

Article

# 'An Art That Reaches beyond the World': Sir Arthur Bliss and Music as Spirituality

Matthew McCullough <sup>1,2</sup> <sup>1</sup> Department of Music, Durham University, Durham DH1 3RL, UK; matthew.mccullough@durham.ac.uk<sup>2</sup> Centre for Death and Life Studies, Durham University, Durham DH1 3RL, UK

**Abstract:** Throughout his life, British composer Sir Arthur Bliss (1891–1975) placed great importance on the value of music. He saw it as something that could bring peace and healing and as an 'art that reaches beyond the world.' In his artistic creed, set out in 1934, Bliss speaks of music as inherently linked with emotion in its form as a crucial mode of human expression, both in listening and in its composition. His philosophies on these are fairly well documented; he spoke publicly on contemporary composition and wrote extensively on his own experiences with music, not least in his autobiography, *As I Remember*. Equally, he and his wife both write of his music as an embodiment of the 'private' Arthur Bliss, one in which we might find something of the man hidden from the general public. With this in mind, and given Bliss's view of music as something with spiritual value, this article aims to examine his previously neglected philosophies on composition, exploring themes of emotion, identity, and destiny through an exegesis of his writings, lectures, and broadcasts, and by probing the composition and context of *A Colour Symphony*, *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*, and *Shield of Faith*. Using a lens of Douglas Davies' idea-value-belief series supported by Davies' theory of cultural intensification it argues that, for Bliss, music can be seen as more than an idea—it was a value, a belief, and perhaps even a religious belief. In its conclusion, this article suggests that we can uncover a form of spirituality in Bliss's attitude to music and view this attitude as something which acts 'against death'.

**Keywords:** Sir Arthur Bliss; music; spirituality; emotion; belief; faith; musicology; words against death; death studies; British music



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## 1. Introduction

Let me here sum up my creed.

I believe that the foundation of all music is emotion, and that without the capacity for deep and subtle emotion a composer only employs half the resources of his medium. I believe that this emotion should be called into being by the sudden awareness of actual beauty seen, or by the vision of beauty vividly apprehended. I believe that the emotion resulting from apprehended beauty should be solidified and fixed by presenting it in a form absolutely fitting to it, and to it alone. If I were to define my musical goal, it would be to try for an emotion truly and clearly felt, and caught for ever in a formal perfection. (Roscow 1991, p. 100)

The British composer Sir Arthur Bliss laced music with immense value and importance; from his own experiences he learned to see in it the capacity for peace and healing and developed the belief that it was 'an art that reaches beyond the world.' (Bliss 1989, p. 278) As can be seen in his artistic creed above, he saw music as something inherently intertwined with emotion and believed in it as a crucial mode of expression, both in its composition and in its auditory experience. Beyond Bliss's artistic creed, we are lucky to have on record many of his philosophies on music and creativity, and many of his own experiences therewith. Across the years Bliss gave many lectures, such as 'What Modern Composition is Aiming at?' and the three lectures on 'Aspects of Contemporary Music' from which

comes his creed. He took part in several broadcasts during and after his time at the BBC, including two appearances on *Desert Island Discs*, and wrote multiple accounts of his music and the mind from which it came, including the detailed autobiography, *As I Remember* (Bliss 1989). These records, written and spoken, provide the Bliss scholar with a wealth of material through which to explore the hows and whys of Bliss's compositional process and purpose, and yet these creative philosophies seem to remain confined to discussions of particular works and their contexts or contents. These ideas and ideals are worth exploring as a corpus to help us understand the very basis of Bliss's musical personality, particularly given that Sir Arthur, his wife, and others who knew him write of the particularly personal nature of the man which is contained within his compositional output—in a way, we must extract the person from the music through the lens of Bliss's understanding of his own artistry.

Of special interest is the fact that Bliss notes a 'spiritual value' (Roscow 1991, p. 181) of music,<sup>1</sup> aligning beauty, emotion, and identity with it as a form of expression; these themes of emotion, identity, and spirituality can also be seen throughout the work of Douglas Davies. In Davies' *Death, Ritual and Belief*, he opens by describing a theory of 'words against death' in which we, as complex human beings, use language as a response to death's challenge to our self-consciousness, framing this use of language in ritual and thus making us better equipped to deal with death in the future. It is this original statement of the theory which I have previously applied to Sir Arthur Bliss's *Morning Heroes*, suggesting one might consider his use of musico-funeral rhetoric to construct a requiem in sound as a musical response to the death of his brother (McCullough 2022). In this article, I wish to move one further step into the theory and use what Davies calls a 'series of notions' which 'concerns the importance of human emotion for "words" at large' (Davies 2017, p. 5). Davies' series of notions is as follows: The world is full of many 'ideas', but it is clear that some ideas are more meaningful to some people and cultures than others, thus when an emotion pervades an idea it becomes a 'value'; a value, that is to say 'an emotion-laden idea' can be seen to become a 'belief' when it contributes to a person's sense of identity—defined by Davies as 'the way people understand themselves in relation to other persons, to the world around them and often also to supernatural realms'; finally, when this belief contributes to someone's sense of destiny it becomes a 'religious belief' (Davies 2017, p. 6). Davies addresses the risks involved in using the word 'religious' in this context, but notes that it 'need not imply a supernatural agent'. To demonstrate, he gives the example of a garden: a garden may carry an emotional association of joy or pleasure to someone and thus become a value; a garden may contribute to someone's sense of identity as a gardener and thus become a belief; for a select few, said garden may be the place in which the gardener wishes to be buried, and thus it contributes to their sense of destiny, becoming a religious belief. With this example in mind and once again returning to the use of religious as not necessarily denoting something supernatural, Davies also notes that a person may hold a cluster of beliefs and religious beliefs, permitting the metaphorical gardener to hold the religious belief of a garden alongside that of a supernatural realm, or other destiny orientated beliefs (Davies 2017, pp. 4–7).

The central idea behind Davies' series of notions is to produce a method by which we can understand the various ways individuals engage with meaning-making in the broadest sense. Developed through a socio-psychological view of the study of religion, combining more sociological observations on shared values within a community or group with the more psychological realm of emotion and states of feeling, Davies provides a useful approach for understanding the various levels of meaning-making for the individual and the relationship of these values and beliefs to others in their society. In addition to these 'levels' of notion, I would also like to draw upon Davies' more speculative adumbration of a 'theory of cultural intensification' which helps contextualise the series of notions as something which has the potential to reach beyond the study of religion and which I hope will elucidate the reasons for its inclusion in this article on music and spirituality (Davies 2008, pp. 7–18).

In the chapter detailing the theory, Davies initially notes the aforementioned sociological and psychological divide in the study of religion and an absence of a 'general analytical category' which embraces these factors 'in such a way that the individual may reappear within sociological studies' (Davies 2008, p. 7). The main task of the theory of intensification is, then, to explore not just the levels of meaning making—as through the series of notions—but the process by which individuals 'achieve meaning through the broad bands of their society and personal temperament' (Davies 2008, p. 7). Based on Chapple and Coon's (1947) 'rites of intensification' in which individuals engage in ritual behaviours which renew a 'familiarity with and commitment to their group's values' (as opposed to Van Gennep's (1960) 'rites of passage' in which a social transition is observed) the theory of cultural intensification attempts to generalise both the constituent elements of the theory as well as its applicability; for example, Davies notes the ritual and ceremonial elements of legal and religious institutions, but adds that buildings, places and monuments, and other material cultures also contribute to cultural intensification through their role in narrative composition (Davies 2008, p. 12). Furthermore, and particularly relevant to this discussion on music and spirituality, Davies draws a parallel between the psychology of a child's development and the pursuit of knowing about the world in philosophy, theology, music, and art to establish the link between meaning-making, hope, and creativity:

It is precisely in these activities of meaning-making that hope and creativity become apparent and show how human beings engage practically with their ideas. If left to itself meaning can seem an abstract and very neutral form of knowledge; once it becomes part of a history of a nation, institution, political party or, indeed, of a sports club or of the myth and theology of a group, then it becomes acted upon and acted out. In and through that activity the particular 'meaning' takes on new life, it becomes intensified in the lives of those related to it. (Davies 2008, p. 14)

Deliberately avoiding the introduction of 'ritual' at this point in order to preserve the theory's generality, Davies describes these intensification behaviours as 'the practice of truth', that is to say our 'truth' is embodied and that when we engage with what we believe to be true (at work, at home, in a religious setting) we often do so in ways that intensify the emotion which pervades our values relating to the origin and significance of life itself. To conclude his ponderings, Davies again focuses on the generality of the idea, affixing a caveat that 'cultural intensification [is] a theoretical construct with potential as a theory *for* use when discussing religion as one amongst other aspects of life rather than a theory *of* religion as a distinctive category' (Davies 2008, p. 17).

And so, drawing upon the series of notions, one might view the progression from one to the other in terms of this intensification theory. Moreover, such a series of notions and the progression therein not only provides the author with a framework against which to explore Bliss's writings on music, but it displays its usefulness in probing elements of spirituality in music through a helpful extrapolation of theory in religion to other aspects of life in which meaning-making occurs. Davies' own view on spirituality throughout his work engages consistently with elements of meaning-making in a secular, as well as religious, sphere. Whilst he avoids providing a concrete definition of spirituality, acknowledging the complexities of doing so alongside its considered status as a deuterio-truth,<sup>2</sup> he does allude to it as one form of 'humanity's meaning-making as it integrates ideas and emotions in the forging of individual and group identities under the framing influence of distinctive narratives, all enhanced by provision of some sense of destiny' (Davies 2015, p. 4). He further notes:

[The idea of spirituality] also reflects an emotional and intellectual stream of making sense of life and conferring a quality of depth to existence whether approached within the corporate structures of major traditions—religious or secular—or as a more personal dimension beyond institutional control. (Davies 2015, pp. 4–5)

Therefore, if spirituality, taken in Davies' sense, is 'an emotional and intellectual stream of making sense of life' which confers 'a quality of depth to existence' aligned with ideas of identity and destiny—again carefully noting the generalities which both surround and encompass religion—then the idea-value-belief series and the processes which are used to maintain and develop these levels are useful in uncovering the elements of spirituality which are interwoven into significant aspects of an individual's life. Finally, these ideas feed back into the genesis of this discussion in Davies' 'words against death' idea. If spirituality can be seen as a form of meaning-making against the framework of the notions series, then the ideas through which it begins and the processes through which they are intensified might be viewed in the broader theoretical understanding of existing as a component of a theory of 'words against death'—this will briefly be discussed in the conclusion.

In light of previous work which uses Douglas Davies' theories to explore how Bliss's *Morning Heroes* may be seen as 'music against death' and as a composition in which he found peace and healing, I here broaden my exploration of Bliss (McCullough 2022) and expand upon my application of Davies' theories in an exegesis of Bliss's creative philosophies. Framing this exploration using Davies' 'idea-series' supported by his notion of 'cultural intensification', this article interrogates Bliss's writings, lectures, and broadcasts to uncover the spirituality inherent in his attitudes towards music as a process of meaning-making. It first explores his ideas on beauty and creativity from his time at war through to *Morning Heroes* then suggests that beauty and in turn music become values through an intensification behaviour of artistic creativity—a process considered through the composition and context of *A Colour Symphony*. Further observing Bliss's insights on compositional inspiration, process, and product I examine his discussions on identity in music and, looking to two works which Bliss and his wife denote as bearing the private qualities of the composer, *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* and *Shield of Faith*, propose that we may view music as one of his beliefs. Finally, I probe the nature of spirituality in Bliss's attitude towards the idea of music and how it links to his own sense of destiny. Illustrating the role of two intensification behaviours in his writings—the aforementioned creativity and also music listening—I proffer that, for Bliss, music was a religious belief and a form of spirituality, thus placing my findings tentatively within Davies' (2017) 'words against death' idea.

## 2. Beauty Apprehended and Emotion

In August 1914, at the age of 23, Bliss enlisted to fight in the First World War and joined the 13th Royal Fusiliers. Initially, Bliss's letters from the front paint the picture of an optimistic officer, but as the war went on Bliss's attitude began to display the more familiar wartime experiences of weariness, fear, fatigue, and all of those more traditionally associated with the trenches (Bliss 1989). Bliss, despite surviving the war, was hardly unscathed: he was mentioned in dispatches for clearing a trench under mortar bombardment; in July 1916 he was shot in the leg at the Somme and was invalided back to London; in August Bliss's brother Kennard was killed at the Somme; in October 1918, he was gassed at Cambrai having recovered from being shot; and he also had the more lasting damage of recurring nightmares which he was to sublimate through the composition of *Morning Heroes* in 1930. In 1917, amidst these events which would come to punctuate Bliss's war, was a personal experience which 'radically effected his life': his conversion to Catholicism. He writes:

During my first year in France I had been buoyed up by the conviction that, whatever the danger, I myself could not be killed. The bullet that bore my name had not been cast. The sense of my own individuality was too strong to allow the thought that a chance shell could in its haphazard way blot out *my* existence. The coming return to the same battlefields made my brash confidence waver. [ . . . ] But now I felt the urgent need for some reassurance that sudden death did not annihilate the human soul: perhaps Faith could prove stronger than stubborn disbelief. In search of a solution I went to a priest at the Brompton Oratory for instruction, and later was received into the Catholic Church. (Bliss 1989, pp. 48–49)

Bliss's faith was renewed because of the stark contrast between the realities of life and death which were imposed upon all those who fought at the front and the fear that death was an end, an 'annihilation of the human soul', rekindled an existing flame of belief, perhaps one which had previously been extinguished; the use of the phrase 'stubborn disbelief' suggests a conscious attempt at spiritual suppression. If the overfamiliar nature of Anglican repetition<sup>3</sup> dulled this sense as a young boy, perhaps the smells and bells of a Catholic oratory, its architecture, and its art might be a fitting arena in which his faith could flourish—after all, Bliss admitted in later life to being a fan of 'pomp and ceremony', both regarding the church and also the state (Amis 1991).

It is not the first time, however, that Bliss comments on this duality between life and death, between morbidity and beauty. Foreshadowing his conversion, he remarks on his leave back to England:

It was like exchanging one planet for another . . . I found in France, as so many others did, that the appreciation of a moment's beauty had been greatly intensified by the sordid contrast around: one's senses were so much more sharply on the alert for sights and sounds that went unnoticed in peacetime because taken so for granted. But a butterfly alighting on a trench parapet, a thrush's songs at 'stand to', a sudden rainbow, became infinitely precious phenomena, and indeed the sheer joy of being alive was the more relished for there being the continual possibility of sudden death. (Bliss 1989, p. 36)

We see this juxtaposition translated into Bliss's music, too; Eric Saylor, in discussing the two-part final movement of *Morning Heroes*, 'Now, Trumpeter, for Thy Close', notes the 'opposing pastoral perspectives inspired by the writings of two different war poets: Wilfred Owens and Robert Nichols' (Saylor 2017, p. 94). This movement is the only section of the symphony which deals specifically with Bliss's own experience at war through reference to the Battle of the Somme. Wilfred Owens' text opens by setting the serene pastoral landscape of a battlefield, pregnant with expectation, but soon descends into horror as the spring offensive begins. The close of Owens' poem brings the entry of a chorale prelude over which the line 'Why speak they not of comrades that went under?' is spoken—Saylor suggests that the depth of grief displayed by the chorale prelude comes in response to this unanswered question (Saylor 2017, p. 95). The passion chorale which follows the prelude sets text by Robert Nichols, a military friend of Bliss, in which the war dead (one presumes of both sides, as per Bliss's comments on his setting of the Grecian roll-call in the previous movement) are heroised graciously without sentimentality thanks to Bliss's setting of the text (McCullough 2022, p. 148). Saylor points to two notable adjacent contrasts from Bliss's setting of these texts. The first is the use of gunfire under the soft pastoral Owens text and the more rhapsodic music which accompanies the Nichols—the pastoral extremes of hard and soft seemingly alter the interpreted tone, or mood, of the texts with subtlety. The second is the use of these contrasts to place and invert the *momento mori* of Et in Arcadia Ego—'Death May be in Arcadia, but Arcadia is also found in Death'—a theme which will recur later in this article (Saylor 2017, pp. 96–97).

One might indeed expect the integration of death and life and the themes of beauty and horror as Bliss turned his thoughts back to his time at war in *Morning Heroes*. This particularly on account of his reorientation towards Catholicism in search for a hope spurred on by a fear of death and in music conjured from the need to sublimate a fear which was preventing him from living. And yet the magnetism towards beauty, life, and life-values seems to persist more deeply through Bliss's life from this point forwards—these stark epiphanies of which we have just read appear to be a splash which ripples, a catalyst not just for the composition of *Morning Heroes* but for his creativity as an artist in a broader sense. To quote at length from *Aspects of Contemporary Music*, a series of lectures given to the Royal Society in 1934 and four years after the premiere of *Morning Heroes*, Bliss even attempts to ascribe this stimulant to a whole generation of artists:

The impulse to creation is an emotional one, and can be defined as a vivid state of awareness . . . Artists of my generation had an unparalleled experience—they



were suddenly flung into war, and though it undoubtedly destroyed the artist in many, it may have aroused it in others. One cannot for long as a young man face the immediacy of death without becoming filled with excitement for the values of life. The smallest evidences of a positive vitality as opposed to a destructive force became an immense significance. A butterfly in the trench, the swoop and note of a bird, a line of poetry, the shape of Orion became as it were more vividly perceived and actually felt than ever before imagined possible. They were clung to desperately, as it were, because of their intimate contact with the saving power of beauty. One developed a sense of awareness more acute than at any other time in one's life—one saw objects for the first time, simply because, I imagine, it might also conceivably have been for the last. (Roscow 1991, p. 98)

Bliss seems to be suggesting that the psychoactive state of hypervigilance which manifests as a symptom of trauma has helped to shape the foremost foundations of, if not, as he says, the artists of a generation, then at least his own creativity. Bliss's personality, by this point in 1934, had certainly undergone a substantial development—this is perhaps seen most clearly through his music in his move from a revolutionary *enfant terrible* towards a more conservative *grand papa*—and yet this focus on the awareness of beauty inspired by the war seems to have remained somewhat of an artistic value for him; something to 'cling to' as an affirmation of life. He notes later in *Aspects*:

I have emphasized this personal experience because it is absolutely akin to that of the artist gestating the work. He is filled with this vivid awareness. While at other times he sees an object or grasps a thought with the intensity of *two*, at the moments of creation he sees and grasps a thought with the intensity of *four*. This generates a sense of power in him, which impels him to communicate that intensity to others . . . But whether it is momentary or prolonged it is the essential power from which creation springs. It has been wrapped up in words like inspiration and divine afflatus, it has been termed a kind of madness by those who are only too sane; but whatever the label attached to it, it manifests itself as a definitely higher voltage of living, in which the values of beauty are the more clearly envisaged and its many forms found to be of an absolute necessity for the continuance of existence. (Roscow 1991, p. 99)

As Carl Jung once remarked: 'It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension . . . These differences of degree [of depth of consciousness] are, however, often differences of character, in that they depend completely upon the development of the personality—that is to say, upon the nature of the perceiving subject.' (Jung 2020, p. 146) The war certainly seems to have brought about a change in Bliss's view of the world, or perhaps more presently, a development in the depth of his consideration of it in which persistent *memento mori* have imbued 'the beauty of things' with a new sense of meaning; one that suggests both a capturing of the present as a significant reminder of life and being, one which sets life against death, and also one which provides life-values and hope.

This intense awareness of 'beauty', inspired by the juxtaposition of life and death, provided to Bliss more than an affirmation of life, life-values, hope, and belief, it also provided an inspiration to creativity. It is interesting that Bliss notes that 'the impulse to creation is an emotional one' (Roscow 1991, p. 98). It seems that, not only has Bliss found a heightened sense of meaning in a vivid awareness of beauty, but the emotional intensity of the inspiration compels him to create, to communicate these ideals in his role as an artist. We can see this sense of emotion along the same lines as defined by Douglas Davies, who in *Emotion, Identity, and Religion* takes "'emotions" to be focused feeling states of limited yet intense duration' (Davies 2011, pp. 4–5). This definition much aligns with Bliss's explanation of the vivid apprehension of beauty, or the 'emotional impulse', which inspires the artist to create. It is particularly apt, given our framework, that he talks of this in terms of an 'intensity'. Whilst perhaps slightly different to the way in which Davies (2008) uses the word, what Bliss is describing is comparable to this process of

‘cultural intensification’ for him as an artist. Due to his war service and his acute awareness of mortality, beauty is no longer simply an idea for Bliss; it is something which he has imbued with significance because of its ability to give meaning to an existence placed against death. Moreover, the process of creation, of ‘the artist gestating a work’, is akin to the ‘intensification behaviour’ or ‘the practice of truth’ which Davies discusses. From this, we can begin to see the germination of the idea of music as something spiritual for Bliss; the ‘intimate contact with the saving power of beauty’ already reveals a value which acts against death in the way in which Bliss evidently understands it, perhaps a lower-tier form of spirituality in itself, but it is further framed by the intensification behaviour—like Davies I here wish to avoid the use of the word ‘ritual’—of artistic creativity which ‘manifests itself as a definitely higher voltage of living, in which the values of beauty are the more clearly envisaged and its many forms found to be of an absolute necessity for the continuance of existence’ (Roscow 1991, p. 99). In beauty we find one of Bliss’s values, perhaps even a spiritual value, and in creativity we find the intensification behaviour through which we begin to see the development of the idea of an artist into something more than a value, something which will be explored later. At this point it is worth addressing the praxis of this intensification of the apprehension of beauty through one of Bliss’s early major works, *A Colour Symphony* (1921).

#### *A Colour Symphony*

On 15 February 1919, at the age of 27, Bliss was demobilised from the British Army and returned to London. Realising that he had likely missed the most profitable years of his life at war he began to compose, conduct, and lecture with a renewed sense of importance. As his post-war musical eccentricities subsided and his conservatism grew, Bliss began to make a name for himself in public musical life. In December 1920 Bliss was invited by Edward Elgar to have lunch at the Royal Societies Club where Bliss, Eugene Goossens, and Herbert Howells were asked to write new works for the 1922 Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester. Elgar had hoped that the three composers—Bliss a Catholic convert, Goossens raised Catholic, and Howells yet to make his name in Anglican music—would ‘do away with the remnant of the notion that everything must be a sort of CoE propaganda’ (Ellis 2011, p. 95). Elgar placed no limits on form or style for these new large scale works and so Bliss took on the challenge of writing his first symphony: *A Colour Symphony*.

Bliss, discussing the conception of the work in his autobiography, remarks explicitly that he found it easier to write ‘dramatic’ music as opposed to ‘pure’ music; he comments on his preference for a stimulus of words or ‘a theatrical setting’ which perhaps explains his keen involvement with film and ballet scores later in his career (Bliss 1989, p. 71). As regards the title of *A Colour Symphony*, Bliss was initially to name the work ‘Symphony in B’ but was later persuaded by Percy Scholes to give the work a title akin to that of Vaughan Williams’ ‘Sea’, ‘London’, or ‘Pastoral’, symphonies—his argument was that ‘Symphony in B’ meant nothing to the man on the street and by making explicit the inspiration for the work, the listener was given some guidance (but never prescription) as to how it might be appreciated. It is also interesting that Scholes hints at a sort of synaesthesia:

It seems (and it is interesting to hear this) that when composing [Bliss] always experiences a play of colour sensation, that such a play had been vivid in his mind when working at this Symphony, and that the title, “A Colour Symphony,” which at once suggested itself to him, would actually express a conception that had dominated him when at work. (Scholes 1932, p. 416)

Whilst Scholes is perhaps just as overenthusiastic in his declaration of Bliss as a ‘true’ synesthete as he is with the title’s self-revelation, Bliss does remark on the inspiration for the work in his autobiography:

For weeks I sat before a blank sheet of manuscript paper trying to make up my mind what shape, what character this new big work should have. And then one day, looking over a friend’s library, I picked up a book on heraldry and started reading about the symbolic meanings associated with the primary colours. At

once I saw the possibility of so characterising the four movements of a symphony, that each should express a colour as I personally perceived it... Hence its title *Colour Symphony* with the sub-titles to the movements of Purple, Red, Blue, Green. (Bliss 1989, p. 71)

The 1932 edition of the score describes the colour associations of each of the movements and a note for a 1956 recording on the Decca label gives further associations: the first is an ecclesiastical shade of purple indicating a procession [the colour of amethysts, pageantry, royalty, and death]; the second the scarlet of embers [the colour of rubies, wine, revelry, furnaces, courage, and magic]; the third a 'Picasso blue' as that of the sky late in the year [the colour of sapphires, deep water, skies, loyalty, and melancholy]; and the fourth a darkening spring green [the colour of emeralds, hope, youth, joy, spring, and victory] (Bliss 1932; Roscow 1991, pp. 227–29). The first movement is *Andante Maestoso*, keeping with his processional description, and is palindromic with a trio of themes which are displayed in reverse order post-climax. The scherzo, *Red*, is mostly based on the melodic development of the first theme which contrapuntally concentrates large amounts of energy in the movement. The third movement, *Blue*, is contemplative and built around the use of chords with added sixths and sevenths, something which was to become a fingerprint of Bliss's post-armistice music—it is one of the first major demonstrations of extensive fluidity and line which marks an essential turning point towards a more inclusive approach which sees the importance of timbre and texture mixed with less abstract ideas in composition. The final movement, *Green*, opens with a tonally ambiguous theme presented in the violas which are soon joined by the violins and the flute in fugal entries. The counterpoint brings an unravelling momentum which climaxes with an Elgarian theme played in the strings and brass.

Although the symphony was met with much criticism regarding the use of colours as descriptors of the movements, the work was almost entirely viewed as a success due to the musical material and the impressively technical treatment of it. The reception of the work is noted here because of Bliss's explicit distinction between the personal and public reception of the colours and moods; he writes, '[t]here was to be no attempt at a semi-scientific basis whatsoever, if there *is* such a thing. I was fully aware that colours arouse quite different emotions in different people, and that I was speaking only for myself in composing this symphony' (Bliss 1989, pp. 71–72). From this it seems that Bliss is acutely aware of the distinction between emotion in creation and perception; there was no intention for these movements to be representative of particular epithets associated with each colour, rather, the intense emotion inspired by a broadly defined 'beauty' springing forth from each colour provided the impetus to create and those who listen are provided a freedom to experience these as they will.

One might draw a connection between Scholes' comments on the name of the work and Bliss's comments above regarding his awareness of the experience of the listener, but Bliss acknowledges such individuality in the emotional reception of musical listening elsewhere in his writings, too. For example, in the second lecture of *Aspects* he divides musical listeners into three types and it is in the second category that we obtain Bliss's views on those who relate the sound to an external experience (Roscow 1991, p. 81). He notes those who 'summon some other activity of life or thought to enrich what they are hearing' but also the inferences made upon explicit statements of inspiration by the composer; 'Sometimes the composer himself gives a definite clue to the source of his musical expression . . . at other times the extramusical expression is not so clearly defined, but underlies the work in the form of a basic mood, which each listener can interpret more fully for himself' (Roscow 1991, pp. 81–82)—perhaps referring here to his own 'programme' for *A Colour Symphony*. The first of these groups, Bliss highlights, 'derive their main pleasure from the purely physical beauty of sound. It is the fabric of musical sound itself that appeals to them, the actual sensuous beauty of tone which arouses their emotion.' (Roscow 1991, p. 80) In the third group he categorises those 'whose pleasure in it is mostly intellectual' and where, he quotes Jean Cocteau, 'emotion resulting from a work of art is only of value when it is



not obtained by sentimental blackmail.’ (Roscow 1991, p. 82) These three categories are joined in a dictum that music’s aim is ‘to move every side of the man, physical, emotional, and mental . . . where [one] should be lifted up to the same heights of inspiration as was the creator of the masterpiece.’ (Roscow 1991, pp. 83–84) Of course, these categories come from Bliss’s wider philosophies on music and perhaps even from his own experiences, but even here there remains a focus on the communication of expression by the composer to the listener.

It is clear that Bliss’s ideas regarding his own compositional process are based in emotion. From his war service Bliss developed, as he claimed, a ‘vivid apprehension of beauty’. In the presence of perpetual *memento mori* on the battlefield, the psychological reprieve afforded to him by a moment’s beauty created intense emotion—that which is described by Davies as ‘focused feeling states of limited yet intense duration’. It might be seen, then, that Beauty became a value for Bliss—not necessarily because of the literal emotion experienced upon its perception, but because the idea of beauty became a symbol of hope and vitality, something which existed in opposition to a constant intimation of death and something which, in the course of this article, will be seen as existing in the foundations of Bliss’s music and spirituality. And this distinction must be emphasised—that between an emotion felt and something emotion-laden. Bliss speaks in both of these terms in the aforementioned quotations and it is true that this thesis follows much of Bliss’s thoughts on perceived and felt emotions, but I do not believe that this negates the overall conceptual framework of this examination, rather, it gives it its basis—the foundation of Bliss’s idea of beauty may consist of felt emotion, but this itself imbues it with meaning and so the idea of beauty is charged with emotion, thus producing a value. That these emotional experiences are apprehended and processed through artistic creativity gives us a sense of the extent to which Bliss’s compositional artistry was an intensification behaviour in which the meaning and life-values held through the idea of beauty are intensified into a form of expression; this form being music. That this form of expression serves as an embodiment of the saving power of beauty and is ‘an absolute necessity for the continuation of existence’ leads us to view music, that form of creative expression particular to Bliss, as also being a held value. It is Davies’ intention that these frameworks exist as a tool through which we might view the relationship between the individual and their society; as we begin to see music appearing as a value of Bliss, a value that might be shared amongst composers as a group, we also see the unique development of this value through his personal intensification behaviours, thus exemplifying the usefulness of Davies’ approach. Within each of these values of beauty, artist, and music we see the beginnings of a network of meaning-making and meaning-making processes alongside a conveyance of a certain ‘depth of existence’ which is central to Davies’ understanding of spirituality. We might begin to see Bliss as approaching the attribution of spiritual values to music outside of a traditional religious sphere; as we shall see, Bliss saw an element of himself in his music which would align these values with a sense of his own identity—a further consideration in Davies’ notion of spirituality—and so it is worth probing both his writings and his most significant compositions even further.

### 3. Bliss: A Man in His Music

As in *A Colour Symphony*, Bliss’s need for extramusical inspiration is evident elsewhere in his oeuvre. Discussing *A Knot of Riddles* (1963) he remarks that ‘[t]he finding of these poems came in very handy for me as I had accepted the invitation from the BBC to write a new work . . . as usual, I was waiting for the needed impetus’ (Bliss 1989, p. 213). In writing the *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* (1955) he maintains that, ‘as always, before starting to write, [he] had to await the moment when some lucky find or incident would fire [his] imagination’ (Bliss 1989, p. 194). More generally, he notes that ‘[t]here is only a little of the spider about me, spinning his own web from his inner being. I am more of a magpie type, I need what Henry James termed “trouville” or a “donnée”’ (Bliss 1989, p. 71). I have noted that, for Bliss, the emotional ignition of beauty inspired an intensification behaviour (the crafting of an artwork with an intention to communicate with the listener, even in

the individual nature of their reception) but given the lineage of inspiration to musical composition and of the embedded elements of personal experience in the translation of the apprehension of beauty to his work, I here want to explore the ways in which Bliss's music formed part of his identity—that is to say 'how he understood himself in relation to the world around him' (see [Davies 2017](#), p. 8).

To begin, one might walk along a rather crooked path from Bliss's acknowledgement of the individual experience of emotion derived from listening towards that which inspires a composer;

[M]usic must convey to me some state of mind, or some emotional or intellectual stimulus. Some part of me must be moved by feeling I'm in contact with a superior mind that wishes to express itself to me . . . does one need to recognize a distinct musical personality in order to get the uttermost enjoyment? I feel *I do*. ([Roscow 1991](#), p. 266)

In many ways, we might see this as being something separate to the emotion inspired by 'extramusical association'; we might view this more as a sort of deuterio-truth of emotion, in much the same way we might view 'spirituality' as a deuterio-truth.<sup>4</sup> Bliss again mentions this in discussing several canonical composers, for example Haydn:

Of the past we can say, for example, that a quartet of Haydn is greater than a quartet of Dittersdorf, because the amount of human experience 'felt into and fixed creatively' in the Haydn is greater than the other . . . In simple words, given that the artistry in the two works is of the same excellence, taken man for man, Haydn expresses the bigger all-round human personality. ([Roscow 1991](#), p. 72)

These two statements, such is their abstraction, might seem wafty and unsustainable, however, in their current role in this thesis they direct the inquisitor towards an important facet of Bliss's compositional process and what, perhaps, we might see as a core compositional component—musical 'personality'. Quoting Professor Samuel Alexander, Bliss remarks:

Professor Alexander says 'an artist is a good artist in so far as he is a creator of beauty'—but it must be remembered that besides being a creator of beauty, he is bound to show in his work the qualities personal to him as a man, and it is upon the power and breadth of these human qualities that his claim to greatness will ultimately rest. ([Roscow 1991](#), p. 72)

Here we have Beauty, that ideal with which we began this journey, being placed alongside the expression of the *artist* in music. It might initially seem that the impetus to create, that which is inspired by a vivid apprehended beauty, is somewhat separated from the need for a composer to display, or perhaps as Bliss would put it, communicate an element of his personality, and yet, it is the process of apprehension which, like that of the listener, triggers the qualities personal to him- or herself: 'Creative effort in any branch of the arts means a lifetime of work. Whether awake or asleep the mind continuously strives to convert experience into sound. Hence the traditional and correct estimate of an artist as someone vague and undependable, someone only half there.' ([Roscow 1991](#), p. 201) We again begin to observe a plausible connection between creative inspiration and the personal expression of the artist; this quotation suggesting that the artist is always on the edge of an experience in the world around them, one which, when embedded into their art for the listener, communicates something of that particular state of being which could only have been lived by that artist. Bliss notes this phenomenon again when speaking to conductor Vernon Handley about what makes a score 'come alive'; 'I demand from music not what I demanded as a young man which was sound and sound only . . . I now demand something very much better than that. You talk about an enhancement of life: I do demand enhancement of life, by which I mean I want to feel behind this music a great personality telling me something about experience that I haven't had before. That's what I want' ([Bliss 1989](#), p. 286).

In returning to the framework of this exegesis, we can see that music becomes an umbrella value under which beauty sits and from which the intensification behaviour

of creativity develops Bliss's attitudes towards the idea of music. In addition, Bliss also situates artistic expression, perhaps seen as the product of that intensification behaviour, within the bracket of music—this expression being one of the individual artist and creator marking the artist's identity as a component of the compositional output. This is significant in that it provides us with two routes through which we can see Bliss's beliefs: that we begin to see the whole compositional process as a value, with its intensification behaviour in creativity and its importance as something which advances the 'saving power of beauty' leading to Bliss calling himself a composer, something that—much like the gardener—ties the idea of composition to his identity; secondly, the focus on personal expression, be it that intended by the composer or that 'mood tied to experience' perceived by Bliss, aligns identity with the compositional process and is subsumed into the final product of music, created or heard. Music then moves from being a value to becoming a belief, an idea which contributes to Bliss's sense of identity and in turn holds aspects of it. To say that music moves from one aspect of the series to the other is perhaps an odd turn of phrase—it is not necessarily moving of its own accord, but rather it is propped up by a set of values which, through intensification, contribute to Bliss's sense of identity—as they might to other composers through a variety of means. But such is the individuality of this process of self-expression in music that it would be prudent to explore this through the context of Bliss's music.

Again, Bliss's fecund comments on his music, process, and creative philosophies provide the researcher with a focused ground for their exploration:

The composer is a man of two beings—one which perhaps, for self-preservation, he shows the world, the other he keeps hidden and it is only behind the closed door of his workroom that he is really himself, and possibly only his nearest and dearest, in this case my wife, for instance can blend the two. I have indeed written an autobiography detailing my life to the age of 75, but whoever wants to know the *real* me must listen to my music.

You remember that Elgar wrote on the score of the *Dream of Gerontius* 'This is the best of me', by which I think he meant, "This is the real me". I have... chosen as a portrait a characteristic work of mine written at the age of 64. It is music that I should wish to have survived me. In Elgar's sense I can write in this work, *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*, and in my choral symphony *Morning Heroes*—'this is the best of me'. (Roscow 1991, p. 282)

Here, Bliss firstly directs us towards his *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* and the aforementioned *Morning Heroes* as works which embody the 'real Bliss'; secondly, he notes his wife, Trudy, as one of a select few capable of understanding those elements of latent personality in his music. It is interesting, then, to note that Lady Bliss wrote an appendix to a posthumously revised edition of Bliss's autobiography, *As I Remember*, in which she notes:

The public Arthur Bliss has been there for all to see: the President, the Chairman, the excellent conductor, the proud and conscientious Master of the Queen's Music. However, for those that know where to look, or rather should I say listen to his music, there will be no difficulty in finding another Arthur Bliss, one of the 'inspired madmen' from the *Phaedrus*.

It is *Shield of Faith*, which he did not live to hear performed, that makes a fitting *envoi*. (Bliss 1989, p. 287)

And so, having already discussed *Morning Heroes* I now take a work in which Bliss has claimed to pledge his true self and one in which his wife notes an element of the same—a work which, written at the end of his life, perhaps accumulates that depth of experience and finessed expression for which Bliss so aimed—the *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* (1955) and *Shield of Faith* (1975) provide a point of departure with an 'authentic' seal of approval.

### 3.1. *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*

Stewart Craggs' collection of essays on Arthur Bliss, music, and literature opens with a preface in which he quotes Bliss's above remark on the parallel between the importance of *The Dream of Gerontius* to Elgar and the *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* to Bliss (Craggs 2017). He quotes the passage at greater length than I have above; in it, Bliss discusses the artist wishing to leave behind a 'definite personality' in their work, he observes that this is 'because with an artist, very often the outer persona that he shows to the world is very different from the inward man at work on his art' (Craggs 2017). The first chapter of this volume, written by Robert Meikle, centres on Bliss's orchestral music, including *The Meditations on a Theme by John Blow*. The *Meditations*, as with Bliss's other music, was inspired by a 'donnée'—in this case a present from Professor Anthony Lewis, a Professor of Music at Birmingham University. Lewis had presented Bliss with a copy of the newly published 'Coronation Anthems with Strings' by John Blow in a volume of *Musica Britannica*. Bliss was struck by a melody in the Sinfonia which precedes the verse anthem, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', and was inspired to write a set of variations on the tune:

I felt a signal omen had been granted me, and it was accordingly on this theme that I began to build my new work. I have used the title 'Meditations' in spite of the energetic, almost violent character of some of the music, because I have been aware of dwelling in thought on the varied imagery used in this psalm and of allowing myself to compose freely on different fragments of Blow's melody. (Craggs 2017, p. 41)

Bliss, as well as taking Blow's theme, also adopts the text of Psalm 23 in his titling of each of the movements, or meditations. It is interesting that the descriptions (verses) appear out of the order originally set by the psalmist, marking well Bliss's dwelling on the 'varied imagery' and his free approach to the composition. Instead of running the psalm chronologically, Bliss has taken his inspiration and moulded the work based on the moods which spoke to him in each of the verses (and, in parallel, one only hears a full, unfragmented restatement of Blow's theme at the very end of the work). He opens the *Meditations* with the eponymous verse, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', in which Bliss presents a melodic Pastoral depicting two contrasting moods: 'one of comfort and reassurance, the presence of the Shepherd, and the other of peril and lurking evil.' (Roscow 1991, pp. 223–25) The second meditation, 'Thy rod and staff they comfort me', express 'confidence and pride' (Roscow 1991, p. 225). The fourth meditation, 'he restoreth my soul', is described as joyful and confident, and the fifth meditation, 'In green pastures', reintroduces the soft melodic material from the opening pastoral using an arpeggiated harp to imply flowing streams and lush, green fields. This is again interrupted by the lurking of peril and evil which brings the programmed text of 'Through the valley of the shadow of death' as an Interlude. As the metaphorical figure (perhaps the shepherd) moves through the valley, they reach, in the Finale, two full statements of Blow's theme before a coda returns to the pastoral of the introduction; there is 'one more premonition of peril, but the final chord brings complete reassurance.' (Roscow 1991, p. 227).

The title of the third meditation, which I have not mentioned above, does not come from psalm 23. It is a pianissimo scherzo titled 'The Lambs'—Robert Meikle suggests that this movement is more generally representative of the innocence of the shepherd's lambs, but perhaps with Bliss's remark that 'the first eleven bars emphasise the truism that sheep move in close imitation' we might wonder, within the context of this argument, whether there is a second, more ironic representation of a march of the lambs to the slaughter in line with his war service. Meikle himself ponders the importance of this psalm and melody for Bliss—'but why should the omen have been that particular tune and no other? Why not the beautiful four part anthem, "let my prayer come up"?' (Craggs 2017, pp. 46–47) Meikle's suggestion is that, in Blow's setting, Bliss felt elements of the first trio in *A Colour Symphony*, and later the introduction to 'Dawn on the Somme' from *Morning Heroes*; perhaps he felt the need to visit the ghosts of the Somme and his own nightmares one more time in order to put them to rest, hence the connection between the two works in Bliss's 'this is the best

of me' comment. And yet we might re-contextualise Meikle's reading within this current piece of writing; in doing so, we become aware of the similarity of compositional process (intensification behaviour) with something such as *A Colour Symphony*, with the initial 'trouvaille', an inspiration sparked by beauty—in this case a theme by John Blow and the associated text and imagery of Psalm 23—and a composition built freely around inspired emotion or perceived moods, again as general in the *Meditations* as they were in the moods associated with the colours. The meditation, in the way in which Bliss restructures the verses, is set out in a manner which adumbrates Bliss's journey of discovery in finding the importance of music and creativity at the heart of his compositional philosophies. The moods that Bliss describes in the *Meditations* display a world in which comfort and reassurance exist alongside evil and peril, but one in which they fight for dominance. The lambs move in 'close imitation' having felt the emotions of confidence and pride but as they reach the 'green pastures' the peace is interrupted by the valley of the shadow of death, even until the final bars the 'premonition of peril' looms before the final chord brings reassurance. There is a sense here that Bliss is once again invoking the classical notion of 'Et in Arcadia Ego', something with which, as we have seen through Eric Saylor's investigation, he both musically noted and reversed in *Morning Heroes*; even in the midst of the continual threat of death, evil, and peril, there remains in the world an element of beauty to cling to, one which provides not only hope, but meaning for the struggle against death.

### 3.2. *Shield of Faith*

And what of *Shield of Faith*, a work which Lady Bliss noted as a 'fitting envoi' and a work in which one might catch a glimpse of the 'real' Sir Arthur? The work is a cantata for soprano and baritone soli, SATB chorus, and organ. It was commissioned as part of the Quincentenary celebrations for St George's Chapel, Windsor, and was first performed on 26 April 1975—almost exactly a month after Bliss's death. The work, like many of Bliss's extended compositions is based on an anthology of texts. These texts were chosen by Canon Stephen Verney and must have given Bliss the impetus he needed to compose—whilst each of the texts chosen by Canon Verney represent each of the five centuries of the chapel's existence, the title of the work is of Bliss's own judgement and is one which perhaps reveals a little of that at which Lady Bliss was hinting. The title is taken from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. (Ephesians 6: 13–17 *King James Version*)

The first text, by William Dunbar, tells of Christ's victory over death and the devil. The chorus sing the text against the back of a virtuosic organ fanfare which converges with the voices at 'Surrexit Christus Dominus' before Bliss engages the two soloists to proclaim 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo'. The second poem, George Herbert's 'Love', in which the guilty are pardoned and invited to share in the sacrament, provides a rather stark contrast to the fourth movement, a setting of an extract from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*. Despite not living to hear the work performed Bliss did write a set of programme notes for the cantata before his passing; of the *Essay* Bliss notes that 'Pope gives a scathing account of man's life; there is no "shield of faith" here, only the cold comfort that God is wiser than we are.' (Roscow 1991, p. 281) Such a reading from 'the region of scepticism' provides an ease into Tennyson's *In Memoriam* where 'we seem to glimpse "the dark night of the soul".' (Roscow 1991, p. 281) The choice of Tennyson by Canon Verney was prompted by Bliss's request for something more 'agnostic'—Verney appears to have been successful as Bliss notes that Tennyson 'hopes for reassurance . . . but the whole excerpt seems to suggest that the hope is in vain.' (Roscow 1991, p. 281) The fifth text comes from 'Little Gidding', the final of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. This text held a personal significance for Bliss who had



visited the chapel of Nicholas Ferrar's religious community in Little Gidding ten years prior to setting the words; 'an aroma of sanctity still clings to it.' (Roscow 1991, p. 281) Bliss ends his programme notes with an assertion about the *Quartets* which we may take as the overarching conclusion to the *Shield of Faith*: 'I do not presume fully to have their meaning, but [the *Quartets*'] magnificence expresses itself in a rapturous acceptance of belief, ending in the Dantesque vision of the union of divine and human love.' (Roscow 1991, p. 281).

In *Shield of Faith* we witness again an engagement of texts which provided inspiration through meaning. Moreover, just as reading the *Meditations* in light of Bliss's assertions of himself in the work deliver a vision of dichotomies—between good and evil, between beauty and peril, and between life and death—*Shield of Faith* offers us a vision of the man's true self, as seen by his wife, with a real consonance. The opening movement's triumph of Christ over the Devil, of life and resurrection over death, brings hints of the Homeric struggle of braveness, loss, and hope of his war, the pardoning of the guilty soul and partaking in the sacrament bares strong associations with Bliss's survivor's guilt at the loss of Kennard, and his subsequent rekindling of faith through the Brompton Oratory. The scepticism of the *Essay on Man* details further the strains and strife that may have been placed on Bliss's faith—either in his recurring torment from his time at war, perhaps even with the occurrence of the second world war, or maybe even something beyond—whilst the 'blazing faith of the final poem' (Roscow 1991, p. 281) lives to embed the reassurance, the comfort, and the belief to which Bliss ascribed—one not always seen explicitly in public, but one visible in his music and its inspiration.

### 3.3. Music, Identity, and Belief

In all of the works which Bliss notes as showing the 'real' him we see a dominating theme of Saylor's inverted 'Et in Arcadia Ego': in *Morning Heroes* we see a tale of soldiers going to war, only to be raised towards God in 'Dawn on the Somme', an improbable salvation after a brutal battle; in *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* we see an unlikely parallel in the continual world fight between comfort and reassurance and the perils of evil, eventually settling with reassurance and hope after passing through the valley of the shadow of death. Similarly, Lady Bliss points to a work, a 'fitting *envoi*' (Bliss 1989, p. 288), which makes explicit a faith which is constantly challenged by doubt—a doubt both in 'a' God or religion, but also in something that works against death, in something that satisfies Bliss's original need for 'reassurance that death did not annihilate the human soul.' (Bliss 1989, p. 48) As much as Meikle's comments on the lambs of the *Meditations* are speculative, our own deductions of which precise aspects of Bliss are embedded into the two compositions discussed here can only remain at the same level of speculation. What can be said with an element of certainty is that both of these works, works which have been labelled as externalisations of private ideation, bear the weight of hope and creativity against much darker backgrounds, something which, as we have seen, was fundamental to Bliss as a composer and, reading his accounts of the war, beauty, and the power of music, to Bliss the man. As I have mentioned above, Music becomes tied to Bliss's identity through both the compositional process and his claim that one can hear the personality and experience of the individual in their compositions; thus Bliss's personality existing in his own, as confirmed by his wife. We can consider this view of music in light of the notion series as a belief, an emotion laden idea which contributes to Bliss's sense of identity as a composer. This concept of music as a belief remains outside of the traditional realms of religion, but it is again something which Bliss will have in common with other composers—his society—through a set of circumstances individual to him, albeit with some commonalities (with potential shared values in artistic creativity and music listening). How then might this secular idea of 'music as belief' relate to spirituality?

## 4. Music as Spirituality

In the *Meditations* and *Shield of Faith* one can find a 'private Sir Arthur' in which we see a more profound level of ponderance; not one necessarily explicitly tied to the

framework of Davies' series of notions, but rather one which seeks to explore the deeper levels of existence, probing concepts which are usually reserved for phenomenological and theological debate. In these two works, unlike in *Morning Heroes*, Bliss did not choose the text, and so it is fraught to attribute the conception of the work to links between the text or its conceptual ideas and Bliss's life circumstances; that being said, drawing upon the nature of Bliss's compositional process and the need for a 'donnée', one might assume that the inspiration for the musical material (form, harmony, development) came from an apprehension of beauty via the intensification behaviour of artistic creativity. In this respect we begin to see the nature of the individual identity which Bliss saw in his music—whilst I have noted this in the *Colour Symphony*, we have, from Bliss's own selection, a common theme in the 'most important' works to him, a theme which deals with a particular existential complexity. And it is worth acknowledging the doubt and sporadic anguish against which these elements of hope and life affirmation are set. The very title of *Shield of Faith* implies a protection from any threat to life-values, and indeed the very use of faith implies occasional uncertainty or doubt.

In addressing graduates of Westminster Choir College at Princeton University, in a speech focussing on the importance of happiness, Bliss orated:

There is also a strong pillar to support happiness. The spiritual world abhors a vacuum. Everyone instinctively feels the need to believe in *something*, not necessarily for some, perhaps, in a formal religion, beautiful as they are in their pure essence, but in *something* that can relate him or her to the vast starry spaces around. After all we are only a speck of dust on a minor planet. It may be presumptuous of me, a musician, to probe into philosophical questions, but music is an art which reaches beyond the world. It is one of the great sources of happiness. Endless draughts of peace and healing can be drawn from its mysterious depths . . .

When I took part in [*Desert Island Discs*] I chose for my first record the Credo from Bach's B Minor Mass, because when I listen to this I am filled with such a positive affirmation of belief, belief in something much greater than the small self, that even in moments of dark depression it is difficult to admit to doubt . . . perhaps truth should be added to beauty as a source of happiness. (Bliss 1989, p. 278)

Here we have a full declaration on Bliss's belief in music as something which 'reaches beyond the world'. It holds in many forms, both in his own music and in that of others, a sense and reaffirmation of his personal values, identity, and beliefs, but more than that—it gives him a sense of his own destiny. Whilst it initially may seem that the 'idea' of music is somewhat separated from destiny in the transformation to religious belief, we only need to look towards the intertwining of music as a belief and religious belief for Bliss, and as something which holds his identity. To use Bliss's 'A Testament' as an example: 'I think most people like to feel like they leave behind them a remembrance of a definite personality . . . the poet his verses, the sculptor his works of art, the painter his canvases, the musician his scores' (Roscow 1991, p. 281). More powerfully perhaps, in an answer to the question of 'Do you think composing is a full-time job?', Bliss answered: 'composing is not a job at all. It is a function, one for which certain human beings are designed. You might as well ask "Has a lighthouse a full-time job, or should it be doing something else during its daylight hours?"' (Roscow 1991, p. 200) Music not only provided Bliss with a sense of his own identity but his own destiny. It was a medium through which he could project something of the nature of himself into the future and for posterity. Music was something which became a strategy of meaning-making in many ways—I have previously noted the act of artistic creativity as an intensification behaviour and, whilst only briefly raised earlier, it becomes clear that the very act of listening to music is just as much of a practice of truth. Bliss remarks on this as early as the 1920s:

What is the use of sitting on a chair over a score and pretending that because you can inwardly hear the tune and general harmonic basis of it, being, thank God,

an educated musician, you are realising the composer's intention and extracting a more pleasurable excitement thereby than if you sit in the concert hall and actually drink in the resulting sound with your ears? [ . . . ] We are entering an age where emotion in music will be studied by the purely musical. (Roscow 1991, p. 22)

It seems that it is not just music in the abstract which displays an importance for Bliss's values and beliefs, but also music as an auditory and sensory experience; again, we might look to this as the next most important intensification behaviour—whilst creativity and composition intensify values to connect Bliss's identity to his music, listening to music, be it his own or otherwise, connects Bliss to his destiny and his spirituality. There can be no stronger argument for this than in the speech above: 'when I listen to [the 'Credo' from Bach's *B Minor Mass*] I am filled with such a positive affirmation of belief, belief in something much greater than the small self, that even in moments of dark depression it is difficult to admit to doubt' (Bliss 1989, p. 278). We may then, through Davies, view the act of listening (perhaps with the caveat of 'to specific pieces') as another intensification behaviour, one which heightens Bliss's belief in the idea of music as something intertwined with his identity to the level of a religious belief as something which 'comes to frame [his] sense of destiny.' (Davies 2017, p. 6) This herein exemplifies the ways in which this approach of intensification speaks to the individual nature of our psychological states whilst addressing the sociological values and beliefs of a broader group; two Christians may share some beliefs and religious beliefs but they may (or may not) reach the various levels through differing intensification behaviours. Again, this religious comparison is helpful in understanding the importance of this approach for music as spirituality in a non-traditional and non-religious setting; it was the regularity of religious services which dulled Bliss's initial Christian beliefs (see note 3) and so in music he found a spiritual means of approaching the 'quality of depth to existence' (as in (Davies 2015, pp. 4–5)) or the 'higher voltage of living' (as in Bliss; (Roscow 1991, p. 99)). This broad comparison is not only made here by the author, but by Bliss himself:

Music [from Beethoven to Wagner] was no longer an exquisite entertainment for aristocratic patrons, and no longer a beautiful but humble handmaid for the service of the church. It had become a proud religion itself, and its large public already revered it as a form of free religious worship, 'experiencing and stimulating mystical experiences for temperaments, which could no longer be satisfied by dogmatic theology.' (Roscow 1991, p. 85)

#### *Music against Death*

Finally, the central thread upon which both Bliss's writings and Davies' series of notions are pegged is that of meaning-making, and it is at this point worth placing this thesis within Davies' (2017) 'words against death' idea and alongside my previous exploration of a 'music against death' adaptation (McCullough 2022). Davies' theory states that humans use language, framed by funerary ritual, to respond to death's challenge to self-consciousness in order to become better equipped to deal with death in the future (Davies 2017). In many ways this article sits both easily and uneasily within the above theory. It is obvious that music forms one of Bliss's meaning-making strategies in a way that I argue is spiritual, which we may see as opposing death through language either by attaching significant meaning to the ideas of music, beauty, artist, or more directly through musical languages (McCullough 2022). The current article sits more uneasily with the use of the term funerary ritual as I here examine Bliss's writings on music whether they directly relate to death or not, focussing in particular on a sense of spirituality or of something beyond and/or against death. This aspect of Davies' theory, the fifth proposition ('funerary rites frame this verbal response, relating it to other behavioural features of music, movement, place, myth, and history' (Davies 2017, p. 4)) requires further probing in cases removed from immediate death and religion, something which is beyond the scope of this article, but I wish to offer some tentative thoughts on how this might be seen in the context of Bliss's

relationship with music and spirituality argued herein. Davies continues his discussion of his theory using the idea of rhetoric, which ‘leads us to the task and traditions of persuasion’ (Davies 2017, p. 5). I have previously aimed to further this idea of rhetoric by including musical rhetoric, that is to say musical languages which fall into generally categorisable topics of requiem, lament, chorale, etc. In a way, it is the active nature of this use of language which produces the rhetoric and a possibility of human engagement with it. We might attempt to parallel Davies’ discussion on rhetoric in funerary rites with the idea of intensification behaviours when considered outside of a religious or funerary context. For Bliss, composition and listening were ways in which he was able to actively ‘practice truth’, to ‘behave belief’ (Davies 2008), and to frame linguistic forms in a way which intensified the emotional concentration of the ideas and the meaning therein associated. It is perhaps for this reason that Davies deliberately avoids the use of the word ‘ritual’ when discussing the ‘theory of cultural intensification’ with its focus on ‘the subjective and social function of the belief within identity formation and the meaningfulness of the world rather than on any objective content of the belief’ (Davies 2008, p. 11); creativity, composition, and listening to music are arguably forms of ritual in themselves and, as Davies points out, there are many theoretical perspectives through which to approach this question, but viewing these acts as intensification behaviours enables them to be considered in a less formal way than ritual, thus achieving the objective of viewing meaning in a wide range of aspects of daily life. We might see these intensification behaviours as a substitute for ritual when considering Bliss’s spirituality and life-values in the context of this argument, ultimately building a platform for exploring existence and in this case existence against death, but a more detailed discussion of this remains beyond the sphere of this article and certainly deserves more detailed and incisive engagement than the space here allows.

## 5. Conclusions

In summation, it may be argued, perhaps on several levels, that Bliss’s relationship with and attitude towards the idea of music was something spiritual and based in various practices of meaning-making which encompassed a breadth of his beliefs contained in the ideas of music, composition, artistry, Catholicism, agnosticism, and doubt. Music as an idea was something which Bliss imbued with emotion through its inherent connection with beauty as a source for creativity and necessity for the continuation of existence. He saw himself as a composer and a musician; music was inherently part of his understanding of the world and he wove his most important compositions from the inner depths of his private, rather than public, personality. He had a deep sense that the music he left behind him would carry his personality beyond his own life and into the future; he saw music as integral to his destiny, and yet in the implicit dual relationship of his core beliefs music in the present was a medium through which he could reach for something more and experience the depth of existence as something spiritual. In the months before Bliss died he wrote in a letter to a friend: ‘Belief should extend to the mystery beyond death. I am not convinced that this is the shutting of the door.’ (Bliss 1989, p. 288) For Bliss, music was an art which reached ‘beyond the world’ and one in which he could express ‘an emotion truly and clearly felt, and caught for ever in a formal perfection’ (Roscow 1991, p. 100); for Bliss, music was a source of peace, a source of healing, and a source of deep spirituality.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In a reply to a discussion paper in 1941 by B.E Nicholls, Controller of Programmes at the BBC, Bliss writes of ‘the threefold function of broadcast music’: to ‘expand the principle value of great music as an ultimate value, indeed a justification for life’; to enrich leisure hours; and to ‘stimulate tired bodies and worn nerves’; he also notes ‘[i]t betrays its trust if it debases the spiritual value of music, acts as a narcotic or drug, or bores by sheer inanity.’
- <sup>2</sup> A ‘deutero-truth’ is a term that is ‘immediately recognised and understood at an ordinary level of conversation but [is] extremely hard to define if pressed for a higher (or second = deutero) level of precise meaning’ (Davies 2017, p. 22). See also (Rappaport 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Throughout his writings, and indeed his public life, Bliss seldom references his religious beliefs. In his autobiography Bliss notes that his family ‘never held [any] deep religious convictions’ when he was growing up and that, given his father’s ‘stern new England consciousness’ of a moral compass, any ostentation or outward observance was unnecessary (Bliss 1989, p. 48). Despite this, he does mention a ‘spiritual quickening’ around the age of his confirmation; this, presumably would have been at one of Bliss’s boarding schools—either at Bilton Grange or at Rugby, both affiliated with the Church of England—but it was not to last long as the regularity of religious services became nothing more than habit and any element of ‘the spiritual’ soon faded away.
- <sup>4</sup> See note 2 above.

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