

## **Orientalism and Imperialism in Sir Granville Bantock's *Omar Khayyám***

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of the present study is to introduce the work of an unjustly neglected British composer, Sir Granville Bantock and to present the historical and cultural context in which his work "Omar Khayyám" was composed, emphasizing those aspects of the composition that are related to orientalism and imperialism. Nineteenth century British music sought to crystalize a national musical idiom, that could clearly be distinguished and associated with British imperial identity. In this endeavour, composers approached various sources of inspiration, in order to obtain the desired musical language. Sir Granville Bantock was preoccupied with the evolution of British music, at the same time fervently encouraging contemporary composers and promoting their works. His works reflect his admiration for such composers as Brahms, Wagner, Strauss, Mahler, or Sibelius, but nonetheless Bantock's unique style, as well as the distinct sound of British music can be distinguished in his works. This research aims to reveal to what degree is his "Omar Khayyám" a product of imperialism, and in what way can the two terms, "orientalism" and "imperialism" be related to his work.*

**Keywords:** *Imperialism; British; exoticism; orientalism; Bantock;*

### **Introduction – Music and the British Empire**

The cultural identity of the British Empire, its expression and expansion may be traced back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, according to certain scholars. Linda Colley<sup>2</sup> observes the forge and emergence of a certain British identity in the eighteenth century, referring to the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain (through the Act of Union of 1707, which linked England, Wales, and Scotland). Furthermore, Patrick Brantlinger argues that the image and meaning of the Empire had an important influence on British ideology and arts, stating that even though *imperialism may not have had a name before 1870* (the familiar terms prior to this period being *colonies* or *colonial interests*), nonetheless it provided background for the works of early- and mid-Victorian writers<sup>3</sup>. The *Royal Titles Act*, issued in 1876, acknowledged Queen Victoria as Empress of India, Britain's monarch thus becoming an imperial ruler. Along this event, the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the pinnacle of an imperial ideology, which would be reflected in literary, artistic, and musical works of the period. Until the 1940's the concept of the Empire was all around, embraced by all social classes,<sup>4</sup> while popular culture and its products (exhibitions, novels, stage works, music, and later movies) were intended to inspire pride in the British imperial achievements<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Colley, Linda. 1992. *Britons*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Brantlinger, Patrick. 1988. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 19-24.

<sup>4</sup> MacDonald Fraser, George. 1988. *The Hollywood History of the World*. London: Michael Joseph, pp. 137.

<sup>5</sup> Richards, Jeffrey. 2001. *Imperialism and Music. Britain 1876–1953*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 2.

Jeffrey Richards observes that the emergence of these imperialist artworks coincided with the English Musical Renaissance, which had an important impact on the development and dissemination of British music<sup>6</sup>. The nineteenth century is chiefly associated with musical nationalism and the emergence of national identity in music. Through the incorporation of folk idioms, Eastern or North European countries developed musical styles that reflected their national identity. However, the English musical scene was dominated by Italian opera, French operetta, and German symphonism. British identity was reflected in the products of colonialism and imperialism, but now the British sought to crystalize and promote a distinguishable musical idiom, that could be clearly recognized and associated with the British Empire through its particular structure. Music meant to express British imperial identity had to embrace Great Britain, as well as India and the other colonies.

**Sir Granville Ransome Bantock** (1868–1946) dominated the Victorian British musical scene and was regarded as one of the leading composers in modern British music. Despite his reverence for German music, which is clearly discernible in his treatment of the orchestra, his music has a personal identity. He composed over 800 works, in various genres, which reflects the ardent attempts of his generation of creating a national musical idiom inspired by various sources: the English sacred music and the genre of oratorio, the English folk music, or the Celtic tunes and myths. To these may be added Granville Bantock's fascination with the Orient, which responds to the above-mentioned requirement, namely that British imperial identity should embrace the colonies as well. Even though certain sources do not consider Bantock's expression of the Empire spirit as effective as that of Elgar or Stanford, nonetheless it is acknowledged that he combines the old with the new, revitalizing English music without robbing it of its individuality<sup>7</sup>.

## 1. Towards a New Identity in Music

Nineteenth century musical nationalism was inspired by folk music, thus it was natural that English folk music was considered an important source of the new national music that the British were seeking. An editorial in *The Musical Times* (1 January 1887), argued on the case of nationalism in music and offered arguments in favour of the English folk-music that should serve as inspiration: English folk tunes are “*simply constructed, of a manly and straightforward character, emphasized by definite, well-marked rhythm and regularity of phrase; and they combine strength and tenderness to a degree approached by no other national airs, save the kindred Germans, in which, however, sentiment predominates over strength ... We have, therefore, a national style of melody, which has grown out of our temperament and circumstances, and is the natural musical expression of our feelings ... But, as far as we are aware, no efforts are being made to infuse the English melodic spirit into works of higher culture*”<sup>8</sup>. These ideas were strongly embraced by those composers who supported the English Musical Renaissance, striving to free themselves from foreign influences in their compositions.

In 1883 the Royal College of Music was founded, becoming a cradle for this musical and theoretical movement. Such composers as Hubert Parry, Charles Villiers Stanford, or Alexander Mackenzie embraced these theories and were also concerned with the collection and preservation

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. viii.

<sup>7</sup> Antcliffe, Herbert. 1918, Jul. “A Brief Survey of the Works of Granville Bantock”. In *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 333-346.

<sup>8</sup> *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 28, No. 527 (Jan. 1, 1887), pp. 15-17.

of English folk songs. However, various other directions that composers have chosen to thread in their attempts of creating a national identity in music may be observed.

Richards argues that Anglican Church music established an indisputable musical Protestantism as one key aspect of English identity<sup>9</sup>. National identity in music was also expressed through church music, with the English oratorio as one of the most successful genres.

The image of an idealized English rural life, with its pastoral tradition, as well as the nostalgia of Elizabethan England provided composers with sources of inspiration in their endeavours of forging this new identity, as suggested by the works of Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, George Butterworth, or Edward German.

Celtic mythology and the mysticism and mystery of Wales, Ireland, and Cornwall represented other fountains of inspiration, echoing the rejection of modern industrial society and the desire to escape to a different (imaginary) world, as reflected in the works of Sir Arnold Bax, Rutland Boughton, Sir Granville Bantock, Josef Holbrooke, and George Lloyd.

The Empire and the idea of musical imperialism were chiefly associated with the figures of composers Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900) and Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934). Despite the fact that he did not provide an imperial musical idiom, Sir Arthur Sullivan had a major contribution in the evolution and crystallization of a national identity in music, through his choral works, orchestral pieces, or comic operas. On the other hand, Sir Edward Elgar perceived the Empire as the fusion of patriotism, mystical Christianity, and his love of chivalry,<sup>10</sup> harmoniously combined and expressed in his works: oratorios, symphonies, concert overtures, and marches. Elgar's imperialism was inspired by the musical idiom created by Sir Hubert Parry, developed and assimilated by Elgar: Parry combined the symphonism of Brahms with the diatonicism of English church music, creating a distinctively British style, now associated with the music of Elgar<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Sir Granville Bantock

Bantock's music captures the spirit of its epoch perfectly: the musical discourse suggests the influence of such composers as Brahms, Wagner, Mahler, Strauss, Sibelius, or even Debussy, but at the same time it captures the essence and sound of British imperialism, combining the sensuality and exoticism of orientalism with the belief in progress. His musical language represents British Late-Romanticism, with its severity that recalls Brahms and its grandeur reminiscent of the Wagnerian sonorities, but despite the daring experiments in orchestration, Bantock refrained from employing radical harmonic innovations. The echo of Elgar's musical discourse, as well as the influence of Gustav Mahler may be observed in Granville Bantock's works for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra – a continuation to the tradition of the British oratorio.

At the same time, Bantock encouraged the performance of works composed by his contemporaries – as token of appreciation for this support, Jean Sibelius would dedicate his Third Symphony to Granville Bantock, while Edward Elgar dedicated the second of his *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, No. 2 in A minor (1901) “*To my friend Granville Bantock*”.

His vocal works (song cycles, choral works, works for solo voices) were influenced by the exoticism of the Orient, but also by the specific sound of English folk-tunes (as was the case

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<sup>9</sup> Richards, Jeffrey. 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Dibble, Jeremy. 1992. *C. Hubert H. Parry: His Life and Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 253–8, 276–8.

with his precursors, when striving to devise a national musical idiom). Bantock had a shy attempt to the genre of opera, his works mirroring the themes preferred by imperialist British composers: orientalism (in *The Pearl of Iran*, 1894), Irish and Celtic themes (in *Caedmar, a Romantic Opera*, 1892 and *The Seal Woman, a Celtic Folk Opera*, 1924 – in the latter the composer employed melodies from a collection of Hebridean folk songs), Gothicism (in *Eugene Aram*, 1892).

Granville Bantock's interest in the Orient was originally stimulated by his training for the Indian Civil Service, which he couldn't continue because of his poor health, turning to chemical engineering instead, and finally to music. In her biography on Granville Bantock, his daughter, Myrrha Bantock recalls the various Eastern ornaments in their home and the oriental extravagance of the composer<sup>12</sup>. Bantock's interest extended beyond Persia to Greece, China, Egypt, Japan, and India, with each of these Eastern regions represented in his music. Throughout his life, songs based on translations of Chinese and Japanese poets appeared, as well as his wife's original poems inspired by all these countries. His contact with other cultures led to a major interest in exotic themes, which he used as pretext for expressing his musical creativity. However, orientalism and exoticism are invested with a different meaning in Bantock's works: oriental themes are used in order to suggest an idealised, exotic, far-away setting, but the composer is not concerned with authenticity of sound or structure. He employs stereotype rhythmic, melodic, or timbral elements, that the West associates with the Orient, such as chromatic scales, rhythmic patterns, or the sound of various instruments (percussion or wind instruments), that are used by the composer in a stylised manner, and not out of the desire to recreate an authentic sound.

### 3. Orientalism and imperialism in *Omar Khayyám*

The meaning of both terms, *orientalism* and *imperialism* may be understood from various perspectives, as scholars have pointed out. The term *orientalism* is often associated with Edward Said's definition of a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, a manner of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient<sup>13</sup>. However, Wilcox argues that the word may simply indicate the domain of interest of those who study the Orient, with no evidence regarding the presence of a discursive pressure that aims to control or influence the representations of the Orient, or to emphasize Western superiority regarding the East<sup>14</sup>. Certainly, there are numerous Western artworks that could be understood as means of expressing the differences between the East and West, with an emphasis on representing the West (and the characters that embody the West) as superior. Nonetheless, nineteenth century Western and British art that deals with aspects related to exoticism and orientalism, may also be regarded as a form of escapism to an idealized elsewhere, or means of criticizing or expressing concerns regarding the cultural, political, spiritual, or sexual aspects of the Romantic, Victorian, or Edwardian life.

*Imperialism*, as employed in the present study, must be understood in the historical context of the second half of the nineteenth century and until the beginning of the First World War. During this period, *imperialism* was a desired and accepted ideology, referring to the rule or domination of one people by another, which was expressed as being in the interest of the

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<sup>12</sup> Bantock, Myrrha. 1972. *Granville Bantock: A Personal Portrait*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., pp. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Said, Edward. 2003. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Wilcox, Andrew. 2018. *Orientalism and Imperialism. From Nineteenth-century Missionary Imaginings to the Contemporary Middle East*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 9-11.

dominated people due to its inferior status.<sup>15</sup> Porter argues that in this context, most contemporaries “*had no difficulty in agreeing that imperial pre-eminence reflected Britain’s racial and cultural superiority. Many felt that pre-eminence and singular privilege in turn carried with them obligations to weaker and less favoured societies, not least the duty to civilize and convert to Christianity*”<sup>16</sup>. Orientalism is not necessarily related to the notion of imperialism, however certain representations may support imperial projects and the idea of power.

The desire to create a distinguishable British musical idiom may thus also be understood in the light of such concepts as *Empire* and *imperialism*: the desired national music had to reflect the grandeur and splendour of the Empire, as suggested by the works of such composers as Sir Edward Elgar or Sir Granville Bantock.

Granville Bantock’s monumental rendition of Omar Khayyám’s *Ruba’iyat* focuses on the mystical aspect of the Persian quatrains, evoking through sound and poem the image of a sensual oriental landscape – an idealized image of the East, as was probably imagined by most Western spectators of the epoch – while the orchestration suggests the grandiose sound of the British orchestral music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bantock set to music 101 quatrains of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Omar Khayyám, in the translation of the Pre-Raphaelite poet Edward Fitzgerald. The work, for 3 solo voices, chorus, and orchestra, often referred to as *oratorio*, was composed between 1906-1909 and is divided into three parts: the first part was performed at Birmingham in 1906, the second part at Cardiff in 1907, and the third part at Birmingham in 1909. The performance of the complete work took place in 1910, at Queen’s Hall in London, and in 1912 in Vienna.

The three named soloists are the Beloved (contralto), the Poet (tenor), and the Philosopher (baritone), the work requiring their presence onstage throughout the entire work. All the three parts are assigned extensive singing parts. The supporting choral parts evoke the complexity and beauty of British choral works, but at the same time are remarkable in their difficulty.

Often regarded as an exotic display of sensual images related to drinking, love, and oriental settings, along with reminders on the brevity of life, the mystical message of the *Ruba’iyat* captivated Granville Bantock, who desired to capture the philosophy that lay at the core of the quatrains, alongside the exotic oriental atmosphere. The three soloists may have been chosen according to this idea: the Beloved is represented by the contralto voice (often used in orientalist or exotic works), whose dark and round colour is often associated with sensuality, the feminine, the senses, while the baritone timbre of the Philosopher suggests the voice of reason. At the same time, the Philosopher accomplishes the role of narrator, offering explanations regarding various aspects of the text. The two poles are united by the tenor, the Poet who sees beyond the meaning of the words, the one who is intoxicated with Divine Love.

Considered orientalist stereotypes when representing the East, the use of percussion instruments, wind instruments, or certain melodic and rhythmic patterns are also used by Bantock in his work, conveying *Omar Khayyám* a certain exotic sound: throughout the instrumental introduction of Part I, for example, the composer integrates within his complex melodic and harmonic texture, ascending and descending chromatic scales, as well as chromatic

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> Porter, Andrew. 2003. *Introduction in The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914*, ed. Andrew Porter. Michigan/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 1–2.

motifs, that invest the musical discourse with sensuality, but also suggest the “drunken”, mystical state evoked by the poems (Fig. 1).

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano reduction. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system includes the instruction 'sempre dim.' and a dynamic marking 'pp'. A circled number '7' is placed below the first system. The notation is highly chromatic and complex, with many accidentals and slurs.

Fig. 1. Sir Granville Bantock: *Omar Khayyám – Part I*

Excerpt from the piano reduction.

Instrumental introduction

Chromatic motifs employed by the composer; the complexity of the musical texture.

The work calls for a large orchestra, with the string sections antiphonally placed and emphasis on the wind and brass instruments. In certain parts of the work, the chorus is divided as well. In an article published in *The Musical Times* after the composer’s death, Anderson refers to Bantock as *the last of our choral heroes*<sup>17</sup>, alluding to his spectacular treatment of the chorus in his works. He also remarks on the influence of Liszt, Wagner, and Strauss, as well as the Impressionist tint of Bantock’s works<sup>18</sup>.

The instrumental introduction is followed by a choral rendition of the first two quatrains: “*Wake! For the Sun*” and “*Before the phantom*”. Here as well, the composer employs wind instruments, the harp, and percussion instruments that emphasize the oriental setting of the work. In “*Wake! For the Sun*” the composer employs musical constructions that confer modal

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, W. R. 1946. Nov. “Granville Bantock (1868-1946)”. In *The Musical Times*, Vol. 87, No. 1245, pp. 329-331.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

allusions, as well as chromatic passages, which further emphasise the idea of orientalism and the idealized exotic space (Fig. 2).

Non troppo.

For the Sun, who scatter'd in to  
Denn es tagt! Die Son.ne schon durch.

For the Sun, who scatter'd in to  
Denn es tagt! Die Son.ne schon durch.

For the Sun, who scatter'd in to  
Denn es tagt! Die Son.ne schon durch.

For the Sun, who scatter'd in to  
Denn es tagt! Die Son.ne schon durch.

Non troppo.

flight The Stars be fore him from the Field of  
bricht Der Ster - ne Rei - gen und sie zü - gert

flight The Stars be fore him from the Field of  
bricht Der Ster - ne Rei - gen und sie zü - gert

flight The Stars be fore him from the Field of  
bricht Der Ster - ne Rei - gen und sie zü - gert

flight The Stars be fore him from the Field of  
bricht Der Ster - ne Rei - gen und sie zü - gert

12

Fig. 2. Sir Granville Bantock: *Omar Khayyám – Part I*  
“Wake! For the Sun” (Chorus). Excerpt from the piano reduction.

Among the numerous memorable passages of the work, the splendid love duet between the Beloved and the Poet, in Part I, must be mentioned: quatrain no. 47 “When You and I behind the Veil are past”. The simplicity of the first section of this duet (Fig. 3) recalls the English tunes, cherished by Bantock and other British composers of the period. Gradually, the discourse becomes more complex, the union between voices and orchestra recalling the wagnerian love duets, while the severity of the structure in certain points suggests Bantock’s admiration for German symphonism and the music of Brahms. However, all these influences are merged into a

symphonic discourse that has a distinctly British sound, recalling the atmosphere and grandeur of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* (1899) – it is interesting to remark that the *Sea Pictures*, in their orchestral version, were also intended for the contralto voice.

The Beloved.  
Der Geliebte. *mezza voce dolce*

When You and I be.hind the Veil are past,—  
Wenn sich vor uns der Vor.hang hat ge.senkt,—

The Poet.  
Der Dichter. *mezza voce dolce*

When You and I be.hind the Veil are past,—  
Wenn sich vor uns der Vor.hang hat ge.senkt,—

*pp*

2 Clar.

B.  
— Oh, — but the long, long while the World — shall last, — Which of our  
— fort — kreist die Welt, in al - ter Bahn — ge - lenkt, — Sie kummert

P.  
— Oh, — but the long, long while the World — shall last, — Which of our  
— fort — kreist die Welt, in al - ter Bahn — ge - lenkt, — Sie kummert

*poco rit.* *a tempo*

*p*

Fig. 3. Sir Granville Bantock: *Omar Khayyám – Part I*  
“When You and I behind the Veil are past”. Excerpt from the piano reduction.

The composer offers an interesting musical depiction of the desert and a caravan. The evocation of the desert is accompanied by the indication *Tranquillo*, suggesting the metaphoric signification of the desert. Like Félicien David's desert in the *ode-symphonie Le Désert* (1844), Bantock's desert also suggests the idea of endlessness and timelessness, related to the essence of the soul, in the context of Khayyám's poem. A sustained note that develops into a sustained chord suggested David's desert, while Bantock's desert is also evoked through a sustained high A (in the strings), which seems to *assist* (since its placement in the high register does not seem to suggest the idea of *support*) the descending motif (consisting of the sustained A note, alongside the downward fourth leap to E, D, and a descending third to B), which is repeated five times, each time one octave lower, followed by another motif, again born out of the note A (Fig. 4).



This second motif (bar 6 of Fig. 4), encompassing an upward and downward third, conveys the image of gentle rocking, as of sand gently blown by the wind – possibly suggesting the eternity of the soul, as referred to in the duet between the Beloved and the Poet.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano reduction. The top system is marked 'Tranquillo. (The Desert.) (Die Wüste.)' and includes a boxed page number '168'. It features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a supporting line. The tempo is indicated as 'sempre pp' and 'pp'. The bottom system continues the piece with similar notation, including a 'pp' dynamic marking.

Fig. 4. Sir Granville Bantock: *Omar Khayyám – Part I*  
 “The Desert”. Excerpt from the piano reduction.

The caravan is represented with the indication *Tempo di Marcia*. The March-like tempo and the rhythmic and melodic construction of the motif played by the low strings (here: in the left hand of the piano reduction in Fig. 5) evoke the slow military marches composed in the British Empire after 1880 – the march being considered by Richards the *single musical form synonymous with the Empire*<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Richards, Jeffrey. 2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 411.

Fig. 5. Sir Granville Bantock: *Omar Khayyám – Part I* “The Caravan”. Excerpt from the piano reduction.

The choral part that follows is based on a Turkish melody (Fig. 6), which explains the marked oriental savor. The melody is first hummed with closed lips (as indicated by the composer), by the tenor and bass (Fig. 6), while in the following section the soprano and alto join in, but this time the melody is sang a fifth lower and with open lips.

Fig. 5. Sir Granville Bantock: *Omar Khayyám – Part I* “The Caravan”. Excerpt of the tenor and bass parts from the piano reduction.

The Eastern colour of the work *Omar Khayyám* was remarked on the first performance of Part I, as Myrrha Bantock recalls<sup>20</sup>, but at the same time, the work is a striking example of Bantock's characteristic style, with its rich and warm Romantic harmonic idiom and the superb, expansive orchestration. The manner in which the composer employs the cello and double bass conveys the discourse emotional depth and fullness of sound, to which the haunting, nostalgic phrases of the upper-strings and woodwinds are added. The brass instruments, much favoured by the composer, enhance the dramatic value of the work through the strident dissonant chords. *Omar Khayyám* is considered Bantock's greatest musical and orchestral achievement, and in the context of the present research the authors venture to say that it also embodies the particular sound and characteristics of the British musical idiom much sought after his predecessors and contemporaries.

#### 4. Conclusions

The present study introduced Granville Bantock's work in relation to the concepts of *imperialism* and *orientalism*, aiming to offer a clear picture of the context in which the composer set to music Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Ruba'iyat*. Thus, the music analysis is closely related to the cultural background, the transformations underwent by the British music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its cultural impact.

The purely British outlook was not sufficient for Bantock, whose fascination with the Orient is mirrored in his songs of Persia, Arabia, Egypt, or China, as is his devotion to Celtic tradition or Hebridean folk-songs. All these sources of inspiration were moulded into compositions that bear the mark of the composer: Bantock assimilated these influences and transformed them into original products, that testify that his exoticism is neither counterfeit, nor artificial. Despite the vividness of his poetically suggestive works, his music is not shallow. Although in *Omar Khayyám* he evokes the mystical musing of the Persian poet, his expression is rather romantic.

The theme, as well as the structure of the work evoke the imperialist and orientalist endeavours of the era, but the musical picture conveyed is one of an idealized, mystical space, and not the image of an Orient that needs to be dominated. Bantock developed the existing techniques of music composition and adapted these in such a manner that could emphasize the mystical message of the Persian quatrains, at the same time obtaining a distinct musical idiom. Vocal and instrumental sound and colour were employed with precision, the majestic structures as well as sonorities reflecting the emotional depth of his subject, and not just the idea of imperialist grandeur.

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<sup>20</sup> Bantock, Myrrha. 1972. *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

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