

Let everyone that comes
be received as Christ.

THE American Organist

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS AND THE ASSOCIATED PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS OF AMERICA

AUGUST 2025



I Heard the Voice

Tracing the Footsteps of the 20th Century's Most Influential Hymnodist

By Alex Hodgkinson

Since time immemorial, composers have borrowed, recycled, and repurposed tunes in new contexts. There are more than 40 masses based on the medieval French folk song *L'Homme armé*, from composers such as Dufay and Josquin in the late Middle Ages to Karl Jenkins and Margaret Sandresky in our own time.

When Martin Luther was compiling a hymnal in the 16th century, he (possibly) complained that “the devil has all the best tunes”—that is, the most appealing, memorable, whistleable tunes were to be heard on the streets and in the fields rather than in the cloisters or sanctuaries. Luther set about repurposing these devilish, secular melodies, marrying them with sacred texts.

In the early 20th century, a gently eccentric gang of folk song enthusiasts—including Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, Cecil Sharp, and Lucy Broadwood—traversed England, supping pints of warm beer in deep-thatched hostelryes and listening to weatherworn locals humming tunes passed down the ages.



Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams in the Malvern Hills (1921)

The folk song hunters collected a vast number of melodies from counties across England, especially Essex, Norfolk, Herefordshire, and Sussex. Following Luther's example, Vaughan Williams reimagined some of them for use in church and included several in *The English Hymnal* of 1906.

Many of these newly transmogrified sacred songs—including MONK'S GATE ("He Who Would Valiant Be"), KINGSFOLD ("I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say"), and the SUSSEX CAROL ("On Christmas Night All Christians Sing")—are as popular today as ever. And several have interesting and perhaps surprising histories.

"The Sussex Carol," as reproduced in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1905)

Tune noted by R. Vaughan Williams, Mus. Doc.

SUNG BY MRS. VERRALL, MONKS GATE,
NEAR HORSHAM, SUSSEX, MAY 24TH, 1904.



See "On Christmas night the Joy-bells ring" (No. 28.) Mrs. Verrall sang almost exactly the same words as Mr. Grantham, though fewer verses. Compare the tunes with "Hark, hark the news" in W. Sandys *Christmas Carols*, 1833. The words of both these were still being annually printed up to 1823 on ballad-sheets. (See Hone's *Ancient Mysteries*, 1823).—L. E. B.

SUSSEX ("Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer")

In 1904, the same year he was commissioned as an editor of *The English Hymnal*, Vaughan Williams paid a visit to a Mr. and Mrs. Verrall at their cottage in the village of Monk's Gate, just outside Horsham, Sussex. Amongst the Verralls' vast collection of folk songs was "The Royal George," a ballad about a tragic shipwreck.

HMS *Royal George* was a 100-gun Royal Navy ship that, at the time of its launch in 1756, lay claim to being the largest warship in the world. It sank in Portsmouth in 1782 as a result of a miscalculation by a maintenance man, with the sad loss of over 800 souls. Several of the cannons were salvaged, melted down, and used for the reliefs around the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London.



Thrift Cottage, Monk's Gate, Sussex. Sometime home of Mr. and Mrs. Verrall, visited by Vaughan Williams.

**As we set sail from the rock of Gibraltar,
As we set sail for sweet Dublin Bay,
Little did we think of our sad misfortune,
A-sleeping in the briny sea.**

(From “The Royal George”)

The tune of this unhappy tale was harmonized and paired with “Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer,” an inspiring text by the New England writer Love Maria Whitcomb Willis (1824–1908). It is a fine example of Vaughan Williams’s skill in the cross-pollination of secular and sacred.

SUSSEX, as it appears in *The English Hymnal* (1906)

SUSSEX. (87. 87.)
In moderate time ♩ = 72.

385

Adapted from an
English Traditional Melody.

Mrs. L. M. Willis (1864).

**Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings, be our guide;
Through endeavor, failure, danger,
Father, be Thou at our side.**

(Verse 4)

KINGSFOLD (“I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say”)

A stone’s throw from the Verralls’ cottage lies the Owl at Kingsfold, a public house known in Vaughan Williams’s time as the Wheatsheaf. It was here in December 1904 that he heard a version of the folk song that eventually became the hymn tune KINGSFOLD. It is uncertain whether this was the first time Vaughan Williams had heard the tune or if the rendition in the Wheatsheaf served purely as a reminder. Either way, this melody has proven to be one of Vaughan Williams’s best-loved hymns, and a tune that punctuated his compositional career.

The version that the young composer heard in the Wheatsheaf, sung by a Mr. Booker, tells another tragic and disturbing tale, this time of a terrible murder that took place in Suffolk in 1827: “The Ballad of Maria Marten.”

Maria and her lover, William Corder, had concocted a plan to elope to the nearby town of Ipswich. The pair rendezvoused under the cover of darkness at the Red Barn in the village of Polstead, from where they would escape.

Seeking to explain their overnight disappearance, Corder (who had a reputation as a fraudster and a philanderer) sent letters to Maria's father assuring him that the pair were safe and well on the Isle of Wight.

At that same time, Maria's stepmother suffered several nightmares and persuaded her husband to search the barn. Heartbreakingly, he found his daughter's body in a shallow grave. She had been murdered by Corder, who was tracked down, tried, and—despite protesting his innocence—hanged.

This sorrowful story shocked the nation. Such was the hysteria that the authorities had to remove Maria's gravestone, as the sleepy village could not cope with the influx of people paying their respects. Maria's fate was recounted in numerous articles, plays, and songs, including "The Ballad." The mournful modality of the folk song appropriately captures the tenor of the tale.

"Maria Marten," as reproduced in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1905)

IV.—MARIA MARTIN."

ÆOLIAN. SANG BY MR. BOOKER,
AT THE "WHEATSHEAF," KINGSFOLD, SUSSEX, DEC. 23RD, 1904.



The Mixolydian and Æolian or Dorian tunes to these words are really variants of the same tune, being almost identical in outline, except for the major third in the Mixolydian tune, and the minor in the Dorian and Æolian.

There seems to be some subtle connection between the words of "Maria Martin" and "Come all you worthy Christians," as they are so often sung to variants of the same tune.—R. V. W.

**If you will meet me at the Red Barn,
as sure as I have life,
I will take you to Ipswich town
and there make you my wife.**

**He straight went home and fetched his gun,
his pickaxe and his spade,
He went into the Red Barn,
and there he dug her grave.**

(From "The Ballad of Maria Marten")

Maria's story has been told and retold in various forms over the last two centuries, most recently in a stage production by the British author and playwright Beth Flintoff. The play focuses on Maria's life rather than her death, giving her the dignity she deserves.

Although the association between this story and the folk song is long established, there are a great number of variants with alternative texts from all over the UK and beyond. The earliest-known printing of the tune is from 1719, and the music is likely older than that—perhaps centuries older. Other versions come from Kent, Devon, Norfolk,



An illustration of the Red Barn, from a contemporary book about the murder of Maria Marten

Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Hereford, and Ireland. The Irish version, known as “Star of the County Down,” has a more positive outlook:

**Near Banbridge town, in the County Down,
One morning last July,
Down a bóthrin green came a sweet cailín,
And she smiled as she passed me by.**

(From “Star of the County Down”)

The tune’s sacred association predates its current manifestation, having sometime been sung to the words “Come All You Worthy Christians” and also used to tell the parable of Lazarus (the version on which Vaughan Williams based his 1939 work for string orchestra, *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus*).

The text of the hymn we know today, “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say,” is by the Scottish pastor Horatius Bonar (1808–1889). It is thanks to Vaughan Williams that this wonderful melody—majestic without being ostentatious—is now forever linked with these lines of profundity, comfort, and hope:

**I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“I am this dark world’s Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright.”
I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that Light of life I’ll walk
Till traveling days are done.**

(Verse 3)

Ralph Vaughan Williams had a great love of the primitive music of his native land, and folk song remained an inspiration throughout his life. He felt it in his soul, in his bones, in his being.

When, later in life, Vaughan Williams was asked what constitutes “good” music, he replied: “There [is] a feeling of recognition, as of meeting an old friend, which comes to us all in the face of great artistic experiences. I had the same experience when I first heard an English folk song, when I first saw Michelangelo’s *Day and Night*, when I suddenly came upon Stonehenge or had my first sight of New York City—the intuition that I had been there already.”

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