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Structural Pluralism in Gerald Finzi's *Earth and Air and Rain*

Natalie Burton

The aesthetic complexities arising from the intermedial union of words and music are far-reaching and profound, but perhaps never more so than in the song cycle, where issues of unity and narrativity add further layers of intricacy. This is reflected in the breadth, diversity and range of scholarship and critical approaches that the genre of song cycle attracts.¹ Given the idiosyncratic heterogeneity of the genre, definitive description is almost impossible, but in the broadest possible terms a song cycle is a multi-movement piece within which songs, that retain an autonomous existence, are collected together to create a more extensive, cohesive musical work. The form that such cohesion may take is as diverse and varied as the genre itself. In relation to these specific issues of structure, Gerald Finzi's *Earth and Air and Rain* poses some fascinating possibilities.

This article seeks to explore the potential for this work to be understood in terms of its structural pluralism. In short, that the formal organisation of *Earth and Air and Rain* may be regarded in two different ways. Firstly, macroscopically, as the full ten-song sequence published in 1936 in which broad-ranging poetic and musical style highlight the work's structural divergence. In this macroscopic reading of the work's structure, all ten songs are essentially collated and then ordered to achieve sustained contrast and variety in performance. Secondly, as a compact narrative cycle, formed from a smaller selection of songs. In this structural reading of the work, five of the poems combine to create a distinct plot or story through songs that share close musical and textual connections. The compact narrative cycle is revealed through a diffractive analysis, in which all of the songs of *Earth and Air and Rain* are considered, musically and textually, non-sequentially. This methodology is applied in direct response to the work's historical context, taking into account the composer's idiosyncratic compositional customs as well as contemporary broadcasting and publication practices, all of which may have influenced the structural presentation of *Earth and Air and Rain* as it is most commonly perceived, and therefore performed, today.

The evocative language of Thomas Hardy's poetry has attracted much attention from musicians.² Of all the composers to have worked with Hardy's texts, Gerald Finzi is the most prolific. Indeed, of the 305 settings of Hardy's poetry recorded in Gooch and Thatcher's catalogue, Finzi's songs and sketches account for approximately one quarter. The composer's wide-ranging literary interests and expertise are well documented,³ so, notably, Hardy was the poet Finzi turned to more than any other.⁴ The majority of his fifty-two completed song settings are compiled within six collections that exclusively feature Hardy's

¹ *Word and Music Studies: Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Word and Music Studies at Ann Arbor, MI, 1999*, ed. by Walter Bernhart, Werner Wolf and David L. Mosley, *Word and Music Studies*, III (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

² Bryan Gooch and David Thatcher record that musical settings of Thomas Hardy are surpassed only by Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, James Joyce and A.E. Housman; see their *Musical Settings of Late Victorian and Modern British Literature: A Catalogue* (New York, NY: Garland, 1976). Other notable composers to have set Hardy's texts include Benjamin Britten, Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland and Ivor Gurney.

³ Finzi's extensive literary collection, totalling approximately 6,000 printed volumes, is now housed in the Finzi Book Room at the University of Reading. Pauline Dingley has compiled a comprehensive catalogue: *The Finzi Book Room at the University of Reading: A Catalogue* (Reading: The Library, University of Reading, 1981). Available online at <<https://www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/collections/sc-finzi-books.aspx>> [Accessed 7 June 2019].

⁴ Rupert Wood, 'Featured Item: Thomas Hardy: *We Field Women*', *University of Reading Special Collections*, May 2008 <<https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/special-collections/featurehardypoem.pdf>> [Accessed 25 July 2017].

verse,⁵ but the classification of these works remains open to question. Aside from *By Footpath and Stile*, composed between 1921–22, Finzi was unwilling to describe any of his subsequent Hardy collections as song cycles, which suggests that, for him at least, that generic status demanded greater integration of poetry and music. Yet this work – Finzi’s only official, self-determined cycle – did not meet his exacting standards and he subsequently withdrew it from the publisher’s catalogue before having all stock and plates destroyed. These two factors – the concept of a song cycle as Finzi understood it and the composer’s reputation as a self-deprecating perfectionist – are crucial elements in exploring how and in what ways his song cycles might be considered and understood.

Earth and Air and Rain draws together ten of Finzi’s Hardy songs but assessing the structure of the work is both challenging and complex. Scholars and critics, echoing the composer’s reflections on the work’s status, emphasise that the piece is not a cycle.⁶ This determination is made on the basis that there is no overarching narrative operating through Finzi’s selection of poems and that there are no significant, recurrent musical structures or gestures that draw the work together. That said, Banfield and Hold have also described the ‘extreme care’⁷ with which the ‘carefully ordered’⁸ sequence of songs is compiled and the greater effectiveness of the songs when performed as part of Finzi’s sequence rather than in individual rendition. The work’s somewhat ambiguous genesis along with a complex publication and performance history add further difficulty in addressing precisely how to navigate its structure.

Knowing when and in what order Finzi composed the songs would seem, potentially, to offer some insight as to his ultimate artistic intentions for this cycle, yet this too is complicated. Finzi’s discontinuous method of composing is widely understood. The composer is known to have worked slowly and meticulously across several works at a time, often beginning compositions but subsequently abandoning them for several years, if not altogether, when unable to sustain the creative impetus. These characteristics, in combination with inconsistent and sometimes incomplete manuscript evidence, mean that there are inherent difficulties in providing precise dates for the composition of each of the songs in *Earth and Air and Rain*.⁹ As such, it becomes challenging to propose how the cycle’s structure might operate based on the work’s compositional development and progression.

The publication and performance histories of *Earth and Air and Rain* add further layers of complexity to any assessment of the work’s structure. Finzi’s publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, favoured the publication of single songs as the most commercially viable proposition since concert programming at the time typically did not include ‘more than four or five modern English songs together’.¹⁰ These considerations were equally reflected in contemporary broadcasting practices, with the BBC tending to programme in fifteen-minute segments. Indeed, the first broadcast performance of *Earth and Air and Rain* in 1937 only included a selection of five songs from the set, and even then they were not performed

⁵ *A Young Man’s Exhortation, By Footpath and Stile, Before and After Summer, Earth and Air and Rain, Till Earth Outwears and I Said to Love* (the latter two were compiled by Finzi’s executors).

⁶ Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 290, and Trevor Hold, *Parry to Finzi: Twenty English Song Composers* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), p. 404.

⁷ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 290.

⁸ Hold, p. 405.

⁹ Piecing together manuscript and documentary evidence, Banfield proposes approximate dates of composition for some of the songs. See his *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 206.

¹⁰ Stephen Banfield, *Gerald Finzi: An English Composer* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), pp. 203–204. Vaughan Williams experienced similar difficulties with the publication of *Songs of Travel*; see Sophie Fuller, ‘The Songs and Shorter Secular Choral Works’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, ed. by Alain Frogley and Aidan J. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 106–112 (pp. 113–114) and Rufus Hallmark, ‘Robert Louis Stevenson, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Their *Songs of Travel*’, in *Vaughan Williams Essays*, ed. by Byron Adams and Robin Wells (Routledge: Oxford, 2016), 129–156 (p. 135).

entirely in sequence.¹¹ It seems, therefore, that at that time Finzi and his fellow composers would have experienced significant difficulty in attracting any meaningful interest, from publishers, broadcasters or performers, in an extended, integrated song cycle. One must consider to what extent those contemporary contextual conditions shaped, or perhaps limited, the work's structure.

When considered macroscopically, as the complete ten-song sequence, the poetry and music of *Earth and Air and Rain* appear to confirm the work's disjunct structure. It is true that the imagery in the texts of the outer songs prominently features singing birds, and that the title being drawn from the closing line of the final song certainly forges a gently cyclical link between beginning and end. However, ultimately the combination of poetry that makes up *Earth and Air and Rain* can only really be seen as a broader reflection of the thematic and formal spectrum of Hardy's output more generally. There are, for example, poems that contemplate the inexorability of fate, poems that recall Cornwall and Emma, self-reflexive poems, poems that examine missed opportunities and poems that explore the theme of death alongside an example of Hardy's satirical, Napoleonic verse. The range of poetic structures and voices that the cycle encompasses is no less diverse with first-person accounts, mystical dialogues and interior monologues operating side by side. Indeed, Finzi's choice of poems is truly representative of Hardy's breathtaking inventiveness in language and prosody, but the selection considered as a whole emphasises difference rather than similarity. (See Table 1).

¹¹ A performance given by Sinclair Logan of songs 1, 2, 3, 7, and 6 was broadcast on 20 February 1937. See Banfield, *Gerald Finzi*, p. 204.

Table 1

	Song	Structure	Verse form	Poetic Voice/Tense	Subject/Setting/Themes
1	‘Summer Schemes’	2 stanzas (each 9 lines)	Iambic tetrameter, with line 2 of each stanza formed of three trochaic syllables. Rhyme: AABABABAA	First person plural. Future tense.	Nature/Fate
2	‘When I Set Out for Lyonesse’	3 stanzas (each 6 lines)	Lines 1, 4, 5: iambic tetrameter; Lines 2, 3, 6: iambic trimeter. Rhyme: ABBAAB	First person. Past tense.	Cornwall/Mystical
3	‘Waiting Both’	2 stanzas (each 5 lines)	Lines 1–4: iambic trimeter; Line 5: three trochaic syllables. Rhyme: ABABB	Dialogue (man & star). Present tense.	Philosophical reflection
4	‘The Phantom’	4 stanzas (each 9 lines)	Lines 1 & 9: 9–10 syllables; Lines 2–8: 4–5 syllables, combining dactylic and iambic patterns. Rhyme: ABCBCBCAA	First person (describing the experience of another). Tense changes.	Emma/Death/Memory/Lost love
5	‘So I Have Fared’	6 stanzas (each a quatrain)	Trochaic lines alternating 7 & 6 syllables (with some variation). Rhyme: ABAB	First person/Interior monologue. Past moving to present.	Macaronic/Self-reflexive/Aging/ Religion
6	‘Rollicum-Rorum’	4 stanzas (each 6 lines: 4+2-line refrain)	Lines 1–4: iambic tetrameter; Lines 5–6: 9 & 8 syllables, dactylic and trochaic. Rhyme: AABB CD	Third person. Present and future.	Napoleonic/Satirical
7	‘To Lizbie Browne’	9 stanzas (each 6 lines)	Iambic dimeter. Rhyme: ABCBCA	Second person address, combined with first person reflections. Past and future.	Missed opportunity/ Time passing
8	‘The Clock of the Years’	5 stanzas (each 6 lines)	Lines 1, 4–6: 4–5 syllables; Lines 2–3: 9–11 syllables. Variable rhythm. Rhyme: ABCDDA	Dialogue (man & spirit). Past tense.	Death/Memory/Time passing/Lost love
9	‘In a Churchyard’	5 stanzas (each a quatrain)	Lines 1–3: variable; Line 4: 4 syllables. Variable rhythm. Rhyme: ABAB	Dialogue (man & yew tree). Past tense.	Death/Acceptance
10	‘Proud Songsters’	2 stanzas (each 6 lines)	Lines 1–3: 8–10 syllables; Line 4: 3 syllables; Line 5: 8 syllables; Line 6: 6 syllables. Rhyme: ABCDBB	Interior monologue. Present tense.	Nature/Renewal/Philosophical reflection/Time passing

Integrating musical features are similarly tenuous when the work is considered macroscopically. Trevor Hold identifies one or two recurring motifs within some songs, but their fragmentary nature does not afford them an especially compelling unifying identity. Perhaps most important of all in the classification of integrated song cycles, at least to musicologists, is the presence of conjunctive tonalities – that is, a sequence of musical keys that allow for a smooth, logical, aural progression between songs – which is probably why Finzi's less than cohesive tonal scheme in *Earth and Air and Rain* is cited as one of the work's failings. Trevor Hold identifies D as an important tonal centre but recognises that there are as many disparate harmonic progressions between songs as there are closely-related ones. Stephen Banfield also acknowledges this 'weakness' of tonal cohesion but as a more general feature of Finzi's compositional style.¹² (See Table 2).

Considered macroscopically – and in the entirety of its final, published state – the music and poetry of *Earth and Air and Rain* appear to substantiate the work's structural status as one of connected divergence. The cycle's structure reveals a level of organisation that provides significant musical and dramatic contrast. The work takes the listener on a journey that embraces comedy and tragedy, revelry and philosophy, satire and seriousness, life and death. The quality and variety of Finzi's writing is considered to be one of the work's great strengths and the careful placement and juxtaposition of songs – which balances tempo, tonality, character and mood – ensures sustained pleasure and interest for performer and listener alike. The fact that there is limited poetic and musical integration overall is in no way indicative of inferiority. Indeed, the macroscopic structure supports this aesthetic aim most effectively. However, there may also be reason to consider the cycle's structure from a diffractive perspective.

Finzi's exacting compositional standards, across genres, had a profound effect. Dissatisfied with *By Footpath and Stile* (1921–22), his only official narrative 'song cycle', the composer withdrew the work from Curwen's catalogue in 1934, but he did contemplate the possibility of future revision and expansion of the original, which reflects the idea that in this, and all his works, there was often an evolving aesthetic aim.¹³ Yet this is not the only instance of Finzi's thwarted narrative ambition in the genre of song. The composer planned another Hardy cycle in 1921, also for voice and strings, which would have been entitled *The Mound*. Finzi's selection of poetry for this proposed cycle projects a distinct narrative structure that seems to echo Schubert's *Winterreise* in setting, theme and experience.¹⁴ Yet like so many of his other works, the composer's projected cycle never came to be.

Taking into account all of these things – Finzi's grander, yet unrealised, ambitions to write an integrated Hardy cycle, the uncertainties of contemporary performance, publication and broadcasting practices, the debatable compositional evolution of *Earth and Air and Rain* and the composer's reticence to classify the work as a cycle – there is an argument to be made for analysing the work diffractively, by reviewing the musical and poetical content of individual songs (as presented in Table 1) non-sequentially and without assumption of definite, consecutive relationships between songs. The effects of this methodology are two-fold, in that musical and poetic divergences between songs are highlighted but, equally, potential connections within and across the whole structure are suggested. When one classifies the poetry of *Earth and Air and Rain* thematically, texts that explore and emphasise themes of lost love and death – songs one, four, eight, nine and ten – account for the majority. Although Finzi's final order diffracts these poems, in that additional songs surround and disrupt their sequence, when

¹² Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 291.

¹³ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 289. In terms of Finzi's wider compositional output, consider the genesis of the *Grand Fantasia*, Op. 38, *Dies Natalis*, Op. 8, the *Violin Concerto* and the *Oboe Interlude*, Op. 21.

¹⁴ Finzi's selection of poetry (Banfield, *Sensibility and Song*, p. 288) parallels the concepts of lone wanderer, winter landscape, nature and unrequited love.

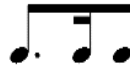
they are considered side by side the beginnings of a compelling, tragic narrative are suggested. In song one, 'Summer schemes', the happy lovers contemplate their future hopes, but with a profound sense of fatalistic awareness, the speaker repeatedly tempers the optimistic mood. In the next thematically-related song, 'The phantom', the speaker's worst fears are realised and the rural idyll in which the lovers dreamily contemplate their future is replaced with the menacing gloom of a 'seaward haze' as the lone lover in his 'careworn craze' seeks his now-deceased 'ghost-girl-rider'. The next thematically related song, 'The clock of the years', has Faustian echoes as the grieving speaker, in his desperation, makes a pact with a mysterious spirit to turn back time and restore his lost lover. Yet this is not to be and in song nine, 'In a churchyard', the lonesome lover, again in dialogue with a mysterious spiritual voice, finally reaches acceptance and peace.

In the closing song, 'Proud Songsters', the setting and imagery of the opening returns, affirming the cyclical nature of life and the speaker's acceptance of the unassailable consequence of destiny. Aside from the attractive, potential narrative substance of this selection of songs, there are musical features that enhance this proposed combination. Firstly, the broader tonal scheme becomes considerably more succinct and analogous, sounding as a logical musical succession that is pleasing to the ear. (See Table 2). Secondly, the recurrence and development of motivic material in the music across songs becomes more compelling when distilled within this condensed cycle structure.

Table 2

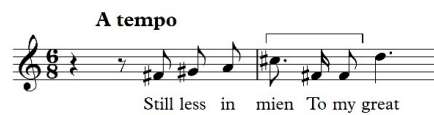
Ten-Song Structure		Narrative Cycle Structure	
1	'Summer Schemes' D major	1	'Summer Schemes' D major
2	'When I Set Out for Lyonesse' E minor	2	'The Phantom' D minor
3	'Waiting Both' Ambiguous	3	'The Clock of the Years' D minor
4	'The Phantom' D minor	4	'In a Churchyard' D minor
5	'So I Have Fared' F major	5	'Proud Songsters' B minor
6	'Rollicum-Rorum' D major		
7	'To Lizbie Browne' Eb major		
8	'The Clock of the Years' D minor		
9	'In a Churchyard' D minor		
10	'Proud Songsters' B minor		

This is, perhaps, most strongly emphasised through rhythmic and textural, rather than melodic, connections. For example, galloping, dotted rhythms persist throughout ‘The phantom’. (See Example 1).



Example 1

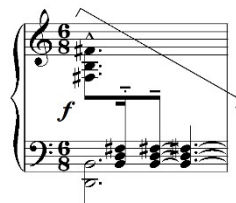
When heard successively in ‘The clock of the years’, this distinctive musical idea sounds as a series of immediate echoes forming a clear and compelling motivic link between what would be consecutive songs. Examples 2, 3a and 3b provide visual representation of this, with the dominating rhythmic device, which appears extensively in the music for both singer and pianist, indicated in the bracketed extracts of score.



Example 2: ‘The Phantom’. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.



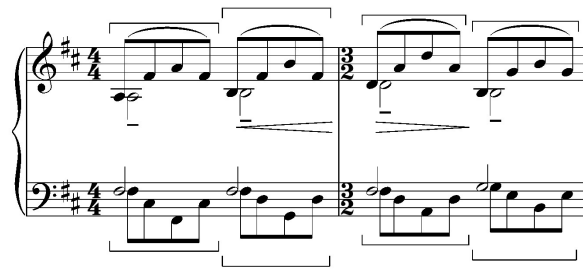
Example 3a: ‘The Clock of the Years’. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.



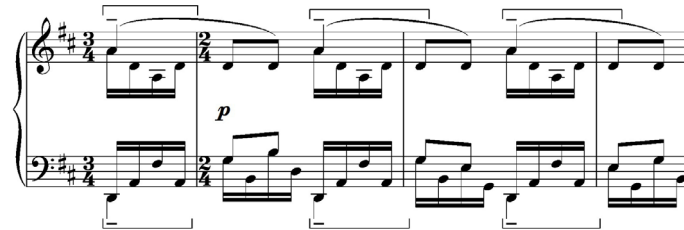
Example 3b: ‘The Clock of the Years’. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

There are further examples of motivic connections within Finzi’s music. The piano accompaniment to the opening song, ‘Summer schemes’, (Example 4) which features a continued, rippling quaver accompaniment that is arpeggiac in design,¹⁵ recalls the flowing closing section of ‘In a churchyard’. (Example 5). The similarities are clear in the chordal outline of the figures and four-note groupings (bracketed in both examples).

¹⁵ An arpeggio might be more recognisably identified as a kind of broken chord.



Example 4: 'Summer Schemes'. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

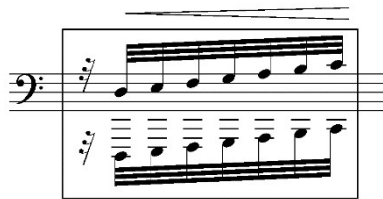


Example 5: 'In a Churchyard'. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Similarly, the closing bars of 'The phantom' (Example 6), which feature a rising scale pattern in the left hand, pre-empt the dramatic opening bars of what would be the ensuing song: 'The clock of the years'. (Example 7).



Example 6: 'The Phantom'. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.



Example 7: 'The Clock of the Years'. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Of course, all of these musical connections exist within the published ten-song sequence. However, when heard sequentially within this smaller group of thematically-linked songs forming the narrative cycle, the motivic relationships are significantly more aurally compelling than in the macroscopic, ten-song arrangement. Moreover, when set against Hardy's poetry, and the tragic narrative Finzi appears to construct from it, the motifs begin to operate with powerful, dramatic function.

'The phantom' and 'Proud songsters', like those songs already discussed, also share thematic material. Of particular note, visually, are the rising, syncopated figures in both bass lines and the dotted rhythms played in the right hand of the accompaniment for each song, though the sighing appoggiaturas with their discomfiting harmonic pattern of tension and resolution can also readily be heard. (Examples 8a and 8b).

Example 8a: 'The Phantom'. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Example 8b: 'Proud Songsters'. © Copyright 1936 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Within 'The phantom', Finzi introduces this new musical material in his setting of the second stanza of Hardy's poem:

They say he sees as an instant thing
 More clear than to-day,
 Time touches her not,
 A sweet soft scene
 That once was in play
 By that briny green
 Yes, notes always
 Warm, real, and keen,
 What his back years bring—
 A phantom of his own figuring.

The opening words of the first phrase, 'They say', add a sense of thoughtful distance, temporarily removing speaker, reader and listener away from the immediate present. Indeed, the internal stream of consciousness almost imperceptibly moves to the past tense, and so the description of the 'sweet soft scene / That once was in play' becomes a gratifying, sensory memory. In 'Proud songsters' the same musical material becomes the principal thematic idea for the song. Here too, pangs of sadness are still very much present and memory is a particular focus. The poetry itself reflects on the landscape of 'a year ago', but within Finzi's tragic tale the implications of what has passed are far more significant and it is through this motivic recollection that the true extent of the protagonist's emotional journey is revealed. The poetry of both songs focuses on memory, but it is Finzi's music that makes it explicit, highlighting the significance of memory in the development of the narrative cycle's central character. Through the restatement of music that has come to be associated with this concept, Finzi directs the listener to a level of understanding beyond that which might be inferred from the poetry alone. These musical materials

are voiced exclusively through the accompaniment, and so in this sense the piano becomes an actor within the narrative's dramatic arena serving as an emotional conduit for the things that are felt and understood rather than spoken (or sung).

Earth and Air and Rain poses some fascinating possibilities in terms of the dynamic potential of its structure as a song cycle. Since it was first composed, performers have successfully and meaningfully rendered the songs of *Earth and Air and Rain* individually, in the published ten-song sequence and alternative combinations, and there is no reason why that should not continue to be. The macroscopic structure of the cycle admirably supports that purpose and, when approached as a work of connected divergence, *Earth and Air and Rain* offers performers great potential for flexibility and an opportunity to reveal new meaning and insight in their presentation and combination of Finzi's magnificent settings. However, the commercial and artistic limitations that British composers of the early twentieth century faced – in terms of opportunities for the performance, broadcast and publication of their works – may have had far more profound artistic consequences than previously imagined, particularly in the genre of song cycle and particularly in relation to the structure of those cycles.¹⁶

For Finzi these circumstances, coupled with his intense sense of self-doubt, combine to create a unique set of conditions and when one considers the structure of *Earth and Air and Rain* diffractively, by assessing the songs non-sequentially and combining them in relation to common thematic characteristics, the musical and poetic evidence for the foetal form of a rejected narrative cycle concealed by its reordering within the broader, ten-song structure becomes increasingly convincing. A cogent, tragic narrative – itself cyclical in its emotional journey from happiness to grief to despair to acceptance – unfolds; the apparently disparate tonal scheme becomes concise and analogous; integrating musical ideas assume newly intense levels of relevance, highlighting and complementing the literary structure Finzi constructs from Hardy's poems. This alternative reading of the work's structure offers musicians the opportunity to approach *Earth and Air and Rain* with even greater interpretative possibility in performance, by presenting a condensed, narrative cycle made compelling and convincing through its symbiosis of poetry and musical gesture.

¹⁶ Hallmark, pp. 129–156.

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