The Composer as Pole Seeker: Reading Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia antartica*

By Michael Beckerman

It is a commonplace of history that we do not encounter events from the past, but rather descriptions of these events. To be more contemporary, and perhaps more accurate, we encounter "spins" on the events. While a kind of precise objectivity based on careful duplication of experiments may be prized by the "hard" sciences, most historians today do not believe that such things as "the past" or "culture" will yield to such treatment. Indeed, the more we seek to "pin down" an event, to argue for a document's "authentic" privileging, the more any kind of objective truth may recede, to be replaced by yet another false front. It is, of course, not necessarily the facts which are in doubt in a particular case, but how they are assembled, organized and presented. The reality of the past, if it appears to us at all, does so through what some have called the "convergence of evidence," and always requires a leap of faith on the part of any investigator or beholder.

If this is true of history in general, it must also be true for the written history of polar exploration, something which, surprisingly, has captured the imagination of the reading public. Twenty years ago it was difficult to find the classic works of the genre outside of an antiquarian bookshop; today bookshops are overflowing with paperback reprints. Thanks to Roland Huntford and others, authoritative biographies are available for such pioneers as Fridtjof Nansen, Ernest Shackleton, Robert Scott, Roald Amundsen, Robert Peary and Frederick Cook. The title of the classic misadventure chronicle, Apsley Cherry-Garrard's recently reprinted *The Worst Journey in the World*, hints at the appeal of this collective hoard of volumes, and a host of others on catastrophic journeys. Sitting in our warm homes, computers buzzing, these harrowing tales are like ghost stories around the fireplace, reminding us of our own comforts and teaching us lessons of heroism and bravery.

Some stories, however, tell better than others, and there has always been a tension between the desire to write history and the storytelling urge, where the requirements of crafting a good yarn do battle with the desire to "get it right." We shall argue here that the same is true when we attempt to understand music and musical meaning. As we take this journey, our guide will be a work "set," as it were, in the cold deserts of Antarctica, a piece that has had something of a mixed reception from audiences and critics—a possibly ambivalent symphony about an ambiguous hero.
Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia antartica* had its premiere in 1953, but its opening strains (ex. 1) were first heard by the public in the 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic*, scored by the composer.¹ It is this passage, which does double duty as the title music from the film and the first bars of the symphony, that will be returned to throughout this study. The theme consists of a series of four consecutive ascending whole tones capped by an oscillating semitone. This is harmonized first by a third relation, E₅ minor–G, and subsequently by an A₅ minor chord (spelled A₅–B–E₅) which leads to an extended variant of the opening that ascends from G through B₉. The opening pattern is repeated a fifth higher, but this time the semitone oscillation is repeated twice in diminution. Initially, the theme is carried by the trombones, trumpets and oboes. Over the next forty measures the entire orchestra articulates a series of variants, culminating in fanfares at measure 48, after which the section comes to a conspicuously clear conclusion (ex. 2).

This opening theme permeates the work. It reappears in a new guise in the middle of the Intermezzo (ex. 3), in a foreshortened form taken from mm. 7–8 of example 1, and returns in full in the final movement. Because of the number of repetitions and their placement, the importance of the main theme in the work is unquestionable, and therefore we may argue that our response to it and our evaluation of the symphony itself are intimately connected.

So then what are we to make of this musical idea and its unfolding? In both the film and the symphony, we encounter it through a virtual barrage of extramusical suggestions that raise more questions than they resolve. What, if anything, does the opening passage have to do with Scott and his Antarctic adventure, and what might it mean in its symphonic context? To answer this we must go on one of the worst journeys of the world, voyaging through the roaring forties, fifties, and sixties to the coldest, highest, and driest continent, Antarctica, and traveling back in time four score and nine years.

For the most part, there is no disputing the facts. On Wednesday, January 17, 1912, after a journey of more than two months and hundreds of miles, Robert Falcon Scott and his group of five Englishmen reached the South Pole. It should have been their finest moment, but it was a living nightmare: paw prints in the snow, flags, and a tent quickly made it clear that Roald Amundsen and his band of Norwegians had been there a month earlier.² Scott's journal makes the mood clear: "The Pole. Yes, but under very different circumstances from those expected. We have had a horrible day—" (Scott 1913:424).³

Despondent and undernourished, Scott and his men made a desperate dash north, but were held up by a combination of scurvy, exhaustion and
Example 1: Sinfonia antartica, first movement ("Prelude"), mm. 1–9.
Example 2 (cont.)
Example 3: *Sinfonia antartica*, fourth movement ("Intermezzo"), 6 mm. after [7].
bad weather. Two men, Edgar Evans and Lawrence Oates died along the way, while the remaining three were stopped about eleven miles short of a large cache of supplies they had named One-Ton Depot. Sitting in their tent, lashed by blizzards, H. R. Bowers, Edward Wilson and Scott died one by one. Scott's final diaries and letters, beautifully written, show that he faced death with courage. Their chilling conclusion, penned when all food and fuel had been exhausted, still has a visceral effect today: "we shall stick it out to the end but we are getting weaker of course and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity but I do not think I can write more—R. Scott." And after a few minutes, hours, or even days: "Last entry For Gods sake look after our people [sic]" (ibid.:410).

This tragic event comprises simultaneously one of the most awful and exhilarating pages in the annals of exploration. Many expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic had met with difficulties and even disaster, most notably the Franklin party, the remains of which were discovered as recently as 1984. But the combination of Scott's tantalizing closeness to both his depot and home base, and his poise under the pressure of certain death render this tale particularly poignant.

In a document titled "Message to the Public," Scott made it clear that he was not responsible for the tragic outcome of the expedition: "The causes of the disaster are not due to faulty organisation, but to misfortune in all risks which had to be undertaken" (Scott 1913:416). Finally, there was a strong appeal to national spirit: "We are weak, writing is difficult, but for my own sake I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past" (ibid.:417).

With lines like this, it is easy to see why Scott became one of the great English heroes. Passages from his expedition diaries became required reading, usually prefaced by comments such as the following by Sir Clements R. Markham, the head of the Royal Geographic Society:

From all aspects Scott was among the most remarkable men of our time, and the vast number of readers of his journal will be deeply impressed with the beauty of his character. The chief traits which shone forth through his life were conspicuous in the hour of death. There are few events in history to be compared, for grandeur and pathos, with the last closing scene in that silent wilderness of snow. The great leader, with the bodies of his dearest friends beside him, wrote and wrote until the pencil dropped from his dying grasp. There was no thought of himself, only the earnest desire to give comfort and consolation to others in their sorrow. (Scott 1913:v)
By the mid-1940s the Scott legend was known by almost everyone in England. Throughout the country, schoolboys learned the story in hushed tones. The official record of the journey, *Scott's Last Expedition*, had been through more than a dozen editions, and books by the survivors joined a huge number of volumes on the subject, both popular and specialized. In order to comprehend the English response to Scott’s journey and tragic death we might think of the 1969 moon landing as an appropriate parallel. Considering that even the near miss of the Apollo 13 mission was enough to inspire a spine-tingling film, we can imagine the response if Neil Armstrong had somehow died on the moon after the Russians had gotten there first, and had left hours of gripping radio messages to his loved ones as he slowly ran out of oxygen. Indeed, such a thing did actually happen recently in a place as inhospitable as Antarctica: the now famous debacle on the slopes of Everest which has inspired several books and films.6

It seems fitting that the film *Scott of the Antarctic* was made on the heels of the Allied victory in 1947, as a further monument to British heroism. It was directed by Charles Frend and produced by Maichael Blacon, and first showed at the Odeon Theater on December 30, 1948. Ernest Irving, musical director of Ealing Films, was responsible for getting Vaughan Williams to do the score.7 All the evidence shows that the composer was taken with the subject almost immediately and was said to have composed most of the score before he even saw the script. If this is true, the “meaning” of the opening music is thus closely tied to his own conception of Scott, rather than any interpretation by the director of the film. This is something to which we shall return below. At any rate, most Vaughan Williams scholars seem to agree that writing the music for the film, and subsequently the symphony, was highly significant for the composer, and gave additional range and depth to his later works. Michael Kennedy writes, “It has already been described how this next subject fired Vaughan Williams’s imagination. The music must have been taking shape in his mind: it only needed the right subject to bring it into focus, and the heroic struggle of Scott and his men against fearful odds provided the stimulus” (1964:360ff).8

That Vaughan Williams became preoccupied with the Scott story is not the least bit surprising. First and foremost it is a fabulous yarn, with all the ingredients of an action adventure film, a sports event and a Greek tragedy. The members of the polar party—the gallant Scott, the powerful PO Evans, the stalwart Captain Oates, the Christ-like Dr. Wilson and the indomitable little “Birdie” Bowers—are distinctive personalities, and each time we read Scott’s diary we cannot help hoping that they will somehow survive. Another reason was no doubt the attraction of Antarctica itself. As
David Campbell writes in his fascinating book, *The Crystal Desert*, “Antarctica has haunted the imagination of Western cultures” (1992:149). For centuries, the continent was almost the equivalent of a UFO, described occasionally by seafarers, but never documented. It was not really seen until 1819, and not still fully explored a century later.

There is something else that must have attracted the composer: Antarctica is an oddly perfect setting for the particular drama of national aspiration. It is an empty stage on which practically all is frozen and pristine white, a place of extraordinary beauty, but also one of amazing deception. The seemingly smooth snow may have the texture of sand at certain temperatures; pressure ridges create great humps, *sastrugi*, which must be traversed; immense ice falls and chasms appear without warning to swallow up sledges; and giant, jagged mountains must be scaled. It is simultaneously pre-Lapsarian Garden and frozen Hades. There is no film preserved from the expedition, only still photographs. These are eerily placid and cannot convey two of the hazards which eventually destroyed the party: the horrible piercing cold and the unbelievable wind that never stopped.

The great explorer Ernest Shackelton, whom Scott reviled, once remarked that the point of the pole was that it was *pointless*. To make it more abstract, compared to something like Mt. Everest, the South Pole is hardly even a place, just an arbitrary intersection of points of longitude. The explorers at the turn of the century did not seek it to gain any wealth or trade opportunities (although it was gradually discovered that the flora, fauna, and minerals of the region were astonishingly valuable). Despite much discussion of science, both Scott and Amundsen raced for the sake of raw achievement and adventure; the only real aim of both expeditions was to achieve the Pole for their respective countries, and the fame that came with it.

Because of the alien terrain of Antarctica and the romantic aura of pole seeking, there are multiple parallels between Scott’s expedition and nineteenth-century artistic aspiration. Antarctica was a barren landscape onto which a person or group could project a range of qualities, against which they could test themselves or the presumed virtues of their nation. It was a kind of “other”: part neutral proving ground, part exotic locale, and part monster from a science fiction novel.

The race between Norwegian and English explorers was seen at the time as a competition of national virtues, a last gasp of Romantic nationalism. The Norwegians based their approach largely on a study of the Eskimos, with whom they were familiar. Their clothing, food, and transport were not technologically sophisticated, but simple, even primitive; they used skis and dog sleds. They were humble, rather taciturn people, and only wanted things to go without “adventure”—that is, as smoothly as possible. They adjusted to their environment and tried not to underestimate it. These
were *Norwegian* virtues. It is no coincidence that the greatest Norwegian explorer of the time, Fridtjof Nansen, was also a significant political figure as well, for Norway was in the heyday of its nation building exercise and polar exploration was the equivalent of warfare, forging victories and creating mythic, latter-day Viking heroes.\(^{11}\)

The English, on the other hand, tried to bring as many things from their home environment as they could, actually creating a polar newsletter and transporting many aspects of Victorian culture to the land of ice.\(^{12}\) They even brought the latest in technology, the ill-fated motor sledges. Indeed, it was the failure of these marvels of industry that allowed Scott and his men to rise to heroic stature.\(^{13}\) Though they tested themselves unsuccessfully, their solace was that no men could have survived such tests, that they had pushed human courage and bravery to its limit. They tried their damnedest and failed. These were *English* virtues.\(^{14}\)

It is this notion of the English spirit that animated *Scott of the Antarctic*. The film focuses exclusively on Scott and the crew he assembles around him, with about two-thirds of the footage detailing the polar journey. John Mills portrays Scott as a mild-mannered man of enormous competence, modesty and integrity. The scientist, Edward “Bill” Wilson, and the rest of the men are treated as tough but gentle fighters and graceful losers. Liberal sections of Scott’s diaries are quoted in the screenplay.

The success of the film depends strongly on the soundtrack which, more than many films of the time, is foregrounded in a particularly conspicuous way.\(^{15}\) We hear the opening title music—later used as the opening of the symphony—twice in its entirety. It sounds first against a bright, blue-white background which after a few seconds yields to the film’s title with a shot of the Scott monument in the background.\(^{16}\) Several details in the material itself are exploited by the composer. The slowly ascending augmented fifth appears to create an atmosphere of struggle and achievement (in the list of musical numbers it is designated “heroism”), while the oscillating semitone suggests something darker, perhaps even the cruel Antarctic wind.

Thus we may well have the impression at this time that the music somehow represents both the vastness and alien grimness of Antarctica as well as the courage of the men who are marching through it. The monolithic quality and the spacious unisons seem an attempt to depict the scope of the landscape in which epic events will take place. It is a second cousin to “vast space” music in works such as *Appalachian Spring*, the “New World” Largo, and Borodin’s *Steppe of Central Asia*; “mountain” music of the kind found in Pavel Novák’s *In the Tatras*; and the type of “outer space” music used in Holst’s “Neptune” from *The Planets* and many science fiction movies.

We are given clues about the semitone oscillation seventeen minutes into the film when Scott is testing his mechanical sledges in Norway.
Nansen (the only Norwegian character in the film) is trying to get Scott to use dogs and says, “This Antarctic of yours is a cold and cruel place.” Against this we hear the semitone in the bass.

Our initial instincts about the theme as a whole are borne out in one of the most spectacular moments of the film, the ascent of the Beardmore Glacier. Here the title music returns in full as the ultimate metaphor for triumph gained through enormous struggle, as we see the party’s agonizing ascent of the glacier, fighting the sledges which constantly threaten to slide down the mountain.

On the return from the Pole, the theme is fragmented (as in example 3): the first two pitches vanish and the semitones are repeated. This variation of the theme is associated with the notion of “desperate struggle.” In the context of Scott and his men, this material also suggests a funeral dirge, since the final journey back from the pole must be considered a kind of death march. Fragments reappear at the death of PO Evans and when Titus Oates bravely goes off to die in the snow. Finally, it accompanies the graphic representation of the distance to One-Ton Depot, never gained by the remaining members of the expedition, who perished about eleven miles from it. The theme reappears at the conclusion of the film, and during the final credits, when the semitones are transformed, along with the theme, into a series of fanfares proclaiming the posthumous triumph of the expedition, resembling example 2.

The film is devoted to the praise of heroism, and, at least in its outlines, the Sinfonia antartica preserves this quality. Instead of visual images, there are now literary prefaces to each of its five movements derived from Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, Psalm 104, Coleridge’s Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni, and Donne’s The Sun Rising. Mixed in with these selections is a passage from Scott’s last journal which stands as an epitaph for the final movement: “I do not regret this journey; we took risks, we knew we took them, things have come out against us therefore we have no cause for complaint” (ex. 4).

It is impossible to generalize about the effect of a symphony on its audience, but the reviews indicate that the first listeners to Sinfonia Antartica were richly engaged with its context. The story of Scott and his men was well known everywhere in England, and the film had been playing in theaters several years earlier. More immediate information was provided by program notes and the passage from Shelley.

Despite the tragic circumstances of his demise, Scott had become a kind of Napoleonic figure, a larger-than-life hero. While it would be simple-minded to expect to achieve any ultimate insights merely by invoking Beethovenian models, neither would such a thing have been unimportant in this case. The general shape and key of the theme invoke the “Eroica”
Example 4: Literary prefaces for the movements of *Sinfonia antartica*.

PRELUDE: Andante Maestoso
To suffer woes which hope thinks infinite,
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night,
To defy power which seems omnipotent,
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
This...is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free,
This is alone life, joy, empire and victory.

*SHELLEY: Prometheus Unbound*

SCHERZO: Moderato
There go the ships
and there is that Leviathan
whom thou hast made to take his pastime therein.

*PSALM 104*

LANDSCAPE: Lento
Ye ice falls! Ye that from the mountain’s brow
Adown enormous ravines slope amain—
Torrents, methinks, that heard a mighty voice,
And stopped at once amid their maddest plunge!
Motionless torrents! Silent cataracts!

*COLERIDGE: Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni*

INTERMEZZO: Andante sostenuto
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

*DONNE: The Sun Rising*

EPILOGUE: Alla marcia moderato (ma non troppo)
I do not regret this journey; we took risks, we knew we took
them, things have come out against us, therefore we have
no cause for complaint.

*CAPTAIN SCOTT’S LAST JOURNAL*

Symphony and, as we have suggested, the opening gesture of the work has elements which allow it to be used both as an image of immensity, power, and triumph and also as a kind of dirge. It is easy to read Scott as the Promethian hero of the work and Antarctica as the arena in which the hero strives, fails, and posthumously triumphs—indeed, Vaughan Williams referred to the work as his “Scott Symphony.”

With its five movements and landscape painting, the *Sinfonia antartica* also shows similarities to Beethoven’s nature work, the “Pastoral” Symphony. Vaughan Williams was clearly captivated by the musical possibilities for painting the Antarctic. A range of musical gestures in the third
movement, titled "Landscape," forcefully portray the "otherness" of this world and are set off against the main theme. This scene painting begins directly after the main theme in the first movement. There is an offstage voice and eventually an offstage choir, both wordless (ex. 5).

The wordless offstage choir, which first began to appear regularly in operas at the end of the nineteenth century, usually suggests something disembodied—the alien, inchoate voice from another reality. This is later coupled with a wind machine which, as much as anything in the symphony, makes it difficult to listen to the piece as an abstraction existing apart from an Antarctic scenario. Considering the amalgamation of the heroic and the landscape, it would not be inappropriate to argue that the symphony is constituted as a heroic Antarctic anti-pastoral.18

Though the work has generally been fairly popular, it has not pleased everybody. In his article in the New Grove Dictionary, based on his larger volume on Vaughan Williams, Hugh Ottaway suggests that the Sinfonia antartica is the least successful of his later symphonies, in part because it is neither programmatic nor symphonic enough (1980:576). One could take issue with either point. Certainly, there are numerous details that suggest a larger program for the symphony based on the notion of Scott's journey. On the other hand, many successful symphonies—Mahler's First, Chaikovskii's Fourth, and Dvorak's "New World," for example—have programs at their core, and it is difficult to reveal in what way these works lack such an elusive quality as "symphonicity." If Ottaway and others have felt some ambivalence toward the symphony, perhaps other readings and contexts may suggest some possible reasons.

The state of the Scott legend as Vaughan Williams encountered it remained more or less stable until 1979. In that year, polar historian Roland Huntford published a richly documented, 665-page book titled Scott and Amundsen, later edited and published as The Last Place on Earth.19 In addition to being a wonderful thriller about the race between two very different men, this book was a scathing indictment of Scott's abilities and leadership. The reader might have been warned by the quote of Basil Liddell Hart which preceded the work: "It is more important to provide material for a true verdict than to gloss over disturbing facts so that individual reputations may be preserved."

Scott's reputation is hardly preserved. Huntford claims that Scott was an incompetent Naval officer and subsequently a terrible explorer, that he was a poor leader of men, remote and mired in the stultifying codes of the British Navy. He argues that virtually every aspect of the trip was poorly planned, and that Scott, not having the patience to learn how to use dogs or even skis, made virtue out of a torture called "man hauling," where in place of dogs the men themselves dragged weighted sledges up mountains
Example 5: *Sinfonia antartica*, first movement ("Prelude").
and on ice with the texture of sand. By ignoring evidence that fresh meat (available either from seal or dog) was necessary for diet, almost all the English contracted the scurvy which probably contributed to their deaths. Huntford argues that by inexplicably adding a fifth member to the polar party at the last moment without increasing the food supply, Scott probably sealed the fate of the group. In a final ghastly irony, it appears that the party could easily have been found by those who had remained behind, but Scott’s instructions about possible rescue were so contradictory that nothing was done. In short, the death of the Scott party was not a noble tragedy, but rather a pathetic memorial to mediocrity. About Scott’s famous “Message to the Public” Huntford has this to say:

This is special pleading. Scott had brought disaster on himself by his own incompetence, and thrown away the lives of his companions. He had suffered retribution for his sins. But he was justifying himself; finding excuses, throwing the blame on his subordinates. It is the testament of a failure, but because of its literary style, heroic failure. (1985:509)

Huntford also reveals that the Scott diaries were edited by his wife and Sir Clements Markham, President of the Royal Geographical Society, smoothing out all the rough edges to ensure that Scott appeared as a hero; any evidence to the contrary was suppressed. For example, the famous passage in Scott’s diary, “Now for the run home and a desperate struggle. I wonder if we can do it,” originally read: “and a desperate struggle to get the news back first. I wonder if we can do it.” Even with careful editing, there are times when Scott seems to lay the blame for his misfortunes on his sick and exhausted companions instead of realizing how poorly he had planned the return journey from the Pole. Finally, in what must be considered the ultimate blow to the Scott legend, Huntford argues (controversially of course) that Scott and his men probably could have made it to their depot:

Scott would have to answer for the men he had lost.
Shackleton would have the last laugh.
That was something Scott could not face. It would be better to seek immolation in the tent. That way he could snatch a kind of victory out of defeat. Wilson and Bowers were persuaded to lie down with him and wait for the end, where the instinct of other men in like predicament was to keep going and fall in their tracks. For at least nine days they lay in their sleeping bags, while their last food and fuel gave out, and their life ebbed away. (1985:507)
Although there were numerous vigorous rebuttals to Huntford’s work at the time—some accused the author of being an Anglophobe—no one has really been able to refute his basic point (which, incidentally, is part of the reason for his hostility toward Scott): Amundsen was in many ways the rightful hero of the piece, having showed all the virtues which have been attributed to Scott. Amundsen was a true professional, who chose his party with great care, built in many fail-safe devices, and worked like a demon from dawn to dusk in order to make sure every detail had been worked out. For all this, the English have tended to write him out of the whole affair, or at least to treat him as an interloper or, even worse, as the man who, by breaking the spirit of Scott and his men, caused their death.

Huntford implies that the Scott legend had much to do with the way the English wished to see themselves at a certain point in history, and thus it is part of a national myth. He writes that Scott’s “actions and, above all, his literary style, appealed to the spirit of his countrymen. He personified the glorious failure which by now had become a British ideal. He was a suitable hero for a nation in decline” (1985:524). By mortifying their flesh, the English engaged in a kind of rite of purification, based on bravery, brute strength and self-sacrifice, while the Norwegians, by not suffering enough, by actually being competent, were accused of missing the point of the enterprise.

We may now ask what the effect of such disclosures might have on our experience with the Sinfonia antartica? If the Scott legacy is somehow ambivalent, or worse, a triumph of puffed-up mediocrity, what do we make of a musical work which, at least in terms of its inception, treats it as the essence of heroism? While a sympathetic reading of Scott’s diaries may lay the foundation for perceiving the symphony as heroic and powerful, perusing Huntford has the opposite effect. And reversing things by using Huntford’s work as a kind of “sound track” for the symphony does not entirely have a positive effect on our experience. Even though Huntford’s book was written more than thirty years after Sinfonia antartica, much of the information on which he based his conclusions was available to Vaughan Williams, and we shall see that the composer’s view was not entirely one-sided. Yet, although quite different in character, profession and ability, Vaughan Williams and the explorer certainly shared some general ideas about “nation” and the concept of the English national character; after all, they were contemporaries. Certainly, for Vaughan Williams to have written a symphony about Scott must be seen as something significant of itself, for he certainly could have used his Antarctic material as a basis for a symphonic work without referring to the explorer. Yet he went even further by linking Scott’s diaries with passages from Shelley,
Coleridge, Donne, and Psalm 104 to give his work an explicitly English character.

Accepting Huntford’s arguments fully, both about Scott and the English response to him, makes it difficult to listen the symphony’s first bars without thinking of them as a bombastic and misplaced bit of national rhetoric. Far from being tragic or heroic, the opening strains of the Huntford-Scott symphony seem overblown and melodramatic, a monument to foolish pride and trumped-up tragedy—in short, kitsch. The notes haven’t changed but we hear them differently, as a kind of soundtrack of a hackneyed newsreel about the glories of the English character. It doesn’t seem a coincidence that the words which directly precede the symphony are “joy, empire, and victory.” This may be especially hard to swallow when we realize that the tendency of the British Empire to organize itself in somewhat rigid hierarchies, whether dealing with the Raj in India or the polar wastes, contributed directly to the failure of the expedition. By destroying the initiative of his men through a stratified chain of command, Scott sealed his own fate. Musical sounds associated with this kind of overconfident incompetence could be analyzed, but it would seem meaningless since we have no serious stake in them.

This view of the music of Scott of the Antarctic was actually expressed to me directly by Huntford in a private communication. He writes: “The Scott film was of its times. Vaughan Williams is one of my least favourite composers, but in my view his ‘Antarctic’ music exactly fits; indeed reinforces the Scott legend. Exactly how this is achieved, I cannot say. I suspect it has something to do with blandness, predictability, and the striving to be virtuous; sycophancy set to music, as it were.”

While the solution to all conflicts does not lie in admitting that both sides have merit, there is certainly a more sympathetic view of Scott that also fits the evidence, one which might suggest a third way to explore and hear the opening of the symphony. We can admit that much of what Huntford says about the expedition and its leader is true, while at the same time admiring the courage and pluck of those five men tramping—some blindly and others with open eyes—to their deaths, and understand that Vaughan Williams responded strongly to them, even as we do today. Polar historian David Thomson articulates this view well: “the story of Scott’s men must be simply that of ill-advised and not always very critical humans, going out in the great cold” (1977:311). Further, we can imagine a Scott who has figured out the enormity of his mistakes and with each step regrets his pride and arrogance more. His last words, “look after our people,” are in no way self-glorifying, but a frantic, desperate plea for all the survivors, especially the families of those who perished. Scott is a hero, but like us, he is massively flawed and complex.
Oddly enough, it is the television film based on Huntford's work, *The Last Place on Earth*, that encourages such a portrait. Between the covers of Huntford's book, in black and white, it is possible to feel something like revulsion for Scott. Yet when a director, actor and cinematographer have to realize this story, something happens, and Scott, despite our reservations about him, becomes heroic once again. We feel pity for his failure, and see his fate as a cruel punishment for flaws all too common among us.

Is there evidence that Vaughan Williams had any awareness of such an ambiguous scenario? Did he accept the Scott myth completely, or was he possibly skeptical of it and the parallel myth of Empire? In wondering about Vaughan Williams's response, we may remember that the conclusion of the film and the symphony are radically different. The former features a process analogous to Death and Transfiguration, ending with hymn-like fanfares of vindication. The symphony, however, concludes with the dark, enveloping death mask of nature: the "heroic" march of the opening yields to the wordless voice associated with the alien Antarctic terrain at the opening of the film, which the composer referred to as "the terror and fascination of the Pole" in his film scenario (see ex. 5). Is this not a strange way to end a heroic symphony, unless one has, perhaps, realized that the hero has feet of clay? There is evidence that from the very first, Vaughan Williams was ambivalent about various aspects of the project and Scott's expedition. Writing in her biography of the composer, his wife Ursula reports, "Ralph became more and more upset as he read about the inefficiencies of the organization; he despised heroism that risked lives unnecessarily and such things as allowing five to travel on rations for four filled him with fury" (1964:279). This ambivalence, apparently, was ongoing, as she also writes, "Ralph still fulminated against the amateurish organization of the last stages of the expedition, but he was pleased with his score" (ibid.:287).

We might consider, then, that both the problem and the redemption of the *Sinfonia antartica* come from a genuine ambivalence on the part of the composer, who knew full well on some level what the Scott Expedition was all about, and could not but allow his response to be reflected in his score. In this case, the symphony is not simply to be heard as a paean to the heroism of man and the massive power of nature, but is also meant to be associated with the bitterness of human failure, the pessimism of dreams dashed, and the futility of fools fighting the wind and ice. If we can believe in such a thing, the opening of the symphony becomes ambivalent, ominous and unremittingly tragic. The whole tone ascent becomes both more sluggish and more highly charged for us, while the semitone wavering carries an immense emotional weight. All seemingly triumphant gestures are rendered hollow, since we know, just
as we do when we read Scott’s journal, how it will all turn out. Scott and his men are fools, and heroes both. The work is simultaneously nationalist and passionately anti-nationalist.

Of course, after all this, some will feel that we have missed the whole point, that trying to play with various extramusical impulses is as reckless as tackling the Pole in shorts and a T-shirt. Why not simply go back to the music and forget about the possibly confusing and contradictory programmatic images? But of course, we know that there is no such thing as “the music,” in any case, and once we have been lured into the world of the program by the composer, trying to return to some notion of abstract aesthetic purity is more difficult than finding a depot in a blizzard. Even if we could attain such a place, it would rapidly become clear that the very thing that we wish to comprehend has become unintelligible, for we never approach works in a vacuum, without context. Without some parallel scenario, there is simply no meaning.

In fact, the most exciting kinds of analysis naturally suggest interpretive strategies. As a quick example, one of the peculiarities of the opening is the “misspelled” Ab-minor chord. The chord itself, while evocative, acts as a kind of phantom placed between two G major chords, the harmonic semitone relationship mirroring the melodic activity at the end of the line. Might we consider that this strangely spelled chord is an immediate symbol of the fact that, in this work, as in the Scott legend itself, nothing is as it appears to be?28

I have focused primarily on the relationship between the symphony and the Scott expedition because the composer stressed such a thing, but I could have easily looked at other features. For example, some critics have considered the work in terms of the sublime, seeing the tininess of the characters against the vast Antarctic landscape as the fundamental goal of the work.29 Certainly, the way the formal unfolding of the symphony affects our response to the opening material is significant as well. It hardly matters which aspect of the work we choose to privilege. What is important is that depending on our attitudes towards such things as Scott, Antarctica, Amundsen, exploration, nationalism, semitones, Vaughan Williams, England, our momentary moods, whole tone scales, and countless other factors, we may find compelling reasons to hear the Sinfonia antarctica as exhilarating, stuffy, heroic, tragic, ambiguous, or downright silly. All of these depend on the interaction between a multiplicity of real-world scenarios and the fiction we sometimes call “the music itself.” And by fiction I do not mean to imply that the idea of “the music itself” is without value, merely that the retelling of a musical work as a Schenkerian reduction, a succession of chords, or an intricate formal
design is no more real than imagining it in connection with ideas, images and actions.

This is, of course, quite troubling, which is at least one reason why so much of the work in music criticism, theory, and scholarship is involved with sanctioned Masterpieces. It is not that they are "better" works, but rather that a collective assumption of value allows us to ignore the outside forces that shape our engagement with music. When we encounter a work such as the *Sinfonia antartica*, which has not been sanctioned, the thin ice on which our aesthetic judgements rest are immediately evident.

In this study, I have implied that a work like *Sinfonia antartica* may change its identity depending on our evaluation of its hero, its composer, and the ideological worlds surrounding both of them. Since this involves an ongoing process, it obviously follows that our listening experience, to choose an appropriate metaphor, is only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, many of our most profound engagements with a work like this occur when we recompose and reflect, minutes, hours, and days after hearing its actual sounds. Thus a *contemplation* of such things as national striving, A-minor chords, and the composer's attempt to find a hero where there may not have been one, is not alien to the process of coming to terms with this symphony, nor is it a negligible part of determining its significance. This process may take a week, or it could take several years. Though in the end, it may be tempting to banish all extramusical considerations for their Scott-like amateurishness and unscientific meanderings, we may remember that much of the value ceded to music by our culture (i.e., why music departments exist) depends on the belief that music is somehow part of reality and communicates things about it, however imprecisely we can articulate them.

For Scott, Amundsen, Vaughan Williams, and so many others, the Poles were great metaphors: of the unknown, of striving, of death. We might continue the process by seeing in polar exploration certain more general analogues to intellectual and artistic activity. Amundsen-like preparation, in exploration or research, though not always glamorous, generally brings better conclusions, while Scott-like efforts usually involve great "adventures," but far less happy results. Looking at Vaughan Williams as an example, we also might suggest that the most successful artists seem to have combined aspects of both expeditions in their approach to material.

We might also note a distinction between expeditions to the North and South Poles. While the South Pole, despite its abstractness, is actually a place on a continent which can be visited time and again, the North Pole is quite elusive. There is no land there, simply ice floes. Two of Scott’s cabins still stand in the Antarctic and there is a scientific base at the South Pole; there are few momentos in the far North. For this reason, not a single person disputes the fact that Scott and Amundsen made it to the
South Pole, while the debate about the North Pole still rages. Did Peary really make it? Was Cook's claim valid? Even today, we do not know.30

Perhaps these polar situations may serve as metaphors for the sciences and the humanities respectively. The South Pole appears to be like the hard sciences. Though the ice cap may shift, there is a continent below, just as many kinds of scientific experiments may be duplicated and verified by succeeding generations. But this is not so for most of the work in the humanities. In a wonderful passage from Amundsen's *The South Pole*, the author talks about his life as an explorer:

The regions round the North Pole—oh the Devil take it—the North Pole had attracted me since the days of my childhood and so I found myself at the South Pole. Can anything more perverse be conceived? ([1912] 1976)

So too does this study end as far away as possible from where it began, for it is the North Pole, with its shifting ice floes, which is more like our discipline. Here context not only alters content, but serves to create content. There is no solid ground, nothing left behind remains at the same place, and this year's verities, about the *Sinfonia antarctica* or any other work, are likely to be next year's laughingstocks, if they are remembered at all.31

**Notes**

1. The title of the symphony is curious in its origin. It was originally called *Sinfonia antarctica*. Presumably the name "sinfonia" was used to distinguish the work from his numbered symphonies, considering its uniqueness in both origin and approach. When it was pointed out to the composer that he was using Latinate ("sinfonia") and Greek ("antarctica") words together, he changed the second word to the Italianate "antartica" (Kennedy 1964:322).

2. The circumstances that led Amundsen to contend for the South Pole are themselves indicative of the vicissitudes of Polar exploration. It had been Amundsen's intention to be first at the North Pole, but while he was planning his expedition he received word that the North Pole, "the Big Nail," had been attained, first by Cook and then by Peary. Although the achievements of both these expeditions were later discredited, Amundsen felt that there was no prize to be had. For this reason he surreptitiously planned an assault on the South Pole, not even telling his men until they were at Madeira, his last European port of call. For more on this, see Huntford (1985).

3. In addition to this 1913 publication, the journals of Scott, obviously unedited, are also available in six volumes from University Microfilms LTD; they were published in 1968. Material about the expedition to the South Pole is found in volume 6.

4. See also the grisly facsimile of the handwritten entry between pages 402 and 403 of Scott (1913).
5. For a fascinating account of the Franklin expedition, complete with aston­ishing photographs of the preserved bodies of the victims, see Beattie and Geiger (1988). There is quite a substantial literature on polar subjects. For an excellent summary of polar exploration and a good basic bibliography see Maxtone-Graham (1988). For a good general history of Antarctic exploration see Fogg and Smith (1990). For more meditative and speculative views, see Pyne (1986), Parfit (1985), and Campbell (1992). The following books are useful descriptions of Scott and his expedition: Huxley (1977), Thomson (1977), and Pound (1966). For a wonderful visual record of the trip see Ponting (1975).

6. In this case, two experienced mountain guides, Stephen Fischer and Rob Hall, died, along with several others, in an ill-fated assault on Mt. Everest. There were video cameras there to film some parts of the disaster, and Rob Hall, who had heroically stayed at the top of Everest rather than leave a dying companion, was patched through to his wife’s telephone in New Zealand, where he was able to say a poignant farewell before dying of cold and exposure.


8. See also Ottaway’s comment in his article in The New Grove: “He soon knew that what he was writing was no ordinary film score and that an Antarctic sym­phony might well come of it. In fact, he was achieving a reconciliation that would produce not one but three more symphonies and would affect almost everything he wrote in the very active ten years remaining to him” (1980:575).

9. For a richly layered portrait of Shackleton see Huntford (1986). The tension between Scott and Shackelton can be traced to the Discovery Expedition of 1902–04, when Scott had Shackelton “invalided out” because of scurvy. It came to a head in 1908 when Shackleton, in a heroic dash, came within ninety miles of the Pole, the Furthest South which had yet been achieved. He returned to London a hero. When his wife asked him how he had the will to turn back he replied: “I thought you would rather have a live donkey than a dead lion.” This is a stark con­trast to Scott’s later choices.

10. Yet their polar expedition was not entirely without incident. Amundsen was so worried about Scott and so overestimated Scott’s preparation that he at first left for the South Pole much too early. He and his men were forced to turn back and several almost died. See Huntford (1985).

11. Nansen’s role in the whole race to the Pole was extraordinary. He coun­seled Scott to use dogs and was a true mentor to Amundsen, giving him the use of Nansen’s special exploration ship, the Fram, and fighting to get support for the expedition. Finally, while Scott was down in the Antarctic, Nansen may have had a brief affair with Scott’s wife Kathleen (Huntford 1985).

12. Several diaries are available which show well the camaraderie of the place. Perhaps the most thoughtful is The Quiet Land: The Antarctic Diaries of Frank Debenham (1992). The best evidence of the manner in which the English brought their donnish humor and behavior to the South can be seen in the facsimile of The South Polar Times, published as volume 4 of The Diaries of Captain Robert Scott (1968).

13. Scott brought three motorized sledges on his ship The Terra Nova. They were of a new design using caterpillar treads. One sank as it was being taken off
the ship and the other two stopped working shortly after the assault on the Pole. See Huntford (1985:224, 393).

14. Something of the extreme nationalism that was occasionally found on the polar journey can be seen in an entry from the diary of Tryggve Gran, the only Norwegian on the expedition. Unaware of Amundsen’s plans to take the South Pole, Gran had accepted Scott’s invitation to join his expedition. The passage describes a conversation between Gran and Titus Oates: “Oates was a closed book to me until I shared camp life with him . . . I gained the impression that I did not find grace in his eyes . . . On the return journey from ‘One Ton Depot’ Oates told me straight out that what he had against me was not personal; it was just that I was a foreigner. With all his heart he hated all foreigners, because all foreigners hated England.” When Gran declared that he would support England if it were forced into war, “the next instant he grasped my hand. From this moment the closed book opened, and Oates and I became the best of friends” (Gran 1984).

15. For a list of the pieces used in the film see Kennedy (1964:583). Although the numbers are listed, they are not identified, and there is no thematic index to show, for example, that no. 1 and no. 19 are the same music.

16. It is ironic that Scott’s “dark” journey took place entirely in the light, since the sun never set during the period of his assault on the Pole.

17. In a letter to Ernest Irving, Vaughan Williams wrote: “I cannot get on at all with the ‘Scott’ symphony, so it will have to wait a bit, I expect” (Kennedy 1964).

18. Other bits composed for the film make their way into the symphony: the Trio of the Scherzo is based on a section where Birdie Bowers encounters some bouncing penguins, while the Intermezzo comes from a theme associated with Wilson’s wife, Oreana, which was not used in the movie.

19. This was later made into a BBC series by Trevor Griffiths titled “The Last Place on Earth,” starring Martin Shaw as Scott, with a nice cameo by Brian Dennehy as the disgraced Frederick Cook. This is a marvelous piece of television theater, and should be seen alongside the film Scott of the Antarctic. The screenplay was also published in a volume entitled Judgement Over the Dead (Griffiths 1986). At the beginning of the volume, Mischa Glenney interviews Griffiths in a fascinating piece of print journalism.

20. One of Huntford’s most damaging indictments is his successful attempt to show that the “awful weather” which held up the ill and demoralized Scott posed no threat to Amundsen at all, and that the Norwegians, using dogs and skis, frequently traveled enormous distances in the kind of weather which stopped Scott in his tracks. This is contested by Solomon (2001).

21. This, of course, cannot be blamed on Scott. These comparisons can be made between Scott’s Last Expedition (Scott 1913) and the facsimile edition of the diaries (Scott 1968). The following passage appears in volume 6.

22. See Maxtone-Graham (1988:304). In Griffiths (1986), there is a good deal of talk in the abovementioned interview (see note 19) about how the forces around Scott’s son, Sir Peter Scott, tried to suppress both the book and the television series.

23. After he had attained the Pole, and before Scott’s disaster had been discovered, Amundsen gave several speeches in England. He was taken aback by the
rudeness and condescension of many of the members of the Royal Geographic Society. This statement by Lord Curzon was particularly galling to him: "I almost wish that in our tribute of admiration we could include those wonderful, good-tempered, fascinating dogs, the true friends of man, without whom Captain Amundsen would never have got to the pole" (Thomson 1977:288–89). In Amundsen’s recollection Curzon said, “I propose three cheers for the dogs’, while he clearly emphasized his satirical and derogatory intention by turning towards me with a deprecatory gesture” (Huntford 1985:538).

24. Scott was born four years before Vaughan Williams, in 1868. The writing about Scott has always drawn on the issue of national character. A typical example is provided by Apsley Cherry-Garrard (1997) who wrote: “It is the great good fortune of England that Scott wrote—could feel so deeply and express his feelings—as he did. Those words which Scott wrote when he was dying, forced out of him by the circumstances and by his sense of duty, are part of England. Of this I am sure; the unselfishness, the sacrifice, the fight against hopeless odds immortalized by Scott in that last message and in those letters which he wrote as he died, had their effect upon the Great War and will go on having their effect for many years unknown.”

25. For more on the organization of the British Empire, see David Carradine (2001).


27. Trevor Griffiths has this to say on the subject: “What is it about the Scott myth, the mythography that surrounds that? Why is that so important? I’ve known this for many years now, but I’ve never quite seen the essential adjacency, a contingency of the one with the other. . . The myth had to be created to justify the war that followed. And it’s because we live in times that are themselves not very different that I wanted to write this piece” (1986:xxxiii).

28. I am grateful to my colleague Lee Rothfarb for his insights into this passage.

29. This paper was first given at U. C. Berkeley, and I am grateful to the student respondents whose questions helped to shape my revisions.

30. The best evidence we have suggests that neither of them made it. At any rate, there is no evidence available in terms of careful diaries and sextant readings to prove either case. The matter is itself a fascinating tale of political power since, like Scott, Peary had the backing of the powerful National Geographic Society. The most important books by both explorers are Frederick Cook’s My Attainment of the Pole (1911) and Return From the Pole (1951), and Robert E. Peary’s The North Pole (1910). The following is a selection of fairly recent books on the subject with their general findings: Wright (1970), maybe Cook made it, Peary didn’t; Rawlins (1973), neither made it to the Pole; Eames (1973), Cook yes, Peary no; Rasky (1977), probably neither did; Hunt (1981), neither, but especially not Cook!; Breton (1988), Cook not, Peary probably not; Herbert (1989), Cook no, and Peary no, but he got close; Abramson (1991), Cook made it, Peary didn’t.

31. Indeed, things in the Antarctic have heated up just as this article goes to press. Susan Solomon, a scientist at America’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who first visited Antarctica in 1986, has written a vigorous rebuttal to Huntford. Her monograph (Solomon 2001) argues that the temperatures Scott
encountered were significantly colder than the "normal" ones as measured in meteorological stations over the past seventeen years. Scott’s failure, she insists, was not due to incompetence, but to the very "bad luck" the explorer mentions so frequently in his diaries. Huntford terms her arguments "codswaddle." And so the debate continues, in the New York Times, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and on numerous websites throughout cyberspace.

References


