

## CHAPTER VI

### RHYTHM IN GRIFFES'S SONGS

The fact that Griffes observed textual meter and declamation as closely as possible in order to maintain musical integrity in creating his vocal rhythms has been discussed in Chapter III. Yet apart from this attention to declamatory needs, of all the musical elements Griffes conceived rhythm as most remote from textual demands. On the whole, Griffes responded to the general atmosphere implied by the text in creating rhythmic patterns and thereby considered himself less restrained by established requirements for this element than in others.

Although not tied to the text as closely as the other elements, rhythm evidently was conceived by Griffes as an extremely vital component in the expression of song. As a matter of fact, of all the elements the rhythmic aspect of Griffes's songs remains the most original and most completely developed, no matter the particular style employed. For this reason it seems inconceivable that Robinson could state the following generalization:

The rhythmic content, furthermore, is generally characterless. It rarely rises above elementary metrical patterns, and the intellectual interest is consequently reduced to a stagnant uniformity of aspect.<sup>1</sup>

Griffes consciously avoided the use of so-called "stagnant" rhythm through several rhythmic techniques. Though common to many songs, these techniques assume an original character with each new song.

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Robinson, "The Life and Death of an American Composer," American Mercury, 30: 346 (November, 1933).

One such device was the generation of rhythmic vitality through syncopation or through the use of unexpected metrical patterns. Another favorite rhythmic procedure was the creation of conflict through the juxtaposition of duple and triple figures, particularly between simultaneous piano and vocal parts. Such a conflict was also used in delineating contrasting formal sections.

In many songs, especially the later ones, such a juxtaposition is not limited to duple and triple meters. Increasingly complex simultaneous lines of conflicting rhythmical figurations become a trademark of Griffes's last mainstream songs.

It seems apparent that Griffes considered himself the master of rhythm rather than feeling constrained by the limiting force of established meter. This freedom is evident in another favorite technique, that of shifting meters. Yet even when such changes are not notated, Griffes composed freely across bar-lines and was able to create throughout most songs a fluidity of rhythm which transcended the visual metric barriers.

#### Formative Songs

Although there is little that is strikingly unusual in the formative songs as far as rhythm is concerned, Griffes's unflagging interest in rhythmic combinations or expressive rhythmic figures is obvious from the first. Seldom do his rhythms degenerate into predictable metrical patterns with no variety. Basically in his formative songs he sought rhythmic vitality through patterns which continued across bar-lines or which in their combinations created a surprise or conflict.

Syncopation in this group of songs is usually found as a chord figure which is tied into the next measure or beat. Sometimes this pro-

cess results in the accent of an unexpected beat and the failure to stress the expected beat. In "Auf ihrem Grab" such a rhythmic pattern (described in Chapter V) establishes a definite rocking effect.

A similar technique is shown in the accompaniment of "Der träumende See." So expected is the accent on the first beat of meas. 2 that one unconsciously provides it despite the tied-over figure (Example 10).

In Griffes's songs, the transition between duple and triple patterns was accomplished with relative fluidity. The  $\frac{6}{8}$  meter of "Elfe" was particularly convenient for such accentual shifts, which are evident as early as the introduction. Although the accompaniment often maintains this accentual ambiguity throughout the song, the vocal part rather strictly adheres to its pattern of paired triplets.

It was rather common for Griffes to set a duple pattern in the voice against a triple in the accompaniment. In "Entflieh" this procedure creates the rhythmic dynamics for most of the song, with the right hand of the piano assuming a duple figure during the solo accompaniment sections (Example 14). This song also illustrates Griffes's use of rhythmic transitions in delineating formal sections. The shift to a duple pattern in meas. 18 heralds the opening of a contrasting section, with a new set of conflicting rhythmic figures (Example 15).

Perhaps the most consistent use of conflicting duple and triple accentual patterns in this group can be found in the companion to the preceding song, "Es fiel ein Reif." In this song no attempt has been made to disguise this conflict. The piano obviously divides the  $\frac{6}{8}$  meter into two groups of triplets, as proven by the use of dotted eighth-notes on the first and fourth beats in the four measures of the introduction, which establishes the arpeggiated triplet pattern. The vocal pattern is just

as obviously founded on the contrasting accentual possibility, with eighth notes on first, third, and fifth beats. Again Griffes took advantage of the rhythmic conflict to aid in sectional organization, as both piano and voice share the vocal accentual pattern in the more lyrical central section (see meas. 33).<sup>2</sup>

With the formative songs, complexity created by juxtaposition of conflicting rhythmic patterns seldom reaches any greater intensity than that already described. Since this group of songs is not particularly linear in conception, any greater complexity due to simultaneous lines would be fairly impossible. What is seen in these songs, however, is a phenomenon almost parallel to the line by line approach to other elements. With the exception of the occasional duple/triple superimposition, rhythmic events are seen as occurring section by section, or phrase by phrase, rather than simultaneously. This frequently results in shifts in rhythmic figurations, as found in almost every phrase of "So halt' ich" (Example 12 and 13). Again the conception seems to be cumulative rather than integrative. This style is obvious in songs of longer contrasting sections, such as "An den Wind," in which the changing rhythmic character helps to define contrasting sections, as described in Chapter V.

Thus in the formative group rhythmic complexity is not central to the composition but is ancillary in importance. Yet the dependence on homophonic rather than contrapuntal conception in these songs restricts the composer's ability to create simultaneous lines in complicated rhythmic interrelations. What is important, however, is that an interest in rhythmic variety was already generated in Griffes's compositional style,

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<sup>2</sup>See Appendix, Song 2.

and that he was already experimenting rhythmically within the boundaries of the late romantic idiom.


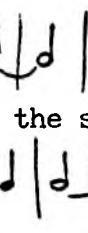
### Divergent Songs

It has been shown already that the manifestations of the individual musical elements in the divergent songs depended ultimately on the idiosyncrasies of the particular styles borrowed. The rhythmic element in these songs in no way contradicts this statement. Thus, the rhythmic character of the divergent songs relies heavily on Griffes's conception of the patterns constituting these styles.

For example, the relatively static rhythm of several of the oriental songs is the product of Griffes's conception of a particular oriental style which is more sustained or controlled. Such is the case with the very sustained "Landscape." So passive is the rhythmic pace that the song almost becomes a still-life in sound (Example 63).

Despite the demands of the stylistic influences, Griffes's favorite rhythmic devices are still evident in the divergent songs. The incidence of syncopated figures is rather limited, however. Syncopation usually takes the shape of a conflict between the perceived accent and the notated accent and occurs most frequently in repeated chord patterns.

This particular device is very apparent in "Two Birds." Throughout meas. 1-16 of the first strophe the piano accompaniment consists of

a repeated two-chord pattern, in the following notation:  etc. Yet the listener tends to hear the accent on the second rather than the first chord, in such a pattern:  etc. Therefore, the entrance of the voice at meas. 5 is heard as

a rhythmic conflict, since the pick-up note in the vocal pattern is set against what is heard as the accented chord of the piano. In the second

(meas. 25-48) and fourth strophes (meas. 73-end) the expected accentual pattern appears and resolves the earlier conflict.<sup>3</sup> The oriental "Tears" is similar in its use of chord patterns which conflict accentually with what the listener is expecting (Example 68).

This last example points also to another Griffes rhythmic device which is less pervasive among the divergent songs--the duple/triple conflict. Its use is more incidental in this group than in either of the others and occurs most frequently as a brief contrast. In the carefree "We'll to the Woods" the overriding rhythmic pattern is a spirited triplet pulse. The introduction of a conflicting duple figure is used only to herald a contrasting section or the return of the original theme. The duple occurrence is never strong enough to create a major conflict with the prevailing triplet pattern.

As suggested in the preceding chapter, the contrasting section of "Come, Love" includes a shift from the opening duple scheme to an arpeggiated triplet figure. Not only does this new rhythmic design help define the contrasting section but it is combined with the original duple figure to vary the return of the opening section (Example 56). Yet again the texture is so transparent that this juxtaposition is heard more as a temporary device to create interest than as a strong rhythmic conflict.

It is obvious that the divergent songs avoid rhythmic complexity to an even greater extent than the formative songs. Actually the incidence of conflicting rhythmic figures in linear juxtaposition is extremely rare, except in those few cases in which such linearity is associated with the style being borrowed. As stated in Chapter IV, linearity is encountered

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<sup>3</sup>See Appendix, Song 4.

frequently in the oriental songs, especially with the combination of two or more recurring ostinato-like patterns. Yet rhythmically these patterns tend to remain fairly simple, except in the case of the Javanese song "Kinanti." In this song Griffes has given the right hand of the accompaniment a freely flowing melodic line whose rhythmic character is at times rather irregular. This combines with a steadier ostinato pattern in the left hand and an ornamental vocal line which makes use of an oriental melismatic style. The result is often fairly complex (Example 84). Again, however, the transparency of the lines detracts from a strong feeling of complexity.

Of the non-oriental songs the logical exception to avoidance of complexity would be the contrapuntally-conceived "This Book of Hours." Yet even in this more linearly-constructed song rhythmic complexity is incidental rather than central in importance. There is actually only one section which can in any way be considered rhythmically complicated, and that is the imitative section in which the accompaniment has an elaborated line (Example 54). In this song it is the fuller texture (in contrast to the more transparent texture of other divergent songs) rather than simultaneous conflicting rhythmic figures which creates the impression of complexity.

Rhythmic complexity is not a crucial element in the divergent songs. Actually it appears that Griffes has almost sought an austerity or clarity of line in these songs. More complicated patterns may have created confusion in the styles used in these songs, whereas the more simplistic rhythmic figures provide the transparency necessary for the true nature of the borrowed styles to emerge. As with the other elements already discussed, for the divergent songs Griffes imposed upon himself the re-

straints inherent in the styles desired.

### Mainstream Songs

As with the harmonic element, the rhythmic element clearly indicates the separation of the mainstream songs from those of the other two groups. It is with these songs that Griffes released his own creativity and allowed himself a truly individualistic perspective concerning rhythmic challenges. What emerges is on the one hand an incredibly flexible rhythmic flow, yet, on the other hand, one whose malleable nature is constantly under the composer's control. In writing of later songs in this group, Upton states:

In no respect perhaps did Griffes show more marked individuality than in his sensitiveness to rhythmic subtleties.<sup>4</sup>

With the mainstream songs, Griffes's favorite rhythmic devices are used most consistently. Not only are they present in some form in almost every song, but they assume a more central position in the song's expression. The use of syncopation in "The First Snowfall" is evident particularly as a rhythmic dialogue between the two voices of the accompaniment. This echoing effect creates a blurring of the expected accents and a perpetual rhythmic pulse which freely crosses bar-line barriers (Example 30).

Syncopation between voices in "The Lament" also creates an ambiguity of accent (Example 88). The off-beat pattern in the left hand recurs throughout the song, usually accompanied by a conflicting pattern in the other voices. These examples indicate another contrast with the other groups concerning rhythmic treatment. Whereas syncopation in the other songs is basically on a single level, that is, created by a single part,

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<sup>4</sup>William Treat Upton, "The Songs of Charles T. Griffes," Musical Quarterly, 9:328 (1923).



the syncopation in the mainstream songs often occurs as an interplay between two or more voices, in a two-dimensional aspect.

This last example points also to the other favored rhythmic technique in Griffes's songs--the conflict between duple and triple figures. This is one trait which can be found to some extent in almost every mainstream song. "Symphony in Yellow" contains no simultaneous duple/triple patterns, yet a shift to triple meter is used to delineate the contrasting middle section. "The First Snowfall" contains no duple/triple conflict whatsoever, but the subtleties of its rhythmic structure are based on other conflicting principles, as described earlier.

In "The Half-Ring Moon" the juxtaposition of duple and triple figures begins with the introduction of the voice at meas. 3 and continues throughout the entire song. There is a constant triplet pattern in the piano, in the left hand if not both hands, while the voice never wavers from its duple scheme, sometimes joined by the right hand of the accompaniment. This conflict is never actually resolved and parallels closely the major/minor harmonic conflict in this song. The lack of resolution of these two conflicting patterns relates well with the poetic image of incomplete or unreturned love--the "half of a ring" (Example 33).

In many songs the occurrence of duple/triple simultaneous figures is more incidental; seldom is it as thoroughly penetrating as in the preceding song. It becomes a device for clearer declamation and special emphasis in the Four Impressions. The shifting to a duple pattern for more equal syllabic accent in "La Mer" has already been mentioned.

The ultimate development of the duple/triple conflict can be found, not surprisingly, in the very difficult "Phantoms" (Giovannitti). Not only does the voice conflict with the piano, but the two hands of the

accompaniment conflict with each other. Added to this is the notated time signature  $\frac{4}{4} \frac{3}{2}$  at the beginning of the vocal part in meas. 6. What is created is a kind of rhythmic discord which complements the often grating harmonic dissonances, as earlier described (Example 74). The rhythmic complexity of this song is not restricted to these figures, but is manifest in various other metrical shifts and rhythmic combinations of an incredibly complicated nature. This song is indicative of the growing rhythmic complexity which became a trademark of Griffes's later mainstream songs.

It is true that few, if any, elements in the genesis of a composer's style reveal a true continuum; that is, a gradual and steady growth until maturity, with only slight deviations along the way. Such a description is usually not only false but also misleading. Yet of all Griffes's characteristics, complexity of rhythmic composition comes closest to such a gradual continuum. Even more so than harmony, his mainstream songs reveal an ever-increasing use of layers of rhythmic formations in very complicated and difficult structures.

Already in the earlier "Phantoms" (Tabb), Griffes demonstrated a tendency towards a flexible rhythmic flow in which configurations shift continuously. For example, from meas. 5 to meas. 7 the arpeggiated figures vacillate between groups of six sixteenth notes to groups of seven or eight thirty-second notes. This fluidity is maintained throughout the song.<sup>5</sup> Yet at this point in Griffes's development, the two-dimensional complexity created by conflicting rhythmic patterns has not yet been attained. While flexibility is achieved, it is restricted to the one-

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<sup>5</sup>See Appendix, Song 3.

dimensional level.

This flexibility recurs in the Four Impressions, and with it often appear moments of more intense complexity. None of the songs of this set maintains lines which are entirely rhythmically independent, yet many phrases foreshadow the irregular simultaneous figures combined contrapuntally which become more thorough-going in the later mainstream songs. There are several excellent examples in "Le Jardin," one of them occurring, very typically, as the crescendo to the first vocal climax (Example 57).

In "Waikiki," as in its companion piece "Phantoms" (Giovannitti), the conflicting rhythms create a discordant effect parallel to the dissonant harmonic effect produced by the frequent chromatic shifting. By now Griffes has infused the entire song with irregular patterns, so much so that predictable accents are avoided and time signatures altered so frequently that bar-lines and regular accents are totally disregarded. It is clearly evident in writing such as this that Griffes consciously intended to be master of the rhythmic flow. He suspended and resumed the motion under his own direction, rather than succumbing to the predictability of regular, established metrical patterns (Example 73).

It is in the "Sorrow of Mydath" that true linear complexity is encountered, not simply for intensity in a brief section, but as a consistent trait. In much of the song three rhythmically independent lines--voice, right hand piano, left hand piano--are juxtaposed, often in conflicting metrical patterns (Example 78). With the flexibility and fluidity created through irregular figures and combinations, it is not unreasonable to assume that rhythm in this song, as the elements of melody and harmony, is again intended to approximate rather than specify. In any case, the emotional tension demanded by the poem is carefully achieved

by such rhythmic conflict.

Not unexpectedly the ultimate of Griffes's rhythmic complexity is revealed in his last three songs, the MacLeod mystical poems. Even the more harmonically traditional "Thy Dark Eyes" attains a complicated rhythmic structure unencountered in his earlier songs. Added to the frequent shifting to irregular figures on a two-dimensional level is the almost constant conflict created by the combination of a syncopated duple pattern and a triplet chordal figure which could be interpreted ambiguously (Example 91). An extremely intricate intertwining of various independent rhythms evolves.

Similar constructions are common to "The Rose of the Night" as well, particularly when the recurring upper melody of the accompaniment combines with the voice and a contrasting pattern in the lower part of the accompaniment (Example 95). Throughout this song the lines, which combine contrapuntally, assume and maintain their rhythmically independent character.

It is, therefore, the contrapuntal nature of many of the mainstream songs that allows for their extremely complicated rhythmic structure. Griffes discovered that the rhythmic fluidity he sought was most accessible in a linearly-conceived texture, one in which the relative independence of lines allowed the composer almost unrestricted freedom for rhythmic invention.

Thus for the mainstream songs, rhythmic complexity is no longer secondary but is now fundamental to the structure of the songs. This results from the freedom from extraneous restraints which Griffes felt in this group. In the formative and divergent songs a rather established style provided the guidelines, no matter how uniquely or loosely Griffes

applied them to his composition. Yet with the mainstream songs, the highly developed rhythmic structure reveals the individuality of Griffes, apart from any established stylistic traits. It is the rhythmic element, then, perhaps even more than harmony, which illustrates the nontraditional trend of Griffes's song-composing and suggests the forward-looking directions in which his individuality was leading him.