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Internationalist against his time: divergent nationalist and internationalist themes in the music and reception of Frank Bridge, 1915-28

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Abstract

This paper explores competing nationalist and internationalist influences on the music of Frank Bridge. Bridge was a performer and composer of some initial success, and later a significant figure in British modernism.

This study investigates the relationship between form, nationalism, and criticism in Summer, Two Poems, and Enter Spring. It begins by identifying nationalist and internationalist themes within these works, and their impact on reception. Bridge's treatment is shown to be increasingly incongruous, with conflicting popular and personal impulses.

Summer and the first Poem show a subtly outward treatment of the nationalist genre of English Pastoralism. They hint at a more explicit internationalism that Bridge would later espouse – if not always consistently. In the more complex Enter Spring, Bridge sought to re-engage with English Pastoralism, having in recent modernist works abandoned its conventional use. Reviews were unconvinced, however, and his correspondence exposes conflicting motivations.

Two conclusions are drawn: first, an irreconcilability between Bridge's internationalism and wider British musical culture. Bridge's attempts to satisfy both, increasingly idiosyncratic, met with little success. Secondly, a diminished accessibility resulting from these attempts. It is argued that this inaccessibility derives from the idiosyncratic combinations arising from these works' conflict between nationalism, internationalism, and modernism.

Keywords**:** *Bridge, Frank, Debussy, Scriabin, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Reception, Criticism, Nationalism, Internationism, Modernism, Impressionism, Pastoral, England, Modality, Folksong, Colour, Sonority, Polychord, Developing Variation, Tonality*

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It seems that this clever composer is acquiring idioms and a peculiar means of giving vent to his feelings that are not easy for ordinary folk to understand or enjoy. Of course this may be owing to the shortcomings of the ordinary folk. [1]

So wrote the *Musical Times* reviewer in response to Frank Bridge's *2 Poems after Richard Jefferies* (1915). In warning of problems for "ordinary folk", the reviewer may refer not just to a general complexity, but more specifically to the work's unusual treatment of English pastoralism, a genre with nationalist associations. A similar reaction can be seen in Ernest Newman's reviews of *Enter Spring* (1928). Here, again, Bridge's music was criticised on the basis of pastoral genre as much as technique, with the "swift, strenuous and shrill" music compared to a "cold wind" that Bridge "does not temper ... to the shorn lamb".[2] In a second review Newman was more blunt, describing Bridge's representation of Spring as "repellent".[3]

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Bridge's engagement with English pastoralism appears to have bound these works to a sensitive set of generic expectations. Newman's comments reflect the way the genre was associated with serene and comforting pastorals characteristic of Vaughan Williams, Holst, Butterworth, and other figures in the English folksong school. Bridge's own (nationally-inspired) visions – including a Spring "where the Downs + the huge Spring Clouds make up their minds that Winter has to go by the board" – were fundamentally at odds with this conception.[4] Seeds of this clash with wider national culture can also be seen in the earlier *Summer* (1914-15), which, while uncontroversially received, foreshadows the innovations in the *Poems* and *Enter Spring*.

Background

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) was a British composer who initially enjoyed popular success. In later years (c.1924-41), he became more experimental and internationalist, in both style and philosophy. Criticism increased, a major theme being that his music was well-crafted but underwhelming. Posthumously, however, opinion has shifted, recognising more positive attributes, such as innovation, originality, and lasting potential.

My research project, of which this study forms a part, investigates this initial failure of Bridge's music to convince critics of these qualities recognised by his later reception. It particularly focuses on the role of a recurring aesthetic that is only gradually appreciable. The works studied by this paper (*Summer* (1914-15), *Two Poems* (1915), and *Enter Spring* (1928)) provide an example of this aesthetic in their outward-looking treatments of genre, which confused and alienated critics, drawing attention away from the music's unified and self-sufficient power.

Methodology

Analytical stance

This study's analysis centres on each work's outward-looking treatment of English pastoralism. This genre played a dominant role in musical nationalism during wartime and interwar Britain, boosted by the related English folksong revival (c.1899-1931), with which, "Having laid the groundwork before the war … the composers of the English pastoral tradition were ready to inherit positions at the vanguard of English music".[5] Thus English musical nationalism is seen through the prism of its dominant style during this period, pastoralism.

The generic expectations of English pastoralism are best summed up as a collection of technical, programmatic, and ideological features, whose collective and conventional use signified works' participation in the genre. This includes features which precede the 20th century English tradition:

> The pastoral style derives, in part, from the practice of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian shepherds … [who] performed on a shawm-like instrument … characterized by a compound time signature, simple lilting melodies, harmonies in parallel 6ths or 3rds and a drone bass. [6]

> … the time signature is often 12/8 or 6/8; the melodies are harmonized predominantly in 3rds and 6ths; long drone basses, or at least pedal points, on tonic and dominant are frequent; a distinction between concertino and ripieno groups of players is often drawn. [7]

These features were conventionally coupled with the use of English folksong, and a generally serene treatment of the pastoral programme (Hopwood, 2007, p.43,101; Hindmarsh, 1983). This can be seen in various representative works, such as Vaughan-Williams' *A Pastoral Symphony* and Butterworth's *A Shropshire Lad*.

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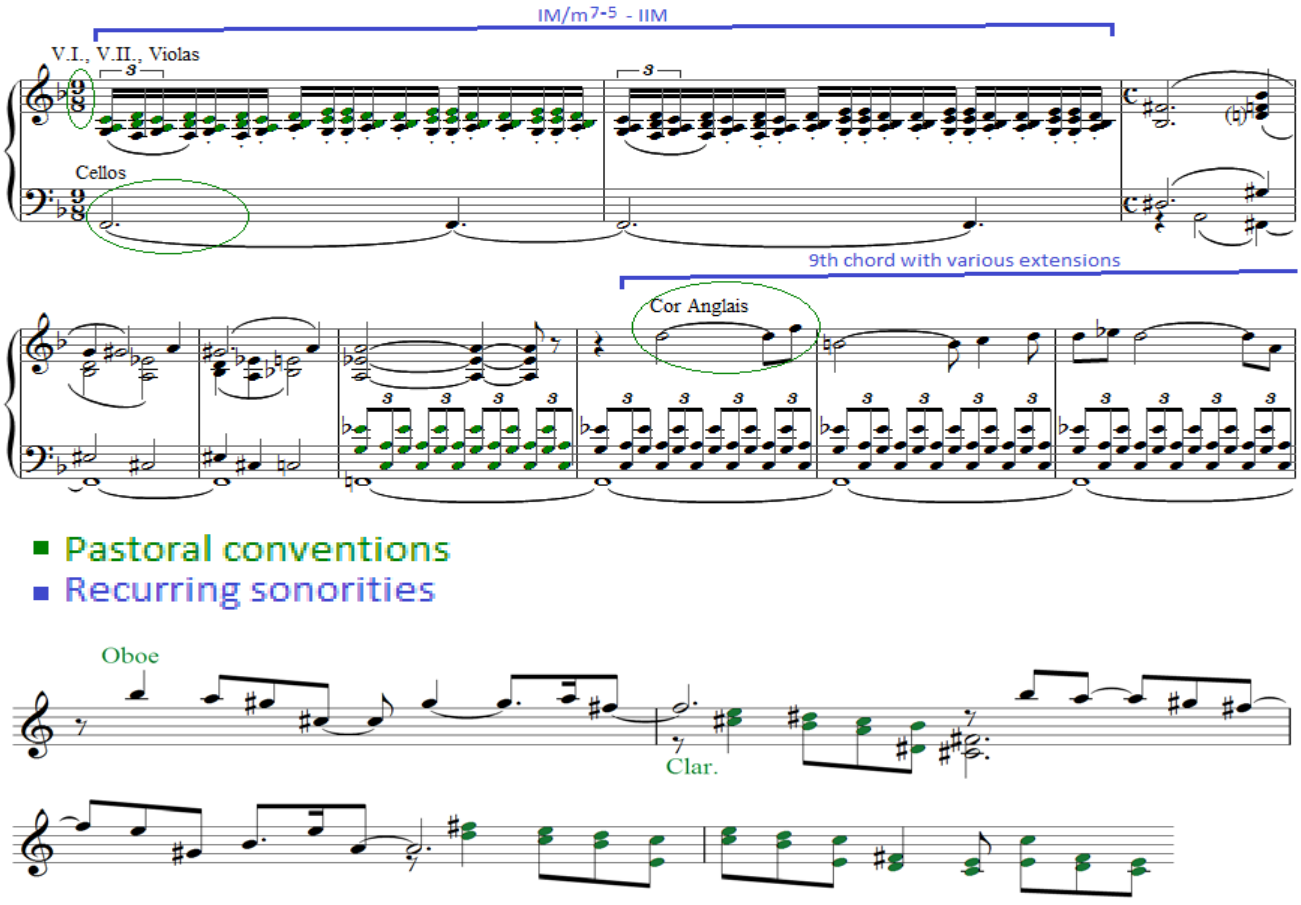
Not all non-English innovations were controversial; indeed, it is unlikely that many composers were unaware of English pastoralism's growth out of an older international pastoralism. However, a broad direction among certain foreign modernists from this time – including Debussy, Scriabin, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg – was fundamentally incongruous with the genre. Whereas Vaughan Williams and others opposed "late romanticism as an escapist, decadent phenomenon",[8] the direction of these other composers was towards even greater technical and emotional extremity.

This study will focus on instances of this aesthetic direction in the three works by Bridge, assessing its role in problematizing their treatment of English pastoralism.

Analysis

The pastoral combination described earlier can be seen clearly in both *2 Poems* and *Summer*.[9] *Summer* is particularly explicit in its pastoralism, with a languid Cor Anglais melody; triplet, 3rd's and 6th's drones; and long pedals; creating a characteristic serenity. The *Poems* feature similar, albeit less conventionally treated, combinations: an even quieter mood in the first movement; compound meter; parallel 3rd's and 6th's; and prominent woodwind melodies.[10]

Ex. 1.1: Pastoral combinations in Summer *and* Two Poems. *See Hopwood (2007) for a more detailed discussion.*



Summer's expansion of pastoralism into incongruous 'idioms and feelings' is subtle, and is largely seen in its structural use of extended sonority. This is both its most experimental and most outward-looking resource, comparable to certain techniques of Debussy, and, more radically, Scriabin. Both composers were known for a pre-occupation with sonority and colour, with the latter composer taking the structural implications further.[11]

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As mentioned above, the intensity of expression of both composers was fundamentally opposite to the moderation and conservatism of English pastoralism. Scriabin was particularly controversial: in words that reflect those by Vaughan Williams above, Crawford notes that "it was his misfortune to be so much in tune with his pre-World War I era, [with] its elements of decadence".[12]

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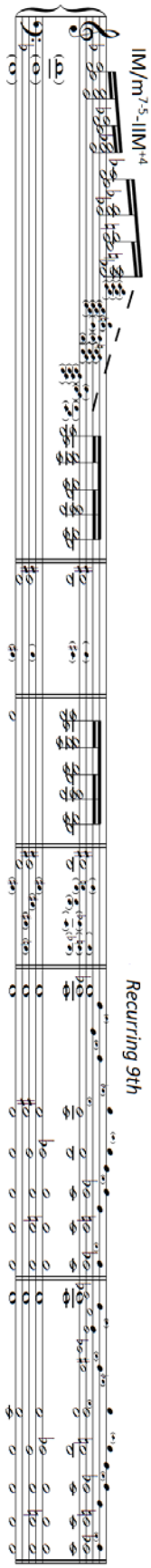
Ex. 1.2: Harmonic reduction of Summer*, introduction and main theme*



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Summer approaches somewhere between these two influences, with much local orchestral and harmonic colour, but also defining parts of the large-scale structure according to recurring sonority. The first instance of this is the oscillating $I_M/_m^{7-5}$ - II_M chords from the opening idea (see Example 1.1). Other than the effects of transposition, pedal-note, and punctuation by a secondary idea, this sonority is static, unifying the opening. Its restatement after the main theme undergoes greater tonal and thematic development, but remains broadly characterised by these chord-colours.

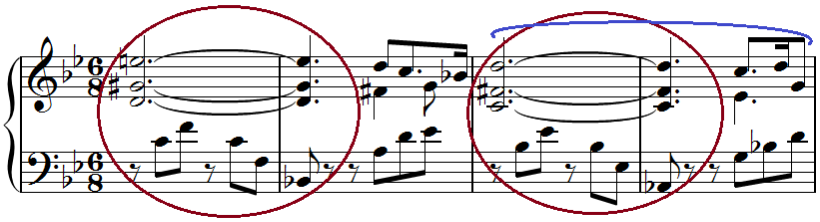
For the second thematic area, the key changes modally to accommodate another recurring sonority, a ninth chord with various extensions. This is less static than its predecessor, but colours the section through its recurrence at beginning, end, and certain other moments, functioning as a quasi-tonic in the midst of a number of modulations in harmony and colour.

This form of colouristic structure was not altogether new in Bridge's works, and bears a number of similarities with the 2nd subject of his Sextet for Strings (1906-12). However, here it dominates much of the exposition and recapitulation, a far larger part of the structure. This, combined with *Summer*'s vivid orchestration, ensures that harmonic and orchestral colour are at the forefront of the work, of similar prominence to the markers of English pastoralism.

The first *Poem*'s harmonic radicalism is only a step further than these resources in *Summer*. However, in contrast to the former gentler use, here they may have provoked the *Musical Times*'s criticism of unsuitability for "ordinary folk". Bridge's structural use of extended sonorities is again the most prominent innovation, but it is far less limited than in *Summer*, radically redefining the work's tonal structure.

For the first time in a major work Bridge largely replaces the role of tonal centre with recurring sonority, rather than complementing the two as in *Summer*. Similarly to Scriabin's use of a 6-note set combining major triad with upper harmonics as his tonic, Bridge creates a similar 6-note chord, $M^{9\#11}$.[13] However, the tonic note that is eventually revealed (B♭) features little affirmation during the work. Instead, the repetition of this sonority, in a number of exact transpositions, serves along with the primary motif as a structural centre to the 'A' sections (see example 1.3). This results in a marked absence of the modal and tonal definition normative in pastoralism.

Ex. 1.3: Unifying sonority and motif, 2 Poems (I)



Bridge's intentionality in alluding to Scriabin is debatable. Edwin Evans' (1919) favourable survey of Bridge's music portrays him as independent of Scriabin in the case of the *4 Characteristic Pieces*. Acknowledging the similarity, Evans nonetheless argues that Bridge "has little familiarity" with Scriabin, and defends the relevant techniques as individual to Bridge.[14] Although persuasively argued, Evans' assertions are generous to Bridge, and probably inaccurate. Bridge had many opportunities to hear Scriabin's music during this period – including in concerts within which he performed – and his keen interest in contemporary musical culture suggests that he would have taken notice of these.[15]

Scriabin was not hugely unpopular in England during this period, and enjoyed some success, seen in the number of concerts that took place in London from around 1913.[16] Bridge's problem in the reception of the *Poems* was not associations with Scriabin alone, but the combination of these

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associations with the context of English pastoralism outlined earlier. The harmonic innovations of these works are far from incongruous to 21st century ears, but would have been more so to period listeners unused to hearing them alongside this genre. This difficulty is exacerbated by consideration of the audiences Bridge catered to in his early career. Many of his early works were miniatures written for private performance and designed for broad appeal. Both their musical language, and the tastes of many among their audiences, were far more conservative than the idioms explored here.

Summer and the *Two Poems* therefore represent a significant departure from Bridge's previously appealing treatment of nationalist and conservative musical culture. The two works feature a wide-ranging combination of pastoral, impressionist, romantic, and modernist features, and the resulting aesthetic, often unremarkable to our palette, contained significant incongruities for period listeners. These may have posed serious barriers to the appreciation of each work's holistic musical language.

Enter Spring

Bridge's thinking concerning nationalism underwent a significant shift in the years following these works. In 1923 he gave an interview with *Musical America*, where he claimed that

You really cannot speak of nationality in music, since art is world-wide. If there is to be any expression of national spirit, it must be the expression of the composer's own thoughts and feelings, and must come from the promptings of his own inspiration; he cannot seek it, and any effort on his part to aim at it as a national expression must end in failure. [17]

It is possible, in keeping with this later statement, to interpret *Summer* and the *Two Poems* as mere "expression of the composer's own thoughts and feelings". However, certain shorter works following these two cannot be seen as anything other than an effort "to aim at … a national expression". These include *For God and King and Right* (1916), the unfinished *To You in France* (1917), and, significantly, the larger-scale *Blow out, you bugles* (1918), an orchestral work that Bridge promoted *after* this interview, as late as 1937.[18] This suggests that Bridge's attitude towards musical nationalism was not as simple as that expressed in this interview.

The fact that very few works following the onset of patronage are explicitly nationalist indicates some sincerity to these comments. Patronage enabled Bridge to compose more independently from the tastes of audiences, and his more frequent musical nationalism preceding this suggests that popular taste may have been a stronger influence than personal ideals in this matter. There is, however, one significant work with substantially nationalist connotations written during the period of patronage: *Enter Spring* (1928), which again depicts pastoralism, and was written for the Norwich festival.

Correspondence and musical text reveal fascinatingly varied motives behind Bridge's compositional choices in this work. In later years Bridge viewed it as "cheap" and "vulgar", suggesting a degree of compromise with popular expectations in his compositional approach, which the occasionally jarring changes in the work also imply.[19] Nonetheless around the time of the work's premiere he was more upbeat, holding that it was written on his own (subversive) terms.[20] Thus Bridge's compositional choices in *Enter Spring* seem to be a mixture of parody and popular appeal. Alongside this, formal sophistication is present in much of the work (see the tightly controlled motivic variation in the 'A' sections), a compositional principle frequently present in Bridge's music. The work is thus an eclectic mixture of formalism, pastoralism, populism, and irony, but none of these define the entire work, explaining its occasionally unusual structural choices.

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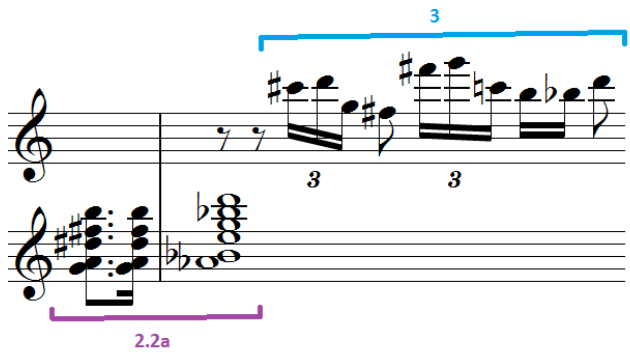
As explored in the introduction, a particular criticism of *Enter Spring* was its treatment of pastoral programme. As noted by Hopwood, the variation sections of the work, rather than the more explicitly pastoral centre and coda, were likely in view here: "It appears that Bridge consigned the majority of his 'difficult' music to the A sections, and provided – perhaps as a generic sweetener – a conventional pastoral and march as well."[21] It is also in the variation sections that the problematic aesthetic of foreign modernists outlined earlier is most apparent. This is more uncompromising than in the two earlier works, and has connotations of different influences, closer to neo-romantic Stravinsky and middle-period Schoenberg – distinct idioms, not usually heard with each other, let alone with English pastoralism.

These connotations are again present due to the use of sonority, as well as in the dense, harmonically independent, motivic development. Motivic processes often use a differing harmonic language to the sonorities alongside them, simultaneously drawing attention to both planes. This is most immediately seen in the frequent presence of modal motives alongside more complex and fast-changing polychords. This melodic-harmonic dichotomy, whilst individual, is reminiscent of Stravinsky's approach in the *Rite*. In contrast, the developing motivic variation has significant parallels with Schoenberg's structural development in middle-period works such as the String Quartet no. 2.

Ex. 2: Motivic and harmonic independence in Enter Spring*: motives 2.2a and 3*



This aesthetic is a stark contrast to that of *Enter Spring*'s central pastoral and coda, and the wider norms of English pastoralism, featuring harmonic and technical extremity. This wide and incongruous range of expression is far more prominent than that of *Summer* and *Two Poems*, and may have posed a larger barrier to appreciation for inter-war British listeners unused to hearing the aesthetics of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and English pastoralism combined.[22]

The contradictory critical responses to *Enter Spring* suggest that this eclecticism did indeed cause difficulties for its reviewers. Ernest Newman's assessment and a *Times* review of a later performance both criticise the conspicuousness of dissonant and modernist material, the former drawing attention to its incongruity with the work's pastoral topic. Conversely, an earlier *Times* review censured its "recollections of the manners of yesterday", likely with the tamer interlude and coda in view.[23] The *Manchester Guardian*, meanwhile, declined to lay criticism at any specific idiom in the work, but instead argued that the work was overlong and unstriking, joined by a *Daily News* critic with similar observations.[24] These latter reviews therefore joined the broader theme in Bridge's reception that held his music to be generally underwhelming.

The work thus alienated a variety of its hearers by aiming for a range of tastes, and satisfying few: those with pre-defined conceptions of English pastoralism such as Newman, and those, like the

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Times reviewer, who expected greater commitment to its modernist language. Moreover, for the *Manchester Guardian* and *Daily News* reviewers, its incongruities may have obscured appreciation of either side to its expression.

On a number of levels, *Enter Spring* represents a break between Bridge's developing style and English musical nationalism – foreshadowed by earlier works such as *Summer* and *Two Poems*. In his motivations, technique, and influences, Bridge's music had developed to the point where it was incompatible with nationalist tastes. Yet ironically, his efforts in *Enter Spring* to synthesise modernist, internationalist, and nationalist influences are extensive and striking, suggesting that he genuinely hoped that they would meet with some success. Thus Bridge's outlook was more open to English musical nationalism than *vice versa*. This aesthetic stance would be vindicated by the posthumous reception of these works.

Acknowledgements

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[1] *The Musical Times*, Vol. 58, No. 888, Feb. 1, 1917. p.82

[2] Payne, A. *Frank Bridge – radical and conservative*. London: Thames Publishing, 1999: 2nd edition. p.72

[3] Hopwood, P. A. *Frank Bridge and the English pastoral tradition*. Unpublished PhD dissertation; University of Western Australia, Perth, 2007. p.207

[4] Letter from Bridge to Bush, 18/09/30; in Burnell, C. *The Anxiety of Memory*. Unpublished PhD dissertation; Queen's University, Belfast, 2009. p.205.

[5] Hopwood, *op. cit.*, p.200

[6] Hopwood, *op. cit.*, p.16

[7] Chew, G. and Jander, O. 'Pastoral [pastorale]', *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press.

[8] Whittall, 'British Music in the Modern World' in Stephen Banfield (ed.), *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain: Vol. 6, The Twentieth Century*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 1995. p.14.

[9] Neither *Summer* or the *Poems* contain clear engagement with folksong. Hopwood considers the second theme of the first *Poem* to be an allusion, but it does not unambiguously signify this. (Hopwood, *Op. cit.*, p.192-194)

[10] The *Poems* also contain explicitly pastoral inscriptions, from the countryside writer and nature mystic Richard Jeffries (1848-1887).

[11] For this assessment of Debussy see Sabaneev and Pring, who praise Debussy's "quite unexampled sense of the colour of tone; creating perfectly new pianoforte sonorities and unprecedented orchestral effects",**[a]** Calvocoressi, who refers to "manifold colour-effects that distinguish [Debussy's] style",**[b]** and Newman (1918), who censures "cheap and clumsy exploitations of a few harmonic oddities. … The novel resonances fascinate him for their own sake".**[c]** Similarly, Scriabin's use of sonority and colour is summed up in some detail by Antcliffe (1924, p.341):

> "[Scriabin] had to invent new methods … The Sixth Sonata he based on a chord starting on G followed by D flat, F, B, E and A flat, and the Seventh Sonata on a transposition of the same chord. … In Prometheus he took from the eighth to the fourteenth harmonics, omitting the thirteenth … starting on D followed upwards by F sharp, B flat, E, A and C."**[d]**

[a] Sabaneev, L. and Pring, S. W., 'Claude Debussy', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Jan., 1929. p.1-34

[b] Calvocoressi, M. D., 'Claude Debussy', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 49, No. 780, Feb. 1, 1908. p.81-82

[c] Newman, E., 'The Development of Debussy', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 59, No. 903, May 1, 1918. p.199-203

[d] Antcliffe, H., 'The Significance of Scriabin' *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Jul., 1924. p.333-345

[12] Crawford (1993), in Burnell, *op. cit.*, p.100-101.

[13] This, in fact, the same harmonic set as Scriabin's *mystic chord*, although in a different arrangement.

[14] See Evans, E., 'Modern British Composers. I. Frank Bridge', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 60, No. 912 (Feb. 1, 1919), p.59:

> "As in many such instances one is driven to the conclusion that there are processes of harmonic thought which are, so speak, in the air, and that composers of adventurous turn of mind are bound to explore them sooner or later whether they happen or not to be aware of their predecessors' experiments in the same direction. But even if Frank Bridge was subconsciously influenced from without, he has made this chromaticism, in common with all the idiomatic devices he employs, in an intimate sense his own."

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[15] See Burnell, *op. cit*; also Thomas, G. *The Impact of Russian Music in England 1893-1929*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Birmingham University, Birmingham, 2005.

[16] See Hardy, L., *The British Piano Sonata, 1870-1945*. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2001; also Powell, J., 'Skryabin [Scriabin], Aleksandr Nikolayevich, *Grove Music Online.* Oxford University Press.

[17] Nolan, P. J., 'American Methods will Create Ideal Audiences: An Interview with Frank Bridge', *Musical America* 39, Nov. 17, 1923. p.3, 32B

[18] See Amos, M., *'A Modernist in the Making'?: Frank Bridge and the Cultural Practice of Music in Britain, 1900-1941*. Unpublished PhD dissertation; Oxford University, Oxford, 2010. p.173-4.

[19] See Hopwood, *op. cit*, p.198.

[20] "My work at Norwich created almost a sensation – such fun for me – a kind of surprise bomb for the audience who expected either something like the Hallelujah Chorus or the Peer Gynt Suite!!" Bridge to Coolidge, 4/11/27; in Amos, *op. cit*, p.218.

[21] Hopwood, *op. cit*, p.208.

[22] Schoenberg and Stravinsky were, however, becoming well-broadcast at this time, owing to the BBC's contemporary music broadcasts. See Doctor, J., *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922-1936: Shaping a Nation's Tastes*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

[23] *The Times*, Sep. 26, 1930, p.10c, in Amos, *op. cit*, p.220.

[24] *Manchester Guardian*, Sep. 26, 1930; *Daily News*, Sep. 26, 1927, in Bray (2004), p.77.

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