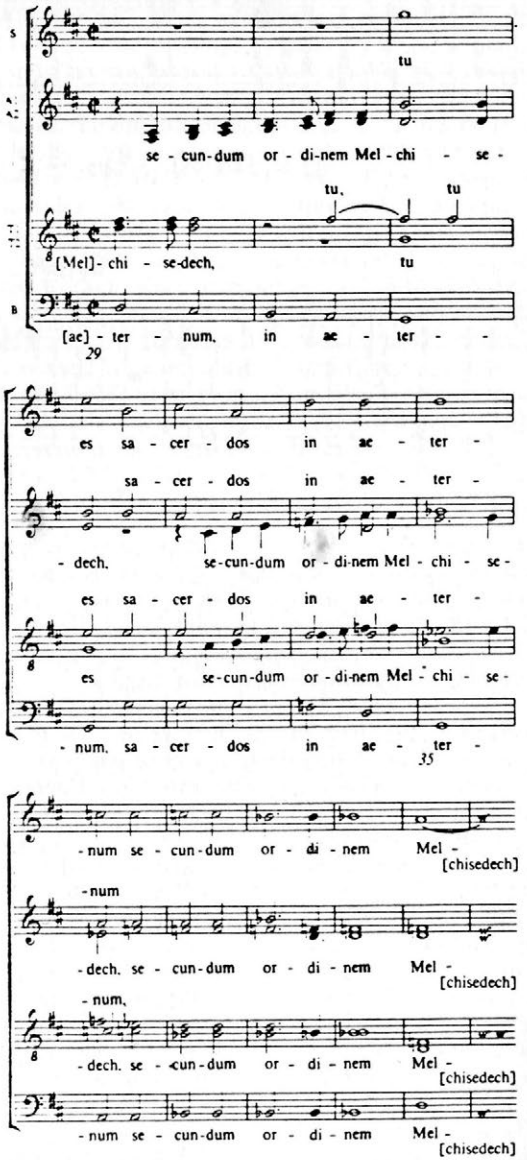


In seeking sources for the formation of Wesley's harmonic language, the examination of music by contemporary Europeans such as Mendelssohn and Spohr is only partially fruitful. Certainly as a young composer of the 1830s, he "drank deep of Mendelssohn" (see *The Musical Wesleys 1703–1876* – Erik Routley) which comes across in one of his earliest published anthems *Blessed be the God and Father* (before 1835), and some of the gentle chromaticisms present in *Wash me throughly* are a product of Spohr's influence. Yet the most likely precedents for the higher diatonicism in S. S. Wesley's best music can be traced back to Renaissance and Baroque models that he had come to know through the interest of his father Samuel Wesley. Samuel Wesley's imagination had been fired by regular visits to the Portuguese Embassy Chapel where he had the opportunity to hear a large repertoire of 16th, 17th and 18th century music (the London Embassies of Catholic countries were the only places where Roman music could be sung freely). His friend, and organist of the Portuguese Chapel, Vincent Novello,[1] who more than anyone else had strongly encouraged the use of early music in the enrichment of the liturgy, was no doubt instrumental in persuading Samuel Wesley into composing a substantial number of Latin works (see motets *In Exitu Israel, Exultate Deo, Omnia Vanitas, Tu es Sacerdos*, and a mass, *De Spiritu Sancto* dedicated to the Pope!). The best of these look back to the solemnity and sonorous textures of the Italian baroque masters, notably a short six-part motet *Tu es Sacerdos* (1827) which betrays the composer's assimilation of higher diatonic passages (see example 11a) in early choral works such as the final chorus of Carissimi's *Jephthah* "Plorate filii Israel" (where the resulting double suspensions build up over the word "lamentamini" are reflected in Wesley's opening phrase, see examples 11b and 12), and in later works in a similar vein like the *Crucifixus* settings by Lotti or Caldara (see Wesley bars 29–40) in which sequences of single and double suspensions are virtually ubiquitous. Other likely material to have been absorbed by Samuel Wesley were the Latin motets of Purcell (also written for the Catholic liturgy in Queen Mary's private chapel at Somerset House), namely *Jehovah quam multi sunt* and *Beati omnes* which were becoming known at that time through the publication of five volumes of Purcell's sacred music by Vincent Novello between 1826 and 1829; both display the same higher degree of diatonicism that are not present to the same extent in Purcell's English works.

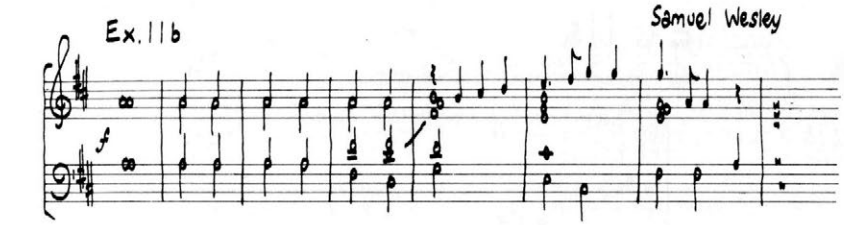
That the Wesley's were conversant with the music of these composers there can be little doubt, since they are all included in the Vincent Novello private library;[3] hence it was indeed a logical and irresistable step for S. S. Wesley to take in incorporating the earlier Latin works and those of this father into his own music, particularly in a compositional environment that was in general so arid. All the harmonic progressions outlined in points (i), (ii) and (iii) earlier are present in one form or another in the works quoted above, emphasising that it was essentially sacred music of previous eras that was responsible for the formation of S. S. Wesley's higher

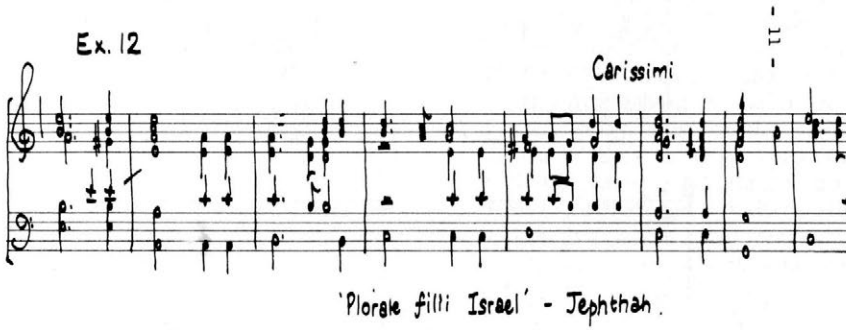
Ex. 11a.

Ex.1 from Samuel Wesley: *Tu es sacerdos* (1827)



Tu es Sacerdos - bars 29 - 40





diatonic language. In the music of Wesley's contemporaries, the few examples of the same type of harmonic devices are extremely sporadic. The second movement of Mendelssohn's Octet (bars 41–48 and 76–83) displays a similar polyphonic accumulation of dissonance as discussed in point (i) and likewise in Schumann's *Overture, Scherzo and Finale* (see the *Finale* bars 201–210) the continual piling up of thirds over a rising bass produces almost identical results.

Samuel Sebastian Wesley stands almost alone in his attitude towards diatonicism in England during the first half of the nineteenth century. By the 1850s, Mendelssohn's popularity had bitten deep and most composers, whether in the sacred (Ouseley, Stainer, Walmisley) or secular (Sterndale Bennett) world of music had failed to forge an individual style. There are many reasons why this should have happened. Firstly a rift was growing steadily between music in and out of church, mainly due to an inflexible, puritanical and conservative Anglican clergy[3] who were suspicious of any continental innovations. Handel and Mendelssohn, the staple diet of almost every choral society in the land,[4] had been endorsed the "most suitable" music for worship,[5] and with the Cathedrals exercising their influence in staging the country's major music festivals, secular advances by our own composers (such as Balfe or Wallace) were sadly restricted; Hugo Pierson even found it necessary to seek voluntary exile in Germany because of his dissatisfaction with the English tradition. Secondly with the upsurge of interest in romantic opera through the Italians on the one hand, and Weber, Berlioz and eventually Wagner on the other, differences and intolerances were set to become even more pronounced. The years surrounding 1860 were witness to the chasm that was gradually forming between this country and the rest of the Europe; *Tristan and Isolde* had been finished in 1859 and was first performed six years later, while Ouseley and Stainer were contributing to and helping to form the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* which appeared

in 1861. In addition, Ouseley, as Professor of Oxford, had instituted the first examination papers for the MUS.BAC. and MUS.DOC. in 1862 (following after Cambridge in 1856) which give a comprehensive picture of the requirements of any English musician. Candidates before 1862 had merely to submit a musical composition (or "exercise" as it was known) exemplifying proficiency in the techniques of five-part vocal writing, an aria, an unaccompanied quartet and a five-part fugue, and after its approval, to have it publicly performed. Inevitably there is hardly a glimmer of inspiration in any of these pieces, and with the institution of written examinations, the English pedagogy became further entrenched in its views; ones that were to die hard, since John Stainer in his pamphlet *A few words to candidates for the degree of MUS.BAC.OXON 1897*,[6] is quite prepared to reiterate the same musical values and criteria that Ouseley had championed almost half a century earlier. It is no surprise therefore that several generations failed to produce any really significant music since they were misled into believing that the outmoded methods imparted to them were acceptable and established them as "qualified" composers. As a reaction to offensive Wagnerisms, the diatonicism of Handel, Mendelssohn and the four-part, standardised hymn-tune harmonisations emanating from the church, evolved into something of a moral alternative, from which a general view transpired that while new music from the continent could be, and was performed here, and tolerated within reason, the prospect of themselves actually adopting such techniques was regarded with reservation.

John Stainer (1840–1901), who succeeded Ouseley as Professor at Oxford in 1889, having previously occupied the post of organist at Magdelen College, Oxford, and St Paul's Cathedral, was one composer who preferred to distance himself from European modernisms. Mendelssohn stylistically dominates the vast majority of his anthems, and yet one early example demonstrates clearly the obvious ability that Stainer possessed in manipulating diatonic dissonance. *Drop down ye heavens from above*, written in 1866 (while the composer was only 26), makes use of an angular motive, in close and irregular imitation, producing a paragraph of dissonance even more extended than any in the most intense of S. S. Wesley's (see bars 1–18). As the exception in an otherwise vapid output, it shows Stainer's positive recognition of Wesley's pioneering efforts, and an attempt to advance the technique further still by a greater concentration of higher diatonic chords. Yet the fine quality of the first 18 bars are lamentably flawed by a dull recitative and perfunctory fugue, undoubtedly influenced by contemporary pedagogical attitudes.

Hubert Parry's early musical training was begun in the organ loft, while a student at Eton College, under the supervision of Sir George Elvey, organist and Director of Music at St George's Chapel Windsor. In 1867, just before leaving Eton for Oxford, he took the Oxford Mus.Bac. with the exercise *O Lord, Thou has cast us out*[7] which was subsequently performed and published. Thus, he was raised in the same manner as Wesley, Stainer, Ouseley, Sterndale Bennett and a host of other nineteenth-century composers. However, through the acquaintance and instruction of Edward Dannreuther, Parry's style was quick to expand under the influences of Schumann, Brahms, Liszt and Wagner, which became embodied in the large number of chamber works composed between 1876 and 1880.

During this period of interest in concerted music, Parry's English diatonic heritage was far less pronounced in his style, owing to a conscious (even self-conscious) attempt to emancipate himself from the moral prejudices and the anthem-writing which are apparent in his earliest works. His first choral commission, the dramatic

cantata *Prometheus Unbound* (1880), is essentially a Wagnerian work in terms of motivic construction and harmony, yet passages, particularly in the second part of the cantata, betray Parry's prevailing strong attachment to the diatonic tradition. The soprano aria "The Spirit of the Hour" exemplifies a purely diatonic section inserted between two chromatic ones, the reason being one of highlighting textual contrasts; the chromatic representing the sensual, the dreamful, and at times the tragic, while diatonicism expresses the noble and the ideal (see example 13); in short, a moral sentiment that emerged from the previously mentioned restraints of the past two or three decades.

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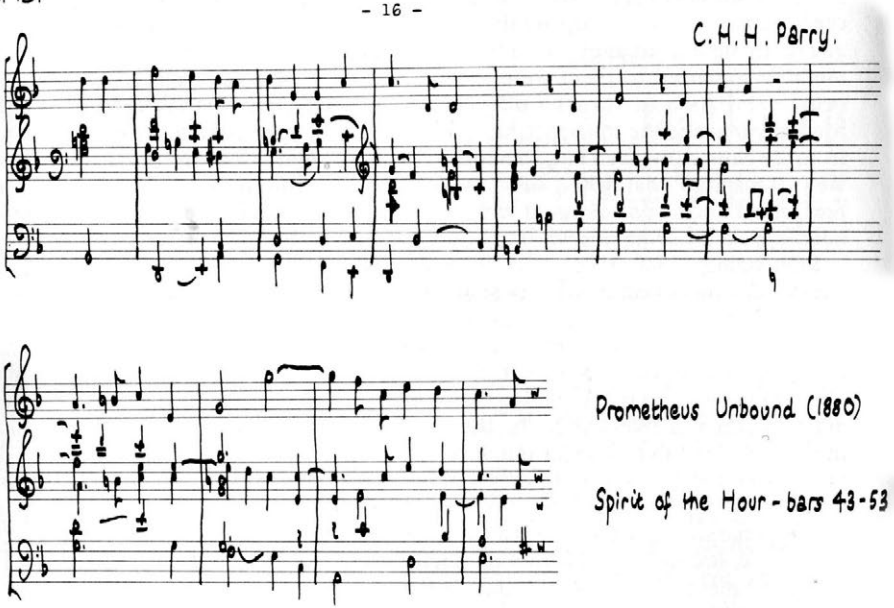

Initially the harmony sets out much in the form of a hymn-tune, but very soon it expands with the use of imitative counterpoint, sequences of suspensions and the gradual addition of extra parts – in this case from four to six. The resulting diatonic dissonance undoubtedly finds its origin in Wesleyan practices, but Parry's vocabulary is wider (take those of bars 7–9 in the example provided) and exploited with greater resource. One other aspect of this example is Parry's use of the pedal-point in diatonic passages of this nature. The technique again looks back to the church environment, where the improvising organist could conveniently rest a foot on a dominant or tonic pedal, over which dozens of perfunctory bars would ensue. Parry's pedal-points frequently act as the basis for larger diatonic accumulations, as is evident in the slow movement of the Piano Quartet in A flat (1879) or in Meshullemeth's aria "Long since in Egypt's plenteous land" from *Judith*[8] (see example 14).

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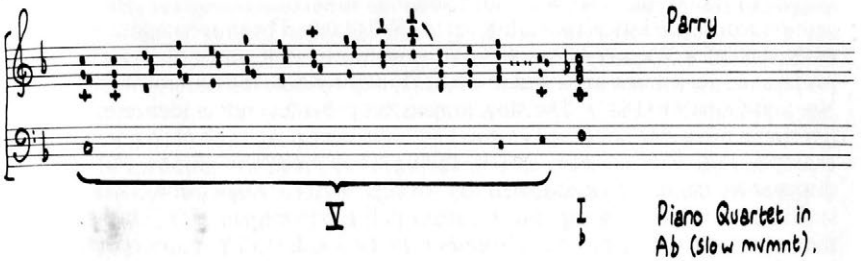
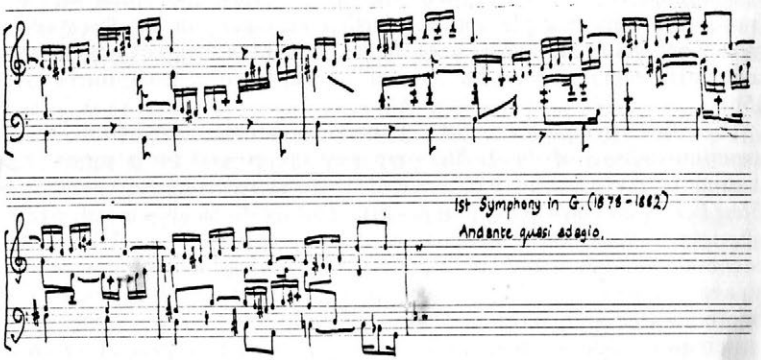


Ex. 15a.



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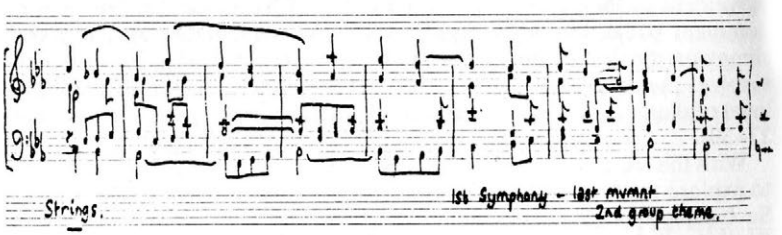
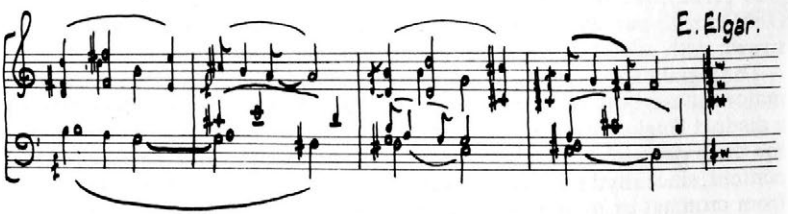


Ex. 15c.



Elgar - 'For the Fallen' "Flesh of her flesh they were, Spirit of her spirit."

After *Prometheus*, which established Parry's reputation, festival commissions began to flood in, for both instrumental and choral works. Moreover, the pronounced chromaticisms leading up to 1880 that had been accompanied by Parry's enthusiasm for Wagner, were dissipating in favour of a richer diatonic language, a preference very much apparent in his next major work, the unpublished Symphony No. 1 in G major (1882). The slow movement provides sure evidence of the type of harmonic procedure outlined in point (i), now occurring in an elaborated form (see example 15a, bars 62–65); and in falling away from the climax, the sequential dissonance mainly characterised by strings of 7–6 suspensions looks forward strikingly to similar contrapuntal passages in Elgar (compare with "Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit", from *For the Fallen*; here Elgar appropriates Parry's technique of harmonic sequence, transferring the dissonance, again of 7–6 suspensions, consistently between the upper voices, and firmly within a diatonic framework; see example 15c). A further example can be observed in the last movement where extensive use of the pedal-point, a five-part texture and the same sequential technique form the basis of the main second-group theme (see example 15b).

The First Symphony marks Parry's departure away from the harmonic experimentalisms of the 1870s, preparing the ground for a series of essentially diatonic works that were to culminate in his most widely known choral achievement, *Blest Pair of Sirens* of 1887. In this work, diatonic dissonance is raised to a new level of sophistication, the previously mentioned techniques of Wesley and Stainer becoming a standard and intrinsic part of the harmonic vocabulary, subordinate to an even higher range of chords and appoggiatura groups. The 30-bar prelude, very briefly paraphrasing the opening of Wagner's Overture to *Die Meistersinger* (itself an extremely diatonic work in its initial bars), soon brings sequential single and double suspensions into play (again using the type of voice exchange seen in the 2nd movement of the Symphony), to be followed by an intense build-up above (i) a dominant pedal, (ii) an inverted tonic pedal, culminating in the main harmonic climax on the first inversion of the subdominant (over which a double appogiatura resolves – see bar 21). From this point the tension subsides significantly, although the level of diatonic chords remains unchanged, particularly towards the cadence (bars 27–30).

With the harmonic precedent firmly established, the 8-part choral forces proceed to explore the further diatonic possibilities, as is borne out in the first vocal phrase. Such triple appoggiaturas as found on the word "joy" (bar 34) figure prominently in Parry's style, especially as the result of considerable polyphonic forces; comparable progressions can be found for example in the double-choir Coronation anthem *I was glad* (1902), the double-choir anthem *God is our hope* (1913), and *De Profundis* (1891) for 12-part chorus. Likewise, the extended pedal-point and final cadences are strewn with added diatonicism, brought about by tight-knit contrapuntal writing.

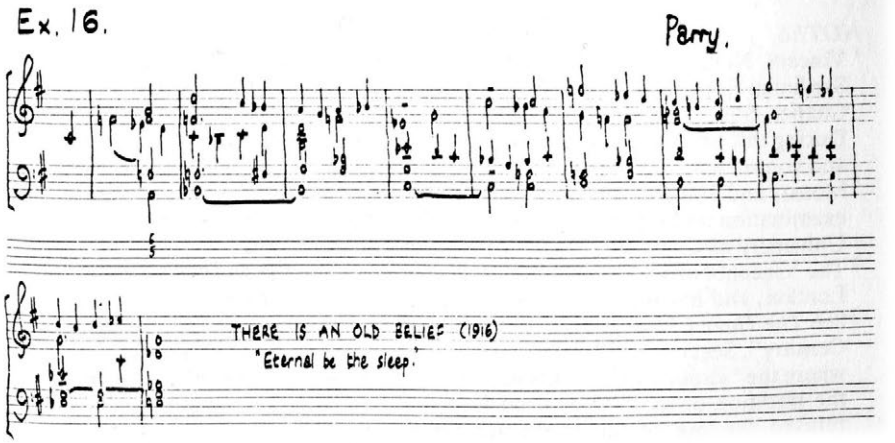
The significance of *Blest Pair of Sirens* is not only the fact that it was Parry's first major success both here and abroad; by reaching a new peak in diatonic dissonance, a distinct English style could be seen emerging which had been denied this country for the most part of two hundred years. The essence of *Blest Pair* is its harmonic content, since rhythmically it verges on the point of being almost dull, rarely straying from crotchet or minim note-values. In spite of this, the higher order of diatonic chords and appoggiaturas provides a canvas for the genesis of new and characteristic melodic material. The phrase "O may we soon again renew that song" that begins the

final section of the work, is based around the contour of the falling 7th, given added colour and impetus by the initial 7th chord on the supertonic. Such phraseology is common in Parry's music, and obviously had considerable influence on his contemporaries in England. There are many instances of the same melodic shapes in Elgar, both in choral works such as *The Apostles* (1903) – see the Chorus of Angels from the scene "At the Sepulchre", or *The Kingdom* (1906) – see "At the Beautiful Gate", or in instrumental works like the Violin Sonata (1918). Together with the falling 7th phrase patterns, Elgar used the interval in an even more fundamental way as is evident in the *Enigma Variations* of 1899 (see variations 9, 12 and the Finale), a work still firmly entrenched in the English diatonic tradition.

The other significant factor that *Blest Pair* confirmed, was Parry's full embrace of the diatonic style along with his decision to resist Wagnerian tendencies, even though he had shown his ability to handle the apparatus. There is but one brief Wagnerian moment in *Blest Pair*, where to the words "harsh din", the Tristan Chord rings out, as if to convey the idea that such chords could only be reserved to express evil or immorality.

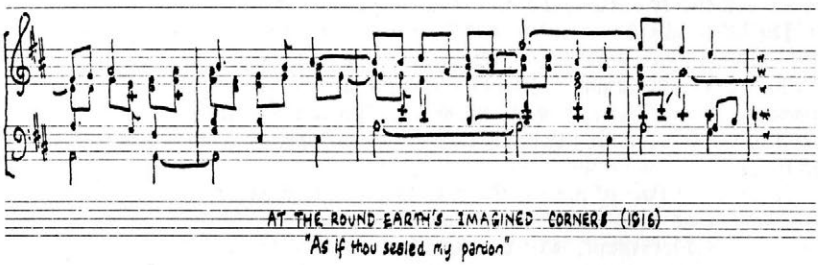
After *Blest Pair of Sirens*, the role of diatonic dissonance in Parry's music is a quintessential one, both in the large-scale choral and symphonic idioms. His supreme achievement, written during the 1st War, and the last years of the composer's life, return once more to the source of influence that was originally responsible for the forging of an individual English musical voice. The *Songs of Farewell* (1915–1917) stand as Parry's most mature choral utterances, marking the final stage of his diatonic explorations.

Of the six unaccompanied motets, the last three for 6, 7 and 8 voices (double choir) respectively provide the best and tersest examples of Parry's consummate technique. A strict adherence to Renaissance and Baroque methods of imitation and antiphonal writing when confronted with large forces, is combined successfully with an experimental approach to vocal texture. The Wesleyan formulae are forever present, as can be seen in No. 4 *There is an old belief:* the last point of imitation, "Eternal be the sleep" is merely a reiteration of the rising bass and sequences of single and double suspensions, as discussed in points (i) and (ii), and there are many mediant suspensions, as in point (iii). But what is most immediately apparent is the



overwhelming concentration and consistency of dissonance in every bar. The same analysis can be applied to the last bars of No. 5 *At the round earth's imagined corners* which closes with similar imitation and perhaps Parry's most intense and poignant pedal-point. Even the four-bar cadential passage, which manages to include a brief excursion to the flat submediant, incorporates some of Parry's most subtle dissonant progressions, as figuring will bear out (see examples 16 and 17).

Ex. 17. Parry.



Today, when the name of Hubert Parry is often dismissed, and despite the fact that little of his music is known, he was responsible, if not for laying the foundations of the English diatonic style, then for consolidating its position and giving it substance. His influence was to reach out, not only to his younger contemporaries such as Elgar, but a line of composers that persisted well into the 20th century. Composers such as Vaughan Williams (take his *Sea Symphony* and *Toward the Unknown Region* as two examples), William Walton and Arthur Bliss (particularly their ceremonial music), Gerald Finzi and Herbert Howells all betray links with their nineteenth-century leader. In returning to the first question of parallel developments with chromaticism in the nineteenth century, Parry's music affirms the importance of diatonicism as a legitimate method of expression that is worthy of comparison with the innovations of the continent.

NOTES

[1] Vincent Novello (1781–1861) began his musical career as a chorister in the Sardinian Embassy Chapel Choir. He became organist at the Portuguese Embassy Chapel, South Street at the tender age of 17, and remained there for 25 years. During this time he compiled numerous collections of sacred music of both native and continental composers, was responsible for the first regular performances of Mozart and Haydn Masses, and amongst his major editorial assignments was the examination and report on the great collection of manuscripts bequeathed to the University of Cambridge by Viscount Fitzwilliam in 1816.

[2] The Vincent Novello private library is now housed in the Royal College of Music, London, and has recently been catalogued for the first time.

[3] See *The Three Choirs Festival* by Watkins Shaw (1854), chapter 3 "The Nineteenth Century". Section 2, "The Later Nineteenth Century" highlights the crisis of 1875, where the "strains of Clericalism, Tractarianism and Puritanism" almost destroyed the tradition of the 150 year old Festival. The Dean and Chapter of Worcester refused the use of the Cathedral for the Festival, arguing that the musical

performances had nothing to do with Christian worship, and that the statutory Cathedral services were completely abandoned for Festival week. No secular concerts were held, not even the *Messiah* was performed." "The Mock Festival" consisted of no more than six choral services at which some of the worst English cathedral music was sung (reaching down as far as Smart in F and Attwood in D).

[4] Ibid. Watkins Shaw. Chapter 3, section 1, pp. 32–34.

[5] Parry's diaries of 1864 and 1865 (from his Eton days) record numerous choral services from St George's Chapel Windsor in which Mendelssohn and Handel are the composers most frequently performed.

[6] Bodleian – 26327 E6 (4).

[7] Introduction to *"O Lord, Thou has cast us out"* full score dated "Highnam" Oct "67", Bodleian MS. Mus. b.26 *a* (fols 1–6) 23.

[8] "Long since in Egypt's plenteous land" is better known as the hymn "Dear Lord and Father of mankind". It is however worth examining the harmonisations in the "Oratorio" version, particularly the interlude sections between stanzas, where pedal-points occur.