

## The late songs – the 1940s and 1950s

### Part one – Introduction and biographical setting

The late songs consist of two song cycles, *In Tenebris* and *Swan Songs*. These sets of songs are not cycles in the sense of Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* or *Winterreise* with an interconnecting theme. Rather, they are sets of songs which, in their choice of poetry, reflect the composer's state of mind at the given point of composition.

Milford's choice of poetry, and the darker and more austere mood of the songs indicate the composer's reactions and intentions in terms of mood and spiritual need during the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, a study of the composer's life reveals that, during these later years, Milford experienced tragic and sad events which had a profound effect upon him, both personally and musically. Such events included the declaration of world war two, a short and unsuccessful army career, the tragic death of his son (Barnaby), a nervous breakdown, a first attempt at suicide, eventual recovery, further nervous problems, a second attempt at suicide, and the deaths of Vaughan Williams and Finzi (Milford's own death in 1959 was due to an overdose of aspirin).

The composer's life was not, however, entirely dark throughout these years. Indeed, earlier research into the composer's correspondence has revealed enjoyable and humorous occasions. Despite a general reputation amongst his friends and family for being a manic depressive, Milford displayed a wonderful sense of humour. It was just that such moments were underpinned by depressions, stress, extreme sensitivity and nervousness.

In early January, 1940, Kirstie noted her husband composing the first of his unpublished songs, for example, “In Tenebris’ in an ice-cold hut on the shore”.<sup>1</sup> In addition to observing his need for composition despite severe experiences, she recorded that he was “often desperately depressed”.<sup>2</sup> Of this time, Kirstie, within her own diary, quoted from her husband’s diary – now lost, “My life is becoming a dreariness and a horror.”<sup>3</sup>

The writing, below, considers additional biographical material, only discovered by the present writer after his initial Milford study and after the death of Marion Milford. After Milford volunteered for the army in 1939, Kirstie and Barnaby moved to the apparent safety of Guernsey. The letter below was written during one of Milford’s spells in hospital after his discharge from the army and his first breakdown.

My Darling Own,

Just to send you & angel Barnaby all my love, which, with my best thoughts, will always be for you both, here & in any other life where I have any choice in the matter!

You are both so perfect to me (I am nervous tonight with these storms about. But remember – if I am struck it was I that wished you both to go to La Digne, & me to stay here for economy). Thank you for all your sweet love & care always, Treasure – I’m sorry I was so depressed on getting home; but you see how much better I’m becoming already, under both your influences, & despite this being alone!

Now (like Private Warren) “I must close”, as this candle-light’s awful to write by, & I don’t like to use gas in the thunder!

All my love, Angels, for ever & ever.

Your both adoring always,

Robin<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kirstie Milford diary entry, ? January, 1940

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Kirstie, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1940

On the back of the envelope of this note, Milford displayed not only his joy in Barnaby, his belief in God but also his self-criticism in failing in his faith despite his deep belief in Christianity:

“I like Barnaby’s chalkings – I can’t help feeling he has real talent for this.

Robin

Trust in God’s goodness. I have never learnt to do this properly – one should.

Robin”<sup>5</sup>

A letter from the following year serves as an example of the turmoil of Milford’s mind during the early 1940s:

My Own Darling Kirstie,

I do just want to send you all my love today, & to the darling little boy too. Good heavens, what is going to happen? I feel so troubled, and tortured in mind sometimes that I wonder what I shall do next. But then it passes - & then comes again - & then passes - & so on. (So if I am a coward & choose to make myself hard [God forbid], you will remember how I did love you both, with all my heart above all people, when I could love, wont you, Angel? But this is morbid & untrusting, & as a Christian believer I should do better than this, if I’m any good at all. It is all very disturbing & terrifying at times, though, isn’t it? But one must always try to hope & pray for the best, for God’s will. One’s sense of loving one’s fellow-beings is so shocked & appalled, isn’t it? Well, God, gives us all strength, I pray, & for mercy too & charity, always.

God bless you, my Sweetest Angel always, & darling Barnaby always to bring you both to Heaven.

Your own adoring for ever,

Robin <sup>6</sup>

The final letter of this recent discovery, below, is, undoubtedly, the composer’s farewell letter before his first attempt at suicide. Amidst the tragedy of this letter, Milford displays not only his concern for Kirstie but also sends his love to, amongst others, Gerald Finzi and Balfour Gardiner. Even love is sent to Dr. Waters who treated him in hospital.

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Kirstie, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1940

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Kirstie, Easter Monday, 1941

The letter also emphasises the important part Kirstie and Barnaby both played in his life and shows the composer's general view of the world and his interpretation of it being a 'wretched world':

Darling,

Bless you, & forgive me, but I feel I'm doing my best. I think it will be happier in the end.

You have been so lovely to me always – I am not really worried anymore now, except for you. I have tried to stick it for you, Angel. (Please go to Marlborough, if you cd. bear to – ask D. & E. [David & Elizabeth] specially from me, will you, please?) – & love to Father, ... Gerald, ... Balfour, ...Dr. Waters, ... .

It is hard to leave you – otherwise it is easy enough – you & Barnaby have made me happy in this wretched world, bless you. May you live to find it less wretched. All my love to you both, Angel Treasures,

Your own ...

Robin<sup>7</sup>

The reasons why Milford's later life can be viewed in terms of 'descending darkness' become abundantly clear.

### Part two - An analytical consideration of the late songs

The 1940s-50s songs were never published during the composer's lifetime and were only published in 2009 by Adrian Self of Animus Publishing, Cumbria, after the present's writer's latest Milford study.

The songs of *In Tenebris* continue the more progressive style of the late 1930s songs (such as 'To Sincerity' and 'I will not let thee go') involving tonal/modal ambiguity, juxtaposed sections of differing character, greater use of chromaticism, more angular melody with wider ranges, greater use of dissonance, increased harmonic experimentation,

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Letter to Kirstie, Tuesday, 1940

constantly changing time patterns (albeit through attention to poetic metre) and wider dynamic and tempo ranges.

The songs of *Swan Songs* show a change in Milford's style. Frequently there are influences of the 'neo-Classicism' style which swept European music in the early years of the twentieth century. This involves a more severe and sparse form of language in terms of texture, scale, harmony and melody,

In terms of the more 'progressive' form of harmony, modulation and contour found in the late works, Milford's views on avant-garde music are, however, amply expressed in his account of hearing part of *The Rite of Spring* at the home of Balfour Gardiner which he introduced as, "the Ballet which caused such a stir in London a little time Ago".<sup>8</sup> Of this work Milford wrote, "You would loath it; it is exactly described by 'the hell of a din'. There are very few soft passages and it is fearfully dissonant (especially on the piano of course, which has no orchestral colour etc to relieve the dissonance) but some of it is quite jolly, though I do not at all think it is great music like Mr. Gardiner and a lot of it is terrible. It is not very hard to follow though".<sup>9</sup>

With further reference to Milford's development in syntax in later life, it is interesting to note that the composer's cousin, Anne Ridler stated, "I don't think he ever enjoyed music that was completely atonal, but I believe he did admire the work of Alban Berg".<sup>10</sup> Anne Ridler threw further light on the discussion of her cousin's music when she stated: "On questions of music, however, he was very sure of his opinions, though aware of his bias - he would struggle, he told me, against yielding to the 'warm bath' of pleasure in listening to Sibelius or Vaughan Williams, and he sympathized with Peter Pears, who had told him (in a conversation in early days) of his reaction from romanticism to the strictness and clarity of Mozart ... He was aware of a prejudice against Beethoven, whom he found

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<sup>8</sup> Letter to Kirstie, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1925

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Copley, 1984, p. 10

often heavy and dull”.<sup>11</sup> Milford showed his hesitation of mainstream twentieth century European music when writing: “...Yes, I, too, I’m afraid, switch off whenever I encounter Elizabeth Lutyens – but then I confess that composers who have imbibed deep draughts of the 12-note tonic are beyond my own intellectual capacity ...”.<sup>12</sup>

The feature of a more dissonant syntax may well have come about due to the composer’s feeling, or realisation, that the musical content of his ‘well-mannered’ pieces was becoming, or had become, out-dated. Thus, Milford’s new approach to writing may well have an attempt at survival in the cut-throat world of composition towards the end of his life. It is important, however, to stress that Milford’s original style of writing in terms of folk-song-derived material was always present in these more experimental works.

Discussions of the earlier songs have considered the main traits of Milford’s musical language in the songs of the 1920s and 1930s, the use of these features within a number of songs, the general canvas of the songs (the memorable features) and a progression in Milford’s style (commencing with the introduction of English folk-song influences as in ‘The Colour’ and progressing to the more profound features found in such songs as ‘Elegy’, ‘To Sincerity’ and ‘I will not let thee go’). Following a similar pattern to the earlier discussion, this consideration will also illustrate briefly the manner in which the composer’s musical features interact not only with primary poetic material but also with secondary material (e.g. evidential aspects) designed to strengthen or further illustrate the primary poetic point. It seems, for example, that Milford responded to Bridges’ poetic technique in ‘I will not let thee go’ by presenting the primary facts in the first and last verses through the use of similar material in these verses, while verses two, three, four and five employ new or developed material. These inner verses present the beautiful, but less essential elements (such as symbols, characters, similes and metaphors). Such a view of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid  
<sup>12</sup> Copley, 1984, p. 61

Bridges' poetic construction gives an analysis of Milford's song more transparency. Thus, this form of poetic analysis will be employed in the consideration of a number of Milford's late songs (e.g. in 'Magnificat' where the first line explains Mary's praise of God and the succeeding material exemplifies the reasons for such praise – God's greatness; Milford responds by beginning and ending the song with the same material).

The cycle *In Tenebris* consists of three settings of dark poems. The layout (and details of tonality/modality) is as follows:

Songs	Tonal/Modal Centres and Implications
'In tenebris'	B minor implication
'Why art thou silent'	A minor
'Wessex Heights'	Ambiguity through C, and an A Dorian implication

The first song, 'In Tenebris' is a setting of Hardy's poem of the same name in which the poet writes, primarily, of bereavement (presumably, of someone close to him), the feelings of emptiness and his waiting in "unhope". The musical development in this song follows on quite naturally from the more developed musical language found in such 1930s songs as 'Sincerity' and 'I will not let thee go'. Written for baritone, 'In Tenebris' is dedicated to Charles Williams. Milford sets this through-composed song in six sections, following Hardy's six verses, as shown below:

Hardy	Milford	Bars	Tonality
Verse 1	Section 1	3-6	E minor
Verse 2	Section 2	9-13	E minor
Verse 3	Section 3	14-19	E minor
Verse 4	Section 4	19-22	G minor
Verse 5	Section 5	23-26	E minor
Verse 6	Section 6	27 onwards	E minor

The primary dark poetic message is created by an overall falling melodic contour and sparseness of texture and its setting in E minor, although ending on the flattened dominant chord [B minor]. 'Tolerance' (1938) was the first song to end on a chord (F minor) other than the tonic (Eb). The primary image of darkness is painted from the beginning of the introduction (bars 1-2) through the use of sparse monophonic texture centred on E. The image is further suggested through the absence of the third (later highlighted by the entry of the voice in bar 3 on the missing third, note G, on the word 'Wintertime'). The sparseness of the introductory texture was, of course, first found in 'Tolerance' (1938). The images of sparseness and darkness are further developed through an unaccompanied voice entry (in quasi-recitative style) at the opening of verse one (bars 3-7), angular melody created through disjunct movement which pivots on notes B and F#, and a triplet rhythmic unit (each becoming a feature throughout the song). The verse ends (bars 6-7) with the haunting reflection that 'Twice no one dies' where Milford returns to the introductory monophonic material, now based on implied dominant harmony. This material continues during the short episode which follows (bars 7-8).

Subsidiary poetic material in verses two, three, four and five (serving as emphasis to the main dark wintry theme) consists of resolutions on the part of the poet which have parallels with winter's characteristics in nature. In verse two (bars 9-13), high register melodic chromaticism (based on flattened dominant harmony with an upwards resolving augmented 7<sup>th</sup>) suggests the severity of the phrase 'Flower petals flee' (bar 9). The poet's belief that once death has removed his loved one, he cannot again experience the harrowing event ('But since it once hath been/No more that severing scene/can harrow me') is portrayed through gentle harmony with the word "me" resolving on the sharpened seventh degree (bars 9-13). In verse three (bars 14-19) the opening phrase 'Birds faint in dread' is painted by a falling melodic contour moving through the notes BAF#B against a

bass octave B in the piano. The poet's determination not to lose any more strength over his loss is painted by a *forte* melodic ascent through the tonic arpeggio, against monophonic quaver figuration (derived from the introduction) during the phrase "Strength long since fled". In verse four (bars 19-22) Milford responds to Hardy's potent phrase "Leaves freeze to dun" by employing a falling melodic contour over G minor and chromatic harmony. A meandering melody against an accompaniment of winding quavers derived from chromatic harmonic side-steps, resolving on a C minor chord (suggesting a quick shift to the C Aeolian mode) illuminates the haunting phrases "But friends cannot turn cold/ This season as of old/For him with none". At the beginning of verse five (23-26) Milford moves from the C minor harmony at the end of the previous verse to second inversion tonic harmony perhaps suggesting the more gentle truth of love in the phrases "Tempests may scath/ But love cannot make smart/Again this year his heart who no heart hath". Milford also employs a falling melodic contour from top E on "Tempests may scath" before returning to the introductory monophonic figure. The idea of being saved from any further terror is painted with fanfare-type triplets derived from dominant harmony (bar 26).

Verse six (bars 27-end) returns to the primary poetic material where the main subject is once again discussed. It, appropriately, returns to tonic harmony. The wonderful poetic phrase, 'Black is night's cope' is suggested by a *fortissimo* falling melodic contour to low A# while the phrases "But death will not appal/One who, past doubtings all/Waits in unhope" involve a more mystical ending which fades away through falling melodic contours, falling textures and dynamics to the final B minor chord – all reflecting the one who casts away doubts and turns to distant hope. The musical character of 'In tenebris' is echoed in a work Milford published in 1949 for cello and piano, entitled *Threne*. The term 'threne' means 'lamentation' or 'dirge' – definitions quite appropriate for this composition. Dedicated to Kathleen Moorehouse and Maurice Jacobson, this work can only be described as a 'dark' piece, possibly reflecting the dark years of the 1940's during which, of course, Milford suffered the effects of military life and the tragic death of his son, Barnaby. Set in the Aeolian

mode on B, *Threne* is created around one theme (consisting of two melodic units) which is, essentially, based on the first five notes of the mode (BC#DEF#). Milford creates the dark imagery of this composition through use of a descending melodic contour based upon the notes of a B triad.

‘Why art Thou Silent!’, the second song in *In Tenebris*, is dedicated to Charles Williams. It is a setting of a sonnet (miscellaneous no. 25) by Wordsworth of the same title, written in 1832/1833. The sonnet falls into three sections. In the first, the poet is questioning his beloved on the strength of her love, in the second, he tells of his unswerving devotion, while in the third section, he asks his beloved to speak and remove his doubts. Wordsworth’s sonnet does not readily subdivide into ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ poetic material because of its construction into the three distinct sections.

Written in A minor, Milford sets Wordsworth’s sonnet as a through-composed song. Although comparatively short, this is a dramatic song in which an introduction sets the scene through its opening monophonic- and octave- dominated texture, predicting the thoughts of the love-torn poet. The introduction (the longest so far written by Milford) opens gently with the notes ABC using a triplet rhythm. Both of these features become unifying units during the introduction and the song. The introduction continues to rise and develop from octave writing between the two hands to contrary movement (bar 5-7) with the introduction of F#s leading the listener to expect a G tonality. This expectation is quickly dispelled in bar 11 when the composer sounds a G min. 7<sup>th</sup> chord. The introduction moves on through Eb, C minor and Bb minor harmony before resolving on the tonic A minor chord for the entry of the voice. So, quite quickly, the listener realises that the song is a continuation of the musical language clearly presented in ‘I will not let thee go’ (1939).

When the voice enters in bar 20 with a retrograde of the notes ABC, the calmness of a first question to the lover (“Why art thou silent”) is suggested by a low register melody (CBACA) and light texture. As the next question (“Is thy love a plant/Of such weak fibre that the treacherous air/Of absence withers what was once so fair?”) is preceded by the rising 3<sup>rd</sup> unit in the accompaniment (bars 21-22), the song develops from bar 22 where the heightening tension (reflecting the poet’s further questions and suggested answers) is suggested by increasing use of chromaticism and swirling semiquavers/demisemiquavers in the accompaniment; constant rising and falling melodic contours, upper melodic register; the chromatic juxtaposition of chords (for example, G major, Eb minor, E major during bars 30-32). Thus the first section ends on an E chord (without an actual modulation), highlighting the final word of the question “Is there no debt to pay, no boon to grant?” Milford paints the poet’s devotional section with musical features which are, by now, typical of his language including rising and falling chromatic melody, chromatically juxtaposed harmony, rapid piano figuration and upper melodic register.

The third section is the most interesting part of the song in which the poet asks his beloved to speak and remove his doubts. Commencing in bar 43 (where the end of the second section and the beginning of the third harmonically link through a V-I closure in D minor) the tone of the poet’s requests are emphasised through broken rhythms in the accompaniment. The final poetic phrase (“Speak, that my torturing doubts their end may know!”) is dramatically preceded by rising hemidemisemiquavers to a dominant chord which supports the opening of the dramatic final phrase “Speak, that my torturing doubts their end may know” (bars 57-59).

It is open to speculation why Milford did not set more of Wordsworth’s poems as songs. In 1946, however, he composed *Elegiac Meditation* for solo viola and orchestra, a

rhapsodic work based on a quotation by Wordsworth: “Have I not reason to lament/What man has made of man?” It is a fine example of an orchestral work influenced by a literary programme. The quotation is, of course, an unanswered question, implying such aspects as reflection, sadness, cruelty, disgust, grief, suspicion and uncertainty. A clear correlation can be seen between these poetic aspects and the various musical sections of the work.

A setting of Hardy’s poem, ‘Wessex Heights’ serves as the text for the final song in Milford’s first cycle. He sets only seven of Hardy’s eight-verse poem, omitting verse seven beginning “As for one rare woman ...”. The poem represents the essence of Thomas Hardy by referring to various locations in his beloved Wessex including heights, lowlands, towns and plain lands. In the first and last verses (in which the poet presents the main thrust of the poem), the poet expresses his fondness of the heights. In the first stanza, he finds them suitable for “thinking, dreaming, dying on” and finds solace only in the heights where he is out of reach of, all memories and ghosts (“I seem where I was before my birth, and after my death may be”). In the middle six verses (the secondary poetic material) he expands and illustrates his theme by explaining that he can no longer visit the other areas where he and his lover used to roam as they are now haunted by ghostly memories. Implying the Dorian mode, ‘Wessex Heights’ consists of an introduction, eight verses and a codetta. This is the longest song in Milford’s output in which the first and final verses employ the same melodic material, reflecting Hardy’s poetic structure. The composer sets the scene of his poetic tour around the Wessex landscape (surrounded by death, loneliness and memories) in march-style, contrasted by a more gentle triplet quaver unit. Representation of each area of the poetic landscape and their associated feelings are painted through the use of extensive chromaticism and modal shifts. Final liberty from haunting memories and thoughts is represented through the eventual arrival of harmonic ‘repose’. The composer tells the story through the use of a, by now, accepted form of

language for this period – angular melody, juxtaposed sections, juxtaposed chromatic chords over static bass lines, and pivoting intervals.

The introduction presents the march-like unit which becomes an essential feature of the melody and, to a lesser extent, the accompaniment. Consisting of a dotted quaver/semiquaver figure, this repeating unit creates an image of the poet marching from place to place. In relating the story, the voice instantly takes up this rhythmic unit, retaining it through much of the song. Having commenced the poetic tour, the dreamy security of the heights in the first verse (“Ingpen Beacon and Wylls-Neck”) in bars 6-11 is represented not only by chromatic shifts to Ab and C but also by upper register melodic notes. Verse two (bars 12-22) employs falling chords in the piano right hand as the depiction of the lowlands while angular melody and chromatic movement in the piano right hand (against Cb and C pedals in the bass register) depict the phrases ‘Down there they are dubious and askance; there nobody thinks as I/But mind-chains do not clank where one’s next neighbour is the sky’ in bars 17-22.

Verse three (bars 23-31) considers the relationship between the Wessex town and phantoms. Here, use of chromatic chords (Bb minor, Gb minor, C minor and F minor, all in inversions) in the treble register, alone, paint the phrase “Shadows of beings who fellowed with myself of earlier days” in bar 26) while a return to the original march-like accompaniment suggests the phrase “They hang about places, and they say harsh heavy things” in bars 28-29. *Forte* chromatic chords (B minor, D major, C# major and E minor) in bar 30 and *fortissimo* upper register melodic notes suggest the phrase “Men with a wintry sneer, and women with tart disparagings”. In verse four (bars 31-39), depiction of falsehood is suggested through a shift to the implied C Dorian mode with the words “Down there” being painted by a falling melodic 5<sup>th</sup> against an F pedal. The simplicity

suggested in the phrase “my simple self was there” is painted by lighter texture with middle 3rds.

The description of a “great grey plain” in verse five (bars 39-47) involves the use of a more dramatic and chromatic melody marked *fortissimo/agitato*. The wonderful poetic imagery contained in the phrase “... there’s a figure against the moon” is suggested by the oscillation of D minor positions, a rising and falling voice line - all underpinned by sparse piano texture. The word ‘moon’ is illuminated by A major upper register semiquaver arpeggiation in the piano while falling demisemiquaver figuration built on D, Eb, D minor, Bb, G minor, C minor, D minor, Eb and Bb harmony refers to ‘forms now passed’ and their lingering in the phrase “For everybody but me, in whose long vision they stand there fast”.

Verse six (bars 48-56) is the most haunting of all the verses. Here, the “ghost at Yell’ham ... a shroud in white’ is suggested by a *Più mosso* marking and introduction of a broken semiquaver piano figure. The merging of the dotted march-like unit with a melodic chromatically rising short monotone pattern (A, Bb, B, C) adds to the poetic dramatic imagery. This melodic pattern continues into the next phrase (“There’s a ghost in Froom-side Vale, thin-lipped and vague ...” but now ascending through the notes C, C#, D#, E#. The daunting phrase “There’s one in the railway train whenever I do not want it near” (bars 52-53) is painted through use of a driving syncopated chromatic piano figure with repeated notes (suggesting the rhythm of a train). The phrase “I see its profile against the pane saying what I would not hear” is depicted by a fanfare-type effect in the piano created by *fortissimo* double thirds using the dotted unit. A crescendo and octave leap leads to an upper register melodic note on “hear” after which falling piano octaves lead into chromatic chords marked *furioso*, followed by silence.

In the final verse (bars 58-end), as the poet returns to the primary message of security not only of Ingpen Beacon and Wylls-Neck, but now also of “homely Bulbarrow, or little Pilsdon Crest/Where men have never cared to haunt, nor women have walked ...”, Milford returns to the melodic material of the opening verse but now, appropriately, with a calmer accompaniment. Hardy brings this haunting tale to a happier conclusion – “And ghosts then keep their distance; and I know some liberty”. Although Milford returns to the original musical material in response to the poet’s return to the primary poetic idea in verse six, he alters the final five bars, highlighting the poet’s relief in gaining liberty from the ghosts and creating a remarkable ending to his song. This involves imaginative dynamics (e.g. *smorzando* and *pochiss. rinvivando*), implications of dominant harmony underpinned by a sustained pedal F, a return to the march-like accompaniment, a sustained melodic E followed by a D resolution but not now in a sharpened form.

The second song cycle, *Swan Songs*, is a later work and consists of nine songs written between 1948 and 1957<sup>13</sup>. The songs are to be performed without breaks. The layout (and details of tonality/modality) is as follows:

Songs	Tonal/Modal Centres and Implications
‘Magnificat’	E Aeolian implication with no I-V-I closure
‘Nunc dimittis’	E minor implication with no I-V-I closure but rather closing on an F# major chord
‘Idleness’	Ambiguous
‘Christmas Day’	F major
‘In Cornwall’	G major
‘Expectans Expectavi’	G major with pronounced chromatic prolongation
‘The Holy Table’	Ambiguous
‘The Glance’	F# Mixo-Lydian implication with I-V-I closure but ending on a C# major chord
‘Sleep’	Ambiguous (part 1 with C and G implications) E minor (part 2 with I-V-I# closure)

<sup>13</sup> Copely inaccurately states 1948-1951

The first two texts in *Swan Songs* are texts from the New Testament rather than poems. In ‘Song of Mary the Virgin’ (or ‘Magnificat’), written in 1948, the primary message of the text is, of course, Mary’s praise of God. Milford instantly commences the song with the suggestion of a cradle song, through the use of the dotted rhythmic unit in the introduction in bars 1-11. Mary’s gentleness is perhaps also suggested through the use of a smooth undulating melody against the dotted rhythmic unit (really, a ‘pastorale’) in the accompaniment.

‘To Sincerity’ (1938) was the first of Milford’s songs to employ tonal/modal ambiguity. This feature becomes dramatically developed in *Swan Songs*. Modality and ambiguity are both created from the beginning of the introduction to ‘Magnificat’. There is no doubt that this song is centred around E. However, is the opening harmony a C7 chord or an E6 chord in last inversion? Answers start to appear with the appearances of B minor 7 chords in bars 2 and 7 and an E chord bar 8.

As in ‘Why art thou silent’, this song employs a lengthy introduction (11 bars). Development commences early in the song. From bars 5 onwards the accompaniment moves away from strict homophonic writing to include dialogue between the registers but, more especially, chromatic colour. From the introduction, therefore, there is little doubt that Milford is continuing his musical language first encountered in 1939 and continued in *In tenebris*, a style profoundly influenced by added-note chords and chromatic shifts.

Musical reflections of God’s greatness involve a synthesis of modality and chromatic ambiguity, a fluid melody, extensive word painting and extensive use of melodic/harmonic chromaticism. Repeated monotones, a feature first encountered in ‘I will not let thee go’, are prominent in the emphasis of the phrase ‘[he hath] scattered the proud in the imag[ination]’ in bars 34-35. Milford first introduced word-painting in

'Daybreak' (1930) and used this feature very sparingly throughout his output. In bars 35-36 he employs one of his longest, and perhaps one of his most effective examples, of this feature on the final syllable of "imagination" through rising and falling chromatic semiquaver figuration. Similarly, in bars 45-47 he decorates the first syllable of "empty" through falling minor harmony (E, Eb, D, C#, C), further decorated by the piano left hand moving into the treble register. The final section of the song, before a return of the original material (bar 62) is concerned with the final two phrases of the text, "As he promis'd to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever". Here the composer slows down the tempo ('Poco lento') and employs a style first met in 'I will not let thee go' - sustained chords (B and D minor) over which the voice sings in quasi-recitative using repeating monotones. Such sustained chordal writing is used later in the cycle. The ending of the phrase ("and his seed for ever") is characterised by a melodic falling second (suggesting falling speech inflexion), followed by a falling second in the piano on an F chord (with a false relation) moving to an Eb6 chord. This falling second feature was used to great effect in bar 16 emphasising "my Sav-[iour]" and now leads into the coda in bar 62. Milford now rounds off the song with an altered quotation of the opening phrase. The final cadence involving a D chord to an E chord confirms the E interpretation of the song.

During 1952, Milford arranged a work, entitled *Fishing By Moonlight* which was originally written for two harpsichords. The new arrangement was for piano and string orchestra and has become one of Milford's best known instrumental compositions and employs features also identified in the songs. This one-movement work is in three distinct sections. The two outer sections employ a distinctive dotted quaver/semiquaver/quaver rhythmic figure in compound time, representing the scene of a calm moonlit night. Milford also employed this rhythmic figure in 'Cradle Song' (1933) and 'Magnificat'

(1948). Self (1986) identified compound duple time as a prominent feature among early twentieth century English composers, labelling it as a “barcarolle rhythm”<sup>14</sup>.

Written in 1948, the primary message of Simeon’s words in *The Song of Simeon* (*The Nunc dimittis*) is his joy in seeing the infant Jesus before his imminent death. This is reflected through a free melodic line and textural contrasts in the accompaniment. The song has an E minor implication and shows further progression in Milford’s language. The introduction is as original as that of ‘The Pink Frock’ in its rising short durational figuration.

In the first section, the voice entry (bar 6), accompanied by sustained E harmony, resembles bars 57-58 of ‘Magnificat’ in its use of monotones in quasi-recitative style (devices first employed in the 1930s. e.g. in ‘The Pink Frock’ but, more particularly, in ‘I Will Not Let Thee Go’). The end of this first section (“[thy servant de]-part in peace/according to thy word”) moves through C# minor and G# minor harmony before suddenly ending on Bb harmony on the final word (serving as the basis for rising demisemiquaver figuration in the treble register).

The second section (bars 14-18) appropriately develops at the words “For my eyes have seen thy salvation/Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people”. The song quickly moves from Bb to D minor, G major and E minor harmony, finally coming to rest on second inversion B major harmony (clearly, the harmony has moved a long way). This section is also painted through continued rising demisemiquaver figuration (originally used as emphasis and decoration of the all-important “word” in bar 11) and use of upper melodic register falling to lower register (involving the drama attached to a gap and fill structure).

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<sup>14</sup> Self 1986: ‘E. J. Moeran’ p. 68

The final section (bars 19-end) returns to sustained harmony, permitting the voice to present the final phrases in quasi-recitative style. The word “Israel” is decorated both melodically and harmonically. The harmony here involves a Vb-I progression suggesting an E tonal centre although the decoration concludes on F# major harmony.

The overall texture of the song, painting the primary message and its secondary illustrations, employs two-part writing in sixths and dramatic chords (i.e. sustained harmony and harmonic shifts - examples include the Bb chord on ‘word’ and the B chord on ‘people’), melodic leaps (e.g. on ‘prepared’) and the melodic mix of disjunct and conjunct melodic movement (e.g. in the phrase ‘prepared before the face of all people’, all underpinned by E minor tonality. Although the harmonic decoration of ‘Israel’ has been discussed above, melodic decoration of this name involves a modal implication where the notes end F# E F#.

The third song, ‘Idleness’, is a setting of a little known and short poem by Andrew Young in which the poet tells God that he will refrain from idleness in order to assist God in all His work. The conversation refers to aspects of nature. This song shows a further development in Milford’s language. With no tonal/modal centre, it commences with an F minor implication and ends on a G# major chord (in effect, the enharmonic major). As with these later songs, ‘Idleness’ is characterised by the constant juxtaposition of unrelated chromatic harmony. Young’s poem consists of four sections. In the first, the poet reveals his thoughts to God (“God, you’ve so much to do/To think of, watch and listen to/That I will let all else go by/And lending ear and eye/help you to watch in the coombe”). Lacking an introduction, Milford commences the poet’s dialogue with God (bars 1-8) using a similar texture of sustained chords as employed in ‘Magnificat’ and ‘Nunc dimittis’. The melody is built through the use of a series of short melodic phrases suggesting the poet’s

successive thoughts. Each melodic phrase is characterised by a dotted quaver/semiquaver rhythmic figure and pronounced chromatic accompaniment.

In the second poetic section the poet considers nature's order of life ("And rooks in the spring-redenned trees/Restore their villages/Nest by nest/Swaying at rest on the trees' frail unrest"). In this part of the song (bars 9-13), the mood changes through a freer form of melodic line (involving triplet rhythms) and further use of sustained harmony.

The third poetic section moves on to consider a limestone wall and the origins of the stones ("Or on this limestone wall/Listening at ease, with you recall/How once these heavy stones/Swam in the seas as shells and bones"). In this section of the song (bars 13-20), Milford employs a lower melodic range and demisemiquavers in the bass accompaniment. The image of "recall" is characterised by rising parallel fifths (C, Db, Eb, F). Milford appropriately suggests the sleeping owl ("And hear that owl snore in a tree/Till it grows dark enough for him to see") by a trill within an A minor chord (emphasised by being preceded by A and G minor harmony).

The determined final poetic section ("In fact, will learn to shirk/No idleness that I may share your work") is portrayed in bars 20-end through a wide-registered melodic contour over D, G and A minor harmony. Melodic semiquavers paint the all-important word "share", moving through A minor and F# minor harmony before resolving on a G# major chord.

What is remarkable about this song is the fact that Milford seems to miss opportunities for possible illumination of the many wonderful poetic images. For example, he fails to give any suggestion of the winds sweeping dead leaves without a broom; rooks restoring their nests in "spring-redenned trees"; or stones swimming in the sea as "shells and bones". Also Milford did not take the opportunity to interconnect the five sections by, for example, a cyclic unit. Similarly, in terms of texture, the first poetic section could well

have employed fast figuration, while the second section may well have employed such features as high melodic register, dark chromatic harmony and then swaying figuration. The third poetic section may well have employed calm texture with low register chords, and the fourth section could well have made some reference to a hooting owl (as in Parry's 'When icicles hang by the wall'), followed by some darkening harmony.

'Christmas Day' is a setting of another poem by Andrew Young. The central theme is, of course, Christ's nativity with the various form of praise forming poetic tangents. Pivoting between Ab, F minor and F, Milford's setting commences with a dotted rhythmic figure in compound time suggesting a rocking cradle, similar to that employed in 'Magnificat' and 'Cradle Song'. This rhythmic device is maintained throughout the accompaniment in contrast to the diverse rhythmic patterns in the melody. The song falls into two sections. Apart from reference to the infant Jesus, the first section (bars 1-25) tells of the cheeping of a thorn bird. Employing a free-flowing melody influenced by a neighbour-note motif, the story is related through a conversation between the voice and piano based on juxtaposed chromatic harmony and dissonance. A flash of piano semiquaver figuration suggests the light within the phrases "As I trudged through the snow fields/That lay in their own light" (bar 14). This is followed by sustained harmony and piano silence which introduces the praise of a thorn bush ("A thorn bird with its shadow/Stood doubled in the night") in bars 15-16.

A short interlude (bars 25-26), consisting of an abrupt rhythmic and chromatic figure (which suggests the awakening of the bird from its 'puffed sleep'), leads into the second section. Section two (bars 27-end) is concerned with praise of the Holy Trinity. While continuing the rocking figure, this section is more forceful in its use of increased dynamics, wider melodic range, melodic climaxes within the phrases, and increased

chromaticism which involves modulations to Db and G. The song, however, brings about a sense of repose with its full closure in F.

The next two songs, 'In Cornwall' and 'Expectans expectavi', are settings of poems by Milford's cousin, Anne Ridler. Anne's father, H. C. Bradby, was Milford's Housemaster at Rugby. Milford spent many weekends at the Bradley piano experimenting with chords. The two cousins remained close until Milford's untimely death and Anne was well acquainted with Robin's innermost thoughts.

Anne Ridler's poem 'In Cornwall' is not actually concerned with Cornwall but, rather, a mystical vision derived from a view across the sea at Cornwall. This, the core of the poem, is painted with the assistance of harmonic sidesteps and chromatic figuration. In Milford's song the Cornish coastal scene is painted through mainly diatonic harmony and light piano texture, both underpinned by syncopation. The painting of drowned men in the phrases "In dark walls through Cornish seas still haunted/By drowned men who shoulder toward the land" (bars 7-14) commences the real development of the song through B minor rising and falling quaver piano figuration, which suggests the haunting of the cliff by 'grim mermaids and the painful cry of gulls'. Slow harmonic rhythm (referring back to a similar image in 'Elegy') and higher melodic register in verse two (bars 19-33) depict the poet lying lazily on fine days watching the sea. Eb semiquaver piano figuration suggests the rolling tide in bar 28. (It is interesting that the words in Milford's song in this verse differ from those published in the 1988 Faber edition of Ridler poetry.)

Milford changes mood again for verse three (bars 33-45). Here, more pronounced rhythms and faster-moving harmony suggest the poet's excitement at seeing 'the flicker of light far out on bayonets/Winking above the wave', while quaver piano figuration hints at the 'submerged army that waits its time'. Musically, verses three and four interlink. As a cloud sweeps the army back, the poet's heavenly vision, leading into verse four (bars 46-

64), is introduced by gentle dissonant chords and upper melodic register (bar 43) before the music gives way to chords with middle oscillating quaver figuration (such figuration is also heard in the fourth movement of the Symphony (1932-33) [Anthology 2, pp 47 and 48] and a more gentle vocal contour depicting the all-important phrases “[But a cloud sweeps them] back/Into an endless milky sea that seems the bright and easy floor of heaven/Like heaven that will not let the earth remain/In sin ...” (bars 45-60). The succeeding image of heaven grinding “its outworks endlessly” is depicted by a return to *fortissimo* chordal writing in bar 61 (it is interesting that Milford ignores Ridler’s phrase format through ignoring phrase beginnings and endings). The safety of heaven in verse five (bars 64-end) is suggested by oscillating thirds in the piano right hand against a pedal D (perhaps suggesting stability) until the penultimate line of the song (‘And O that we were there’). At this point Milford alters, yet again, his cousin’s text by repeating this line without the opening word ‘And’. This final line, ‘O that we were there’, is a direct quote from the German melody ‘In dulci jubilo’

The plain simple time melody with displaced rhythm found in ‘In Cornwall’ is also present in the second and final movements of the Symphony..

Anne Ridler’s poem ‘Expectans Expectavi’ is inventive through its concern for the poor at Christmas. Basically in two parts, the opening poetic material (found in the song in bars 1-12) presents a strong prelude to the main material of part two. Milford presents the poet’s cynical view of Christmas through a series of contrasting features: opening sustained G minor harmony (within G major), above which the voice presents an E dominated melodic phrase (“The candid freezing season again”); a jagged melodic contour above juxtaposed chromatic harmony (“Candle and cracker, needles of fir and frost”); flattened winding semiquaver figuration (“Carols that through the night air pass, piercing/The glassy husk of heart and heaven”); parallel 6ths based upon a ‘cradle song’

rhythmic pattern (“Children’s faces white in the pane, bright in the tree-light”). Similar features also illuminate the second poetic section (set by Milford in bars 13-end) which suggests that love and kindness might just take over from normal Christmas festivities. The song truly starts to develop when the poet talks of “bodily starvation” (bars 18-19) and the “spirit’s exile” (bars 20-21) through greater use of chromaticism and semiquaver figuration. More dramatic chordal writing paints the phrase “O might the hilarious reign of love begin ...” (bars 22-24) while continued semiquaver and, indeed, demisemiquaver figuration over sustained G minor harmony paints the phrase “... let in/Like carols from the cold ... numb outcasts into welcome” (again, Milford alters Ridler’s text by omitting the words “The lost who crowd the pane”). Implied closure in G major is appropriate for the final transformation of the poor now being welcome at Christmas.

‘The Holy Tide’, the seventh song, is a setting of words by Frederick Tennyson. Tennyson’s poem consists of two large verses with eight lines in which each verse subdivides in half. Milford responds to this poetic construction by employing a progressive-strophic setting in which the last two poetic lines are original. The main message of the poem is the encouragement of singing songs and telling stories around the fire at Christmas until “the lamp flickers, and the memory fails”. Secondary poetic material includes the simile between the dark features of winter and “the sunset of this purple cup”; the haunting imagery of the phrases “And the old Dead will hear us and wake up/Pass with dim smiles and make our hearts sublime!”; the simile between the aspects of holly and the sharp spear which pierced Christ’s “sacred side”; and the simile between the colour red and the drops of blood upon Christ’s “thorny crown”. Finally, Tennyson firmly states that the darkness of Christ’s Passion nor the merriment surrounding His birth shall stop the “solemn Muse” in the telling of the “sweet old tales” around the seasonal fire.

The imagery of this poem is depicted through the use of sustained chords, modal implications, the constant juxtaposition of minor and major chord, word painting, chromatic semiquaver piano figuration and gentle dissonance. Particular musical illumination includes falling piano figuration depicting the symbolic imagery during the phrases ‘And through the sunset of this purple cup’ (bars 15-16), ‘Fright off the solemn Muse, - tell sweet old tales’ (bars 41-44); [‘Sing songs as we sit] brooding o’er the hearth’ (bar 46); and the final phrase ‘Till the lamp flickers and the memory fails’. The final resolution of the song on a major chord proves this feature to be an effective Milford trait in this set of songs (earlier examples being ‘Magnificat’, ‘Nunc Dimittis’, ‘Idleness’, ‘Christmas Day’, and ‘Expectans Expectavi’). In addition, Milford’s use of broken piano semiquaver figuration (e.g. bars 16-23) not only adds contrast to the accompaniment but helps paint imagery.

‘The Glance’ is a dramatic setting of George Herbert’s three-verse poem of the same name. The primary poetic material of this poem is the poet’s belief in God’s watchful eye on him from youth, through sin and evil, to meeting that eye, face to face, in heaven. Milford does not attempt to represent the constancy of God’s eye but, rather, sets the poem in three distinct sections following Herbert’s three poetic verses.

The first section of the song (bars 1-18) uses a progressive-strophic structure and is centred on F# minor and the F# Aeolian mode. This section falls into two parts, representing the poet in sin (before his knowledge of God) and then after his realisation of God’s eye. Milford’s employs a semi-folk-like melody in the first half (bars 1-11), perhaps suggesting the poet’s “youth and night” with an accompaniment of rolling bass 3rds, perhaps giving some suggestion of a roving eye. The second part (bars 10-18) develops the melodic material through chromaticism and melisma, painting such evocative phrases as “I felt a sug’red strange delight/Passing all cordials made by any art/Bedew, embalm, and

overrun my heart”). A dance-type figure is heard in the accompaniment, painting the phrase ‘I felt surged strange delight’.

The second section (bars 21-31) is preceded by an interlude predicting more violent imagery. Sequential semiquaver figuration suggests the effects of “many a bitter storm” on the relationship between the poet and God. It is followed by a *tempestuoso* marking, sustained chromatic harmony and winding bass figuration, all suggesting destruction and “ill-meaning harm”. Perhaps the idea of God’s constantly watchful eye is suggested through pivoting semiquavers on “But still thy sweet original joy/Sprung from thine eye,did work within my soul” (bars 29-33), while the image of bold “Surging griefs” is created through a wide register range and chromatic semiquaver figuration.

The style now changes again for the final section (bars 39 onwards) which philosophically looks ahead to the power of God’s eye when met in heaven. Here, Milford employs a calmer dance-like rhythm characterised by repeating chromatic quaver chords. This verse contains the melodic climax of the song, using high register notes on “What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see/Thy full-eyed love!”. Milford’s textures can never be viewed as intense but here the piano texture increases two-fold to include chromatic semiquaver figuration in both registers, suggesting the Christian’s movement from the pain of this life to the joys of Heaven. How else could Milford paint the final line (In heav’n above”)” but with closure on a C# chord?

‘Sleep’, the final song of the set is a setting of a poem by his great friend and mentor, Charles Williams. Anne Ridler once told the present writer that, due to Milford’s special friendship with Charles Williams, the best way to understand the composer and his music is to explore the writing of Williams (indeed, she wrote a poem entitled *Charles Williams: In Anamnesis*). Milford attended a number of the meetings of the intellectual

group, the 'Inklings', at Oxford with Charles Williams. Williams succeeded in assisting the composer through some of his dark emotional days.

The words of Ridler's 'Sleep' are quite unlike the famous words by Fletcher so frequently set by Milford's contemporaries. Rather, Ridler speaks of 'kind sleep' setting in because '... industry is ended'. The idea of a moving 'sleep' figure is absent in Milford's song. The song is in two contrasting sections. The calm first section (bars 1-22), preceded by an almost comically short introduction, which looks back to that of *The Pink Frock* (1939), presents a gentle chordal accompaniment which allows the meandering melody to sing out the attributes of sleep. In dramatic contrast, the second section (bars 23-end) suddenly presents a *forte* E minor chord and top register melody note to present an opposing argument. This section is more chromatic and employs a melodic triplet figure, all underpinned by a much more dissonant style. Happily, the song resolves on, as now expected, a major chord (E), itself somewhat ironic because of the reference to death.

*Swan Songs* highlight an important aspect of Milford's song composition – the ability to set, and successfully illuminate, texts within short and concise parameters. Milford was essentially a miniaturist and nowhere better does he display this ability than in his songs. Large settings of texts with repeating musical phrases, extreme textures and unwieldy harmony are not part of Milford's style.

Similar to the songs of the 1930s and 1940s, the piano music of these eras demonstrate a distinct development in style from quite simplistic and non-dissonant writing (e.g. *Three Sea Pictures*) to a more complex form of piano figuration, construction and chromatic style as found in *Jenifer's Jingle* (pre-1930) and then, finally, to a neo-Impressionistic style as in *Diversions* 1938.

Historically, it might appear obvious to consider Milford's 1930s compositions within the 'Post-war group' because of 'experimental' style. Milford, however, made it

clear in his late correspondence that, with the exception of Jacob, he did not feel any affinity with the styles of this group. However, Milford's late songs (e.g. the *Swan Songs*) show an affinity with the post-war group in terms of French influences, Stravinsky and neo-classicism (for example, in terms of delicate piano textures). Such influences are first seen in *Diversions*.

Of this work Milford wrote "... I'm really glad you find the pieces interesting, I've got so sick of writing dull, well-mannered pieces lately, so, if anyone suggests I may be making a bit of a change, I'm only too delighted".<sup>15</sup> He went on to state: "Also I believe these pieces should 'come off' quite well, which is what so much of my music doesn't do. Balfour [Gardiner] wrote to me such a nice letter about these pieces too, so I feel a bit encouraged - otherwise I've felt damned depressed about my music lately, particularly since no-one has taken on my Violin Concerto for a second performance, which I really do (or, at any rate, I did) feel is a good work ...".<sup>16</sup>

Howard Ferguson gave the first performance of *Diversions* at a Newbury concert in 1938 and has described the work as being 'very awkwardly written for the instrument'<sup>17</sup>, a fact he fully realised, knowing that Milford, himself, was not a pianist.

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<sup>15</sup> Copley 1984: 'Robin Milford' p57

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Howard Ferguson letter to Peter Hunter, March, 1991