Beyond England’s “Green and Pleasant Land”:
English Musical Romantics Alongside the Musical Renaissance
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England experienced a resurgence of musical talent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the “English Musical Renaissance.” This rebirth spanned the years 1880 – 1945 and is credited to the work of Edward Elgar, Frederick Delius, Gustav Holst, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Their break with Continental compositional models and the subsequent rediscovery of Tudor music and English folk song eventually created a "pastoral" musical style, heard as the authentically English musical voice.

A strain of English musical Romanticism continued parallel to the Renaissance, however, represented by Granville Bantock, Arnold Bax, Rutland Boughton, Havergal Brian, and Joseph Holbrooke. These composers retained Continental, specifically Wagnerian, Romantic techniques, including chromatic harmony, leitmotifs, virtuosic use of enormous performing forces, and an emphasis on programmatic music. Their inspiration was drawn from exotic sources and Nature’s mystical, dangerous, and beguiling qualities instead of any "pastoral" traits. Each wrote emotionally extravagant music at a time when such was considered foreign to the English character.

This dissertation demonstrates the Wagnerian character of these “English Romantics” through examination of stylistic features in representative scores. Further, by presenting scores, criticism, and monographs, it affirms their sustained compositional presence through the twentieth century though English cultural tastes had turned from Germany to France, Russia, and the United States after the First World War. Finally, in challenging the standard narrative of British musical history this study broadens the concept of authentically English music to include a great deal more music “made in England.”