

‘The tumult of thy mighty harmonies’: Tonal Conflict in Elgar’s *Four Part-songs*, Op.53.

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The *Four Part-songs* are the first complete compositions of what might be considered as Elgar’s reinvigorated self. Written in late 1907 during the second of the Elgars’ holidays in Italy, they follow a period of artistic stagnation when Elgar had become increasingly fraught over his composing.¹ It is not certain in which order they were composed, nor whether Elgar had yet started writing his First Symphony, Op.55, a work that has been argued to intone the beginning of his ‘modernist’ phase.² The part-songs, therefore, occupy an intriguing position in Elgar’s career and, as this essay will show, were to prove vital for ideas worked out at a much larger scale in the Symphony, one of the most heavily anticipated works in the history of British music.

In an effort to show how these part-songs adopt gestures of the Austro-Germanic modernism of Elgar’s continental contemporaries (Strauss, Mahler, early Schoenberg) – or rather, Elgar’s take on these gestures – and to examine the extent to which the four pieces were intended as a symphonic conception, I hope to demonstrate how Elgar’s tonal imagination was in line with the prevailing practices of tonal duality, hexatonic tonal space and continuous structure of his time, which have been theorised more recently by, among others, the late Robert Bailey, formerly Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Music emeritus at New York University, and Richard Cohn, Battell Professor of Music Theory at Yale.

Famously, the first part-song, *There is Sweet Music*, is written in two key signatures – the sopranos and altos take Ab major, and the tenors and basses G major. Even to an analyst of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century tonal music this unorthodoxy causes confusion over the true tonic: Ab or G? Elgar presents a puzzle to be investigated. Robert Bailey has suggested an explanation of such practices through his theory of tonal pairing, a complex seen in a number of other late-romantic works that gave equal hierarchy to two tonal areas. The increasing levels of chromaticism in nineteenth-century music enabled composers to achieve far-reaching networks of

- 1 The dogged efforts to finish his final oratorio *The Kingdom*, Op.51, led the sensitive Catholic who had penned *Gerontius* to question his theology, forcing him to abandon his originally planned trilogy (The third oratorio in the sequence was due to be *The Last Judgement*, for which only a handful of sketches survive.) With the death of his father in April 1906, Elgar’s own illnesses and his increasing gloom over the financial worth of his efforts triggered a hiatus of minimal composition. He expressed in a letter to Sir Ivor Atkins (22 December, 1906): ‘Times is awry: & thus, my eyes are not well & get no better – not much better at any rate: I have been in evil case & fit for no good works’. (E. Wulstan Atkins, *The Elgar-Atkins Friendship* (London: David & Charles, 1984), 157). He had been sketching a string quartet during the autumn of 1907, the material of which was used for the First Symphony and the quartet abandoned.
- 2 Substantial work on the symphony was begun in December of the same year; around the same time (December 1907-January 1908) as the completion of the autograph score of the part-songs.

tonalities. Between these networks lie chromatic pathways that deliberately disrupt a clear sense of tonality. Richard Cohn calls upon parsimonious voice-leading³ to theorise the hexatonic tonal spaces⁴ he has recognised in the music of composers from Schubert to early Schoenberg, often referring to the quality of such harmonies in evoking the supernatural.⁵

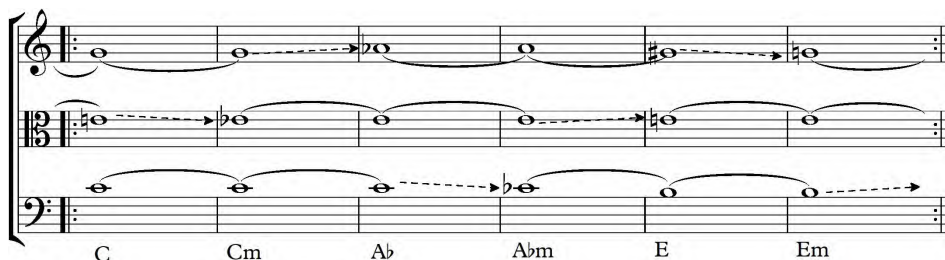


Fig.1 – Diagram of parsimonious voice-leading.

To Elgar, the matter of his dual tonality appeared to be fairly trivial: '[I] have furnished (good word) four part-songs, one whereof is in two keys at once! [...] It will sound very remote & will please village choirs'.⁶ His dual tonality, as J.P.E. Harper-Scott has suggested, is of a different nature to the hybridisation found in such examples as Schoenberg's song *Traumleben* (Op. 6, No. 1) where a combination of two tonics (F major and E major) forms a persistently-heard sonority.⁷

- 3 Voice-leading, one aspect of part writing, is the relationship between the successive pitches of simultaneously moving parts or voices. It may be described as parsimonious if it follows 'the law of the shortest way' moving as few voices as few steps (i.e. chromatically) as possible. This provides a way of theorising late-romantic harmony in which the customary idea of tonal 'relatedness' or 'distance' is called into question (for example, A minor and E minor are closer to C major than is G major).
- 4 This term, 'hexatonic' being applied to any music, mode or scale based on a system of six different pitches, has been used by Cohn to describe a network (hence 'tonal space') of six pitches arranged a minor 3rd apart (for example, Ab, C, Eb, G, B, D).
- 5 Richard Cohn, 'Maximally smooth cycles, hexatonic systems, and the analysis of late-Romantic triad progressions', *Music Analysis*, Vol.15 (1996), 9-40; or, more recently, *Audacious Euphony: Chromaticism and the Triad's Second Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Patrick McCreless, 'An Evolutionary Perspective on Nineteenth-Century Semitonal Relations', William Kinderman, 'Dramatic Recapitulation and Tonal Pairing in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*', and William E. Benjamin, 'Tonal Dualism in Bruckner's Eighth Symphony', in William Kinderman and Harald Krebs (ed.), *The Second Practice of Nineteenth Century Tonality* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 87-114, 178-214 and 237-59; David Lewin, 'Amfortas' Prayer to Titirel and the Role of D in *Parsifal*', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, Vol.7, No.3 (July 1988) 336-49; Matt BaileyShea, 'The Hexatonic and the Double Tonic: Wolf's *Christmas Rose*', *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol.51, No.2 (Fall, 2007), 237-59; and Christopher Lewis, *Tonal Coherence in Mahler's Ninth Symphony* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1984).
- 6 Letter to Ivor Atkins (17 January, 1908), cited in E. Wulstan Atkins, *The Elgar-Atkins Friendship*, 169. *There is Sweet Music* is dedicated to Canon Charles Gorton, founder of the Morecambe Musical Festival and Competition, for which Elgar not only had adjudicated four times since 1903, but had also written a number of test pieces. It is very likely that Elgar had a competitive element in mind when planning his Op.53 part-songs.
- 7 See Christopher Lewis, 'Mirrors and Metaphors: Reflections on Schoenberg and Nineteenth-Century Tonality', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, Vol.2, No.1, Resolutions II (Summer, 1987), 26-42.

‘[Elgar’s] use of such double-tonic complexes [are] only an incidental strategy, and his principal focus is on opening rifts in the structure of his music by the direct opposition of two tonal areas’.⁸ Bars 13-18 of *There is Sweet Music* (Fig.2a) flow succinctly down the hexatonic cycle, represented here by the *Tonnetz Strip*⁹ in fig.2c (overleaf).

A mediation between the two notes through a hexatonic tonal space is directed by parsimonious voice-leading, producing a thread of floating harmonies that gradate between Ab and G. This causes a softly-spoken ‘tumult’ between the notes, evoking an impression that the music is content with its being tonally undefined. Diana McVeagh has aptly described this music’s laziness as ‘that half-world between waking and sleep’.¹⁰

There is Sweet Music sets the first stanza of the Choric Song from Tennyson’s dramatic monologue *The Lotos-Eaters* (1832). The poem describes the adventure of a group of mariners and their discovery of the Lotos-land, a garden of paradise ‘in which it seemed always afternoon’.¹¹ After consuming the fruit of the lotos, the seafarers are drugged into a state of slumber.

Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,
Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave
To each, but whoso did receive of them,
And taste, to him the gushing of the wave
Far far away did seem to mourn and rave
On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,
His voice was thin, as voices from the grave:
And deep-asleep he seem’d, yet all awake,
And music in his ears his beating heart did make. (28-36)

Tennyson’s evocations of a semi-conscious state, in which the mariners’ minds (and yet also the reader’s) are detached from space and time, finds a synonymous representation in the drifting harmonies of *There is Sweet Music*. Elgar has connected with Tennyson’s psychological ‘hyper-realis[m]’;¹² laziness, after all, was something on which the two men saw eye-to-eye.¹³ Even the part-song’s ending, which presents the most iconic moment in the Ab major/G major opposition, captures the fateful idleness contained in poem’s last lines in its capacity to leave the duality hanging and ‘sleep’.

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more. (171-73)

8 J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar: Modernist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 66.

9 The *Tonnetz* (German for ‘tone-network’) is a conceptual lattice diagram invented by Leonhard Euler in 1739 that shows a two-dimensional tonal pitch space created by the (in this case hexatonic) network of relationships between musical pitches.

10 Diana McVeagh, *Elgar The Music Maker* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), 92.

11 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), 98.

12 John D. Rosenberg, ‘Tennyson and the Landscape of Consciousness’, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol.12, No 4 (Winter, 1974), 305.

13 A comparison between Elgar and Tennyson has already been made by Diana McVeagh. See ‘A Man’s Attitude to Life’, in Raymond Monk (ed.), *Edward Elgar: Music and Literature* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1993), 1-9.

15 *ppp* Than tir'd eye - lids u-pon tir'd eyes; *pp* That gen - tier lies, Than tir'd
spi - rit lies, Mu - sic that gentlier on the spi - rit lies,

18 eye - lids up-on tir'd eyes;
Than tir'd eye - lids up-on tir'd eyes
up-on tir'd eyes, up-on tir'd

Fig.2a – *There is Sweet Music*, bars 15-18

13 14 15 16 17 18

Triad: $\begin{pmatrix} E\flat \\ C \\ A\flat \end{pmatrix}$ $\begin{pmatrix} E\flat \\ B \\ A\flat \end{pmatrix}$ $\begin{pmatrix} C \\ G \\ E \end{pmatrix}$ $\begin{pmatrix} E\flat \\ C \\ A\flat \end{pmatrix}$ $\begin{pmatrix} E\flat \\ B \\ A\flat \end{pmatrix}$ $\begin{bmatrix} C \\ G \\ E \end{bmatrix}$ $\begin{pmatrix} E\flat \\ C \\ A\flat \end{pmatrix}$

Fig.2b – Reduction of and grouping of triads in *There is Sweet Music*, bars 13-18.

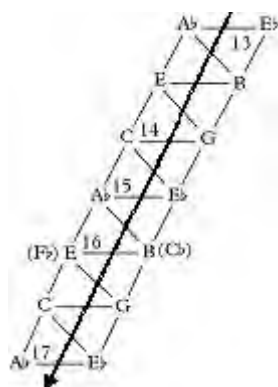


Fig.2c – Tonnetz Strip showing hexatonic cycles in *There is Sweet Music*, bars 13-17.

However, amongst the lethargic haze of hexatonic cycles, the moment where an unwavering tonality is established (bar 20) is of consequently greater effect, bringing about a localised association between Db major and ‘sleep’. Whether the tonality here is stable in an effort to show sleep as one of the possible solutions to chemically induced slumber is left to our speculation, though it is worth taking stock of what Elgar meant by ‘remote’: in physical space or the precinct of one’s mind? Significantly, having provided a tonal foundation to the part-song in the form of a five-bar pedal, Db itself eventually succumbs to dozziness as it drops (off) down to Cb (bar 25), and even further to B natural (bar 26), causing the tonality to be once again indeterminate.

The third part-song, *O Wild West Wind!* encounters the idea of a conflict between G and Ab being worked out in a more traditional manner. Here, the tumult exists between the two notes themselves, rather than the ethereal pairing of two tonalities in *There is Sweet Music*. The explosive opening presents the notes at loggerheads, with G invading the Ab chord of ‘Wind!’ (bar 2). The struggle continues in bar 4 and correspondingly in bar 11, where the sopranos’ high G is an appoggiatura to an Eb dominant chord, in which the tenors consistently sing an Ab and therefore emphasise the clash. Similarly, both Ab and G are superimposed on top of each other in bars 47 and 51, where the G takes on the 6 of a 6-5 suspension over a dominant 9th of C minor. The presence of Ab and G is prevalent here (bars 45-53) and, when not alternating between each other (as seen in the tenor part in bars 46-7), they appear simultaneously (bar 52). This bar illustrates the height of the conflict, in which Ab and G directly oppose each other on both of the bar’s strong beats.

Ab continually forces G to resolve, creating a hierarchy that is not present in *There is Sweet Music*. The tugging of the music towards Ab in bars 8 and 9 is made more conspicuous by the *poco allargando*, which gives the chord enough space to spread its wings. By having the Ab as the highest sounding note, the common formula would be for it to fall to a G, corresponding with the perfect cadence into Eb in bar 10. This does not happen, and instead an Ab pitch is left resonating as the unison begins. This pitch-class dominance is held throughout the part-song until a dominant seventh of D major, to which G functions as the seventh, interrupts a dominant seventh of Eb in bar 59, of which Ab is the seventh. The sudden entry of chord half-diminished seventh of Eb (bar 61, beat 3) restates the opposition which remains pronounced throughout the piece’s penultimate bar. The ending of *O Wild West Wind!*, therefore, demonstrates a lateral tumult between the same ‘mighty harmonies’ that were vertically opposed in *There is Sweet Music*.

Despite its being written in an Eb major/C minor key signature, there is much to make us believe that the real tonic of *Deep in My Soul* is in fact Ab major.¹⁴ Although made less blatant by its upper neighbour notes, the opening bar is in essence a dominant-tonic movement in Ab. However, this newly established Ab is immediately undermined by the entry of the other voices a beat later, making it the seventh of Bb major, casting an ambivalent darkness and contradicting the affable announcement by the basses. The music is twisted into various contortions of the opening conundrum, though the harmony resists any application to hexatonic processes. Beyond the opening’s repression of Ab, the music is transported to the relatively unrelated key of E major (bar 5), until a cold reprise of the ‘Deep in My Soul’ motif returns in its original key at the words ‘lonely and lost’ (bar 6). Even here, Ab is denied absolute establishment by the Eb poised underneath.

14 This is in contrast to the prevailing view that the song’s tonic is in Eb major. See A.J.J. [August Jaeger], ‘Elgar’s New Choral Works’, *The Musical Times*, Vol.49, No. 785 (1 July 1908), 453-54, and Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar: A Creative Life* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 524-25. The harmony of *Deep in My Soul* is described by Moore as ‘wandering’, whereas the present study implies Elgar has rigid strategy to this music.

Deep in my Soul

Andante espressivo. ♩ = 69

p Deep in my soul *ppp* deep in my soul, *pp* Lone-ly and

7 Deep in my soul that ten-der se-cret dwells, that ten-der se-cret dwells, _____

lost to *dim.* light for ev-er more, *cresc.* Save when to thine my heart re-spon-sive swells, Then *pp*

— Lone-ly and lost,

14 *dim.* trembles in-to silence, in-to si-lence *ppp* as be-fore. *dim.* *rit.*

Then, then trembles in-to si-lence as be-fore *pp* in-to si-lence as be-fore.

20 *a tempo. (Poco più mosso.* ♩ = 72.) *pp* There, in its cen-tre, a lamp, in its cen-tre, a se-pulchral lamp *fp > pp* burns, burns the slow flame e-

p *solenne* a se-pul-chral lamp Burns the slow flame, e-

25 *ter-nal dim. pp* e-ter-nal un-seen; Which not the dark-ness of Des

ter-nal but un-seen, but un-seen; Which not the dark-

30 pair can damp, Though vain its ray as it had nev-er been, vain its

ness of Des-pair can damp, Though vain its ray *dim. molto*

35 ray as it had nev-er been, *ppp* nev-er been. *p* Deep in my soul
 41 *ppp* deep in my soul, *pp* Lone-ly and lost to light for ev-er more, Save when to *cresc.*
 dwells that ten-der se-cret dwells, Lone-ly and lost,
 47 thine my heart re-spon-sive swells, Then trem-bles in-to si-lence in-to
f *pp* *p*
 Then then trembles in-to
 52 si-lence *dim.* as be-fore, *molto rit.* in-to si-lence as be-fore.
 si-lence as be-fore in-to si-lence as be-fore.

A condensed echo of the partsong's initial matter in bars 6-8 leads to an exploration further from the inhibited tonic, directed by the bass line – sinking the interval of a tritone – into A major ('my heart responsive swells'). Also at work is the surreptitious pronouncement of Cb. It is particularly prominent in the concluding bars of the first section, causing an Ab minor chord on 'trembles', which hints at Ab major as the denied tonic, while further suppressing its appearance.¹⁵

In the part-song's third section, the counteractive magnetism of Cb tugs the music away from the suppressed tonic, initiating the occurrence of B major in bar 48, a chord that moreover shares a closer relation to Ab minor by way of parsimonious voice-leading. In addition, Cb (and its enharmonic twin B natural) holds a command over the final ten bars and forces an ending in Eb major via a downward resolution of Cb to Bb. In this way, the partsong's central section has an augmented importance in that it corrects the prevailing Ab minor heard in bar 14, and the consequent presence of Cb/B natural by prolonging an arpeggiation of Ab major (see Fig.3).

15 The same augmented chord is used in the First Symphony to ensure the first movement ends in Ab major.



Fig. 3 – Bass Arpeggiation in *Deep in My Soul*, bars 20-38.

The final curiosity of *Deep in My Soul* is Elgar's choice of such a troubled text. It certainly seems odd to dedicate a setting of such unnerving melancholy to a friend (Julia Worthington) who had been so generous to Elgar and his family.¹⁶ Yet, there is perhaps something semi-ironic at play. The closest the music gets to achieving Ab major occurs at the words 'lonely and lost' (b. 6), a play on words that jests at the very nature of the tonic's frailty in establishing itself. The witticisms continue, for instance the final line of the first stanza, 'Then trembles into silence as before', could be seen to pun on the further repression of Ab major, and the interference of Cb at the end of the first section. Even in the music of the middle section, Elgar puns on the text – 'there in its centre' – and could the Ab major arpeggiation be the 'sepulchral lamp', forever burning 'but unseen ... as it had never been'?

In a similar way to *Deep in My Soul*, the tonality of the fourth part-song *Owls: An Epitaph* is made deliberately ambiguous to the extent that it becomes one of Elgar's most bewildering compositions. The key signatures suggest the music for the first and third stanzas to be loosely based in C minor/Eb major, whereas the second stanza is equally tied to C SHARP minor/E major. In all three stanzas of Elgar's own poem (the music remains much the same for each one) the tangled chromaticism of bars 4, 15 and 27 and the use of the Neapolitan at the words 'Dead [or 'Now' in v.3] at the foot of the tree', prove the most serious of disturbances to a single tonality. In a letter to Jaeger, Elgar stated how 'it [*Owls*] is only a fantasy & means nothing. It is in a wood at night evidently & the recurring "Nothing" is only an owlish sound'.¹⁷ A further clue that the morose atmosphere of *Owls* is perhaps to be taken lightly is in the detail of its dedicatee, 'My Friend Pietro d'Alba' – namely Peter Rabbit, the pet of Elgar's daughter, Carice.¹⁸

In the *Four Part-songs*, Elgar concentrates his attention on instigating tonal problems that epitomise the very atmosphere central to each song. This includes tonal pairing, a repressed tonic, a two-note conflict, and an air of complete ambiguity. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that the tumult between Ab and G is universal to all four part-songs, the idea being deeply embedded in the music. This is most perceptible in *There is Sweet Music* and *O Wild West Wind!*, but is also identifiable in the others.¹⁹ The first three bars of *Deep in My Soul* witnesses a movement from Ab

16 'Pippa', as she was known to the Elgars, had hosted the composer and his wife during their American trip of 1905. She was later to become one of the suspected dedicatees of the Violin Concerto, Op.61.

17 Edward Elgar, letter to August Jaeger (26 April, 1908), in Jerrold Northrop Moore (ed.), *Elgar and His Publishers: Letters of a Creative Life*, Vol.2 (Oxford University Press, 1987), 52.

18 Elgar could equally be shrugging off a light-hearted explanation of a part-song that meant a great deal more to him than he was willing to disclose. This is also suggested by Geoffrey Hodgkins, Cover Notes to 'Elgar: Part-Songs', *Naxos* 8.570541, 2008.

19 This might imply that *O Wild West Wind!* was the first song of the set to be conceived: it represents the most basic working out of the Ab/G conflict, of which *There is Sweet Music*, *Deep in My Soul* and *Owls*

to G, and in its central section, where an Ab major bass arpeggiation underpins the harmony, G forms the peak of the melodic phrase (bar 25) before the music sinks back into disarray. In *Owls*, Ab is emphasised in the tenor part on the word ‘dead’ (bar 5), and the Ab/G conflict is pronounced in the partsong’s ending. Similarly, the chromatic ascent in the bass from C (bar 9) up to Eb (bar 23) brings Ab once again into focus. This is in contrast to the presence of G in the brief mention of a funeral march, ‘A marching slow of unseen feet’ (bar 25).

An overall bass arpeggiation of the *Four Part-songs* reveals a triad of C minor (see Fig.4). This is not surprising: C minor proves to be of great importance in the set. In *There is Sweet Music* it provides a reference point between Ab major and G major, most notably at the words ‘Than tir’d eye-lids’ (bar 18), and in *Deep in My Soul* a cadence into C minor in bar 34 overshadows the later cadence into Ab (bar 37), the latter as if an afterthought.



Fig.4 – Overall bass arpeggiation to *Four Unaccompanied Part-songs*

The tumult of Ab/G exists in a constant state of flux throughout the Op.53 part-songs. The lack of hierarchy between the keys of *There is Sweet Music* is reformulated with the repression of Ab in *Deep in My Soul*, contrasted by the repression of G in *O Wild West Wind!*. If *Owls*, therefore, is to be regarded as a conclusion to the set (though, I will argue against this proposition) then the struggle is never won (nor lost) and the contest remains. Yet there is an additional tonal struggle in these part-songs that frequently threatens the stability of an overarching C minor arpeggiation and augments the volatility of the Ab/G duality. Returning to the concluding bars of *Deep in My Soul*’s first section, it was noticed above how the note Cb proved contradictory to an Ab major tonic, and received ‘correction’ by way of an Ab major arpeggiation in the central section that followed. Cb also appears in *There is Sweet Music*, acting as a pivot note between the two tonalities and provides harmonic colour when describing the poppy as it ‘hangs in sleep’ (bar 28). Cb has further word painting properties in *O Wild West Wind!* where it provides a ‘deep autumnal tone’ in bar 13, and again brings about the Ab minor heard previously in *Deep in My Soul*. A detail of miniature proportions in bar 33 of *Owls* codifies the proliferation of Cb as yet another large-scale tonal problem across the four part-songs (see Fig. 5). The note on ‘said’ sinks to a B natural (Cb), contradicting the two occasions before it where the note had been a C natural.²⁰

Fig.5 – Proliferation of Cb in the four part-songs.

provide three alternative guises for the rift.

20 It is perhaps not coincidental, furthermore, that the highest notes of the four partsongs are Ab and G, and the lowest note a memorable Bb (Cb) in *Deep in My Soul* (b.54).



Fig. 5a, *There is Sweet Music*, bars 28-29.

Fig. 5b, *Deep in My Soul*, bars 13-19.

Fig. 5c, *O Wild West Wind!*, bars 12-17.

Fig. 5d, *Owls: An Epitaph*, bars 32-33.

Finally, there is every reason to believe that the *Four Part-songs* were conceived of as a set which, as the present study has shown, are interlinked with one another in a continuous structure.²¹ To this end, the part-songs exist together inasmuch as do the four movements of a symphony, and the symphony Elgar was writing at this point in time not only interconnects a number of disparate tonalities, but also prolongs a tonal conflict (this time between Ab major and D minor). As such, issues of directional tonality are as relevant to these part-songs as they are to Elgar's First

21 It is worth noting that Op.53 represents the largest number of Elgar's partsongs to be collected under one opus. The nine partsongs produced in quick succession during 1914 largely inherit separate opus numbers to each other or at the most are twinned. These are *The Birthright*, *The Merry Go Round*, *The Brook*, *The Windlass*, *Two Choral Songs*, Op.71, *Death on the Hills*, Op.72, *Two Choral Songs*, Op.73.

Symphony (or any other large late-romantic work for that matter). Yet there is nothing in *Owls* close to what William Kinderman – writing of the ending to *Parsifal*, arguably the apotheosis of large-scale directional tonality – describes as the ‘completing and perfecting [of] the musical form as an audible symbol for the utopia of redemption’.²² Instead, we get quite the opposite: an utterly perplexing and private ending with a chromatic whimper that looks forward to the ‘perfunctory’ final chord of *Falstaff* (1913).²³ Writing about the end of Elgar’s First Symphony, Harper-Scott argues of ‘a sense in which the work ends only because Elgar decides it should: the ending is not, in purely musical terms, absolutely the end of all argument. It could conceivably go on, and things could end differently’.²⁴ This sense is also conspicuous in *Owls*; the piece (and the struggle between Ab and G) could theoretically continue forever. Even better perhaps, *Owls*’s final chord could easily lead back to the opening melody of *There Is Sweet Music*, beginning the cycle again and again. It is of no coincidence that Elgar ends his First Symphony, and many other pieces written thereafter, in an ironically un-triumphant manner, leaving unresolved rifts created at the very start of these pieces.²⁵ In many ways, Elgar answers his own question – ‘What is that? Nothing ... All that can be is said’.

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22 William Kinderman, ‘Dramatic Recapitulation and Tonal Pairing in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*’, in *The Second Practice of Nineteenth-Century Tonality* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 210.

23 Harper-Scott, *Elgar, Modernist*, 19.

24 Ibid. 185.

25 See Aidan J. Thomson, ‘Elgar and the City: The *Cockaigne* Overture and Contributions of Modernity’, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 96 (Summer 2013), 219-262.

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