

Molly on the Shore: **A Conductor's Guide to a Minor Miracle**

David Goza
Director of Orchestral Activities, the University of Arkansas

Percy Aldridge Grainger's 1920 wind band setting of *Molly on the Shore* hardly qualifies for the "masterpiece" designation best held in reserve for such compositions as that composer's *Lincolnshire Posy* and Hindemith's *Symphony in B flat*: it has about as much weight and substance as a single movement of the former (a little longer, to be sure, but not nearly as psychologically freighted), and was really never intended to be more than a diversion. Its modest aims notwithstanding, *Molly on the Shore* affords high entertainment value both for listeners and performers and is not entirely lacking in the kind of substance that rewards analytical scrutiny. It began life as a setting for string quartet (1907) and subsequently appeared in versions for string orchestra, full orchestra, violin and piano, and piano solo before being set for winds. All of the earlier settings are in G major; the band version is ratcheted up a half step to make things easier for the transposing instruments.

The work was originally published by Schott & Co., Ltd.; in the U.S. it has been re-issued by Carl Fischer, Inc.

The composition is based on two reel tunes from Cork, which were published in 1905 in Charles Villiers Stanford's *Complete Petrie Collection of Ancient Irish Music* (Stanford's edition is actually an update of a much older collection). Those tunes, Nos. 901 and 902, are "Temple Hill" and "Molly on the Shore," respectively. These untexted fiddle tunes share some structural similarities. Both consist of eight-measure sections (three for "Molly on the Shore," two for "Temple Hill"), and in both cases the sections themselves exhibit an internal repeat (4 + 4). In many of those cases the internal repeat is exact; in the remaining cases it is nearly so. This is a standard feature of reel tunes.

The Grainger setting, which begins and ends with "Molly on the Shore," is in rondo form. Here is a synopsis of its content, with both fiddle tunes' sections accounted for:

1–2	Introduction (perhaps "Incipit" would be a better term)
3–42	Molly on the Shore, A \flat major, <i>abcab</i> , 40 measures
43–58	Temple Hill, B \flat Dorian, <i>ab</i> , 16 measures
59–98	Molly on the Shore, A \flat major, <i>abcac</i> , 40 measures
99–130	Temple Hill, A \flat Dorian, 2 statements, <i>abab</i> , 32 measures
131–62	Molly on the Shore, A \flat major, <i>abac</i> , 32 measures
163–78	Temple Hill, F Dorian, <i>ab</i> , 16 measures
179–95	Molly on the Shore, A \flat major, <i>ab</i> , 17 measures

From the synopsis above, it is clear that the greatest harmonic interest lies in the "Temple Hill" settings, with rather more formal "shuffling" in the "Molly" tune's appearances.

The work begins quietly, and – except for a decorated “stinger,” ends even more quietly. The dynamic peak of the composition occurs during the third statement of “Molly,” measures 139–46; the loudest printed dynamic, however, is at the final gesture (the ending of Holst’s *Second Suite* comes to mind).

Two bars of *ostinato*-like accompaniment set the stage for the first appearance of the “Molly” tune; these bear close examination. This two-voice *ostinato* immediately gives an impression of *very* fast harmonic rhythm, with the progression I–V–ii⁶–V to be understood as filling each measure. At Grainger’s metronome marking (to be discussed below!), this is a harmonic rhythm that can only be described as “dizzying.” However, as we shall see at 27 ff., there is another way of understanding the pitch content of these measures – a way that involves a harmonic rhythm only half as fast as what the opening measures imply.

The accompaniment pattern is also “athletic” in character, owing to wide displacement of the third quarter note in both voices. (To see how wide the displacement actually is, re-assign the pitch classes of that quarter note, with the bass voice taking the B_♭ and the upper voice the D_♭, then place those pitch classes as close as possible to the surrounding pitches. In that case, the bass voice will traverse the span of a perfect fifth, with the upper voice negotiating only a minor third!) This accompaniment pattern is sounded unchanged 16 times, finally yielding in measure 17 to a string of parallel diatonic triads initiating an authentic cadence.

The first setting of “Molly on the Shore” begins with the upbeat to measure 3 in the 1st and alto clarinets. As measure 3 in the score makes clear, the bass line actually maps onto the fiddle tune itself; this probably accounts for Grainger’s decision to construct the accompaniment as he did. The *a* section of the tune, measures 3–10, is “closed” twice on the tonic pitch, in two identical four-measure phrases as discussed above. The span of *a* is a minor seventh, and this portion of the tune is in plagal position, lying between the fifth scale degree and the fourth, a seventh above. The *b* section (mm. 11–18), is in authentic position, with its range somewhat extended (from the sixth degree to the tonic, a tenth higher). Although this portion of the tune also exhibits an internal repeat, it features some variation in its last two measures. So while the first of its phrases ends like both phrases of *a* (compare m. 14 to m. 10), the second ends with a flight of fancy (mm. 17 f.) It is this “flight of fancy” that will later provide the material for the most deft compositional stroke of the entire work.

The *c* portion (mm. 19 ff.), again in plagal position, finds the tune moved to bass voices; the concluding measures of both phrases (mm. 22 & 26) are identical to those of *a*. Grainger has elaborated the internal repeat with some upper neighbors in triplet rhythm (mm. 22 f.); the folk tune itself also exhibits a small embellishment in measure 25 (plus its upbeat) as compared to 21. It is in *c* that we find the first instances of chromatic harmony: a secondary dominant in measure 22, an incomplete vii^{o7}/vi in 24, and additional applied dominants in 25 & 26. In the interest of as much accuracy as one might enjoy when working from a reduced score, I recommend supplying an eighth rest in the top staff at the end of measure 26, below the sixteenth notes.

With the upbeat into measure 27, we have apparently embarked on a repeat of the material so far set forth. The tune’s *a* material is now found in a fuller complement of clarinets and alto saxophones, and the accompaniment is enriched. At this point we come to understand that the opening harmonic pattern could after all have been heard as two chords per measure: I–V⁷. At the internal repeat the tune moves to a higher octave and is enhanced by a middle voice supplying

(mostly) parallel sixths, with a mixture of articulations and a rhythmically elaborated foundation. This statement of *a* is also the first *crescendo* statement of the piece, culminating in *forte*.

The second statement of *b* (35 ff.) is further elaborated, with real rhythmic interest in the accompaniment. At the internal repeat (mm. 39 ff.) the melody is again enriched by parallel sixths. The expected recurrence of *c* never materializes.

Beginning at 43, we encounter the first instance of “Temple Hill” in a single statement of 16 measures (in rondo form, this is the first episode). We are also confronted with an apparent mystery. Fiddle tunes, almost by definition, always end on the tonic pitch – usually, many times. That being the case, it is obvious that in this appearance, the tonic pitch of “Temple Hill” is B \flat and its flavor is Dorian (the occasional G \sharp s make it so). Nevertheless, the harmonic setting that Grainger has supplied is apparently A \flat major with half cadences concluding the tune’s four phrases. This is very much like the “Horkstow Grange” setting in *Lincolnshire Posy*: There, the tune is in A \flat Mixolydian but the harmonization is D \flat major with half cadences. This sort of harmonic sleight-of-hand seems to occur in Grainger’s works whenever the tune that is being so set is in fact *transitional* or *episodic* in the larger scheme of things. That is most certainly the case with “Horkstow Grange,” which links “Lisbon” with “Rufford Park Poachers,” and it is also the case here, where appearances of “Temple Hill” constitute the episodes in a rondo-form composition.

Lest there be any doubt about which of the lines in the reduced score actually represents “Temple Hill,” it’s the uppermost line of the middle staff, the one marked “Reeds” and “*upper octave also*”. Its *a* section is in somewhat extended plagal position (low 5 to high 7, a minor 10th all told). The instruments in the top staff are supplying a countermelody, whose secondary voices are placed wherever the editor could find space for them (I do hate such reduced scores as this – one never knows what’s *really* going on). In the interest of accuracy, the conductor will want to supply the missing slur in measure 46, so that it looks like measure 50.

The *b* portion, which begins at 51, sees the fiddle tune moved to upper voices in a *fortissimo* setting; parallel sixths and mixed prolations (triplets against duplets) heighten the excitement and the tensions. This section is in authentic position, from tonic to supertonic a ninth above. “Temple Hill” exhibits another important structural similarity to “Molly on the Shore” in that the *b* sections of both tunes exhibit a “flight of fancy” in the second of two internal phrases (in the present case, that’s in mm. 57 f.)

Grainger’s “A \flat major setting with half cadences” sets up the return of “Molly” at the upbeat to 59. The melody is now carried by 1st cornet and alto saxophone, in a *legato* treatment, and the accompaniment is of the “oom-pah” type, but with the elements reversed from the usual presentation (do by all means supply the missing staccato dot on the first chord). At the internal repeat (from the upbeat to 63) the *staccato* standard returns, with the accompaniment decorated with grace notes. (The passage is not as chromatic as it looks in the score; the grace notes are simply a half step below their arrival notes, hence all the printed accidentals).

Here, the composer’s treatment of *b* (67 ff.) is among the most noteworthy features of the composition. Grainger has contrived a sort of canon at the half-bar interval (there are some melodic adjustments imposed to make things “work out”). The accompaniment also represents an advance over earlier instances, with a more athletic and generally interesting bass line and the ear-catching sonority of a French augmented sixth chord in measure 72 (I recommend stressing the latter).

The tune's *c* portion is imaginatively re-written here: what was before the most pedestrian aspect of "Molly on the Shore" (cf. 19 ff.) has been transformed into the most lyrical, by the simple device of eliminating re-articulations of a single pitch and the introduction of nuanced markings. Two of the harmonizing sonorities call for special notice. The first occurs in the first half of measure 76: the chord is D \flat minor, functioning as iv; the bass-line tune adds a major seventh, and the result is that most rare and expressive of all seventh chords, the minor-major seventh – here, presented in third inversion. This chord recurs in measure 80. The other notable sonority is an augmented sixth chord in 78. This could be described as being of the "Italian" type, with an additional "sharp fifth" (the C of the tune). The result certainly is striking, and forecasts even more imaginative augmented sixth usage to be seen in the work's closing measures.

One other feature of this presentation of *c* commends itself to our attention: the ending, in measures 80–82, is adjusted, with the *b* ending grafted onto *c*. This "blurring of distinctions" will likewise play an increasingly large role as the composition progresses.

As in the first presentation of "Molly," we now return to the *a* section. The "parallel sixths" aspect of measures 31 ff. is now revisited, with additional adjustments (the tune itself is "lined out" in m. 85; the accompanying voices shift positions to produce parallel thirds in the following measure). The chordal accompaniment now moves to offbeats, occasionally enhanced with rhythmic "kickers," and the best compositional stroke of all appears as a countermelody in mid- to high-range voices (moving an octave higher in the second four-bar phrase). This new countermelody is of course an augmentation of what I earlier described as a "flight of fancy" (mm. 17 f.). It is the ending of this countermelody (mm. 86 & 90) that makes some of the "Molly" tune's adjustments necessary. The chromatic harmony in measures 87 f. is of the "darker" variety, momentarily pointing the music toward the subdominant.

At the return of *c* in 91, the countermelody begun at 83 attains monumental proportions, its contour nothing less than *ecstatic* at measure 95. The tune itself, however, is constrained this time: its two closing bars (94 & 98) are identical. The accompaniment is now in F minor, and the ostinato in bells and vibraphone suggests that something new is afoot. Here, it simply consists of pitches that outline other accompanying voices, which may be identified by picking through the third and fourth staves. Those voices contrive to deliver some memorable sonorities. In measure 94, for instance, we have an irregular German augmented sixth chord on the first beat, while the last chord in that bar is a V 7 /V which, rather than resolving at the following downbeat, simply "yields" to iv.

In retrospect, it seems as though we have embarked on what might legitimately be thought of as a sort of development section: we are now set up for the first of two harmonic excursions that will lie largely "off center" for a considerable span of time. Rather than leading inexorably to what might be expected in a more standard common-practice context, the F minor of the present section simply evaporates in measure 98, giving place to a complex sonority consisting of the first pentachord of the A \flat minor scale (this structure continues throughout the next section, slightly re-voiced via an exchange of voices from 98 to 99, with D \natural in two octaves serving as the "hinge"). Simultaneously, the vibraphone ostinato is reduced to two pitch classes in two octaves, one of those pitch classes providing yet another member of the A \flat minor scale.

This, of course, is the setup for the second appearance of "Temple Hill," now in A \flat Dorian (here, the accompaniment more or less matches the tune's "key"), to be presented in two statements.

The first of those statements runs from measure 99 to 114. The ostinato and an enhanced double drone in lower voices yield some of the most static music of the entire composition. (It is also in this presentation of “Temple Hill” that the largest number of mistakes are to be found in the score!)

Apart from the vibraphone ostinato and the A \flat –E \flat drone in the bass voices, a trio of mid- to upper-range voices (flutes, oboe, 2nd clarinets) provides a handsome foil – not exactly a countermelody – to the fiddle tune. The top two of those voices are destined to drop out at different times.

To clarify the score, I would certainly supply a natural sign to the flutes’ G in measure 99, since G \flat will otherwise be the “industry standard” for this stretch of music. (I would also provide flat signs at the beginnings of the second and third systems for the G \flat still in force from earlier.)

With the onset of the *b* portion of “Temple Hill” (m. 107) the upper voice of the double drone begins to wander (this is the enhancement mentioned earlier). The cross-relation between D \natural in that upper drone voice and the D \flat of 2nd clarinets (m. 110) is a very handsome one. (Correct the slur in m. 109, by starting it from second printed quarter note E \flat not the tied note.) The enhanced drone voice finally bursts into song in measure 113, and leads the music into a second statement of “Temple Hill.” Be sure to supply the missing flat sign for the C \flat in measure 111.

The second statement, from measure 115, is harmonized in G \flat major with half cadences at its closing measures (the analogy with the first appearance of this fiddle tune is exact). Except for noting that the vibraphone ostinato continues doggedly for awhile, the setting of *a* hardly requires comment; but there are a number of editorial mistakes to correct in the score. In measure 116, third staff, the G \flat quarter note at the end of the measure (the one that would make sense of the suspended G \flat in the following bar) is missing. You should supply it, sharing a stem with the B \flat below it (as in m. 120). In 117, the G \flat –C \flat quarter note should have a *tenuto* mark under it as in 121. The flat sign in the bass voices in 117 makes no sense; it appears in a single octave in 121, making even less sense. In 119 you will need to supply flat signs in two bass-voice G \flat s (in two different octaves) plus a slur in the middle voice of the third staff, between A \flat and G \flat (as in 115). Make this last correction also at the beginning of 120, and supply a staccato dot for the last accompanying quarter note in that measure, same staff.

The loudest music to this point begins at 123, with the restatement of *b*. Here, a counter-tune based on the *b* portion of “Molly on the Shore” (again in augmentation) is entertainingly sequenced between treble and bass voices (the compound line in 123 f. is G \flat –F–G \flat –D \flat –C \flat –B \flat –C \flat –G \flat). Again, there are missing flat signs to supply in the middle staff, in front of C \flat s in two octaves in both measures 124 & 128. The sudden motion to A \flat major halfway through measure 130 is almost a shock.

The statement of “Molly on the Shore” that begins at 131 is reduced by eight measures from previous instances. The setting begins with a double drone (heretofore an aspect of “Temple Hill” setting), broken off after a mere two measures in favor of a staccato accompaniment reminiscent of music we’ve seen earlier. The confusing dynamic indications in the score at this point (mm. 131–38) are an *excellent* example of why a reduced score is not an adequate conducting tool. I wish any director good luck in figuring it out! You might want to provide a quarter rest on beat 1 of measure 133 right before the first bass clarinet note, just to keep things straight.

With the arrival of *b* (upbeat to 139) we are set to hear the loudest music of the composition. Once again, parallel sixths enhance the fiddle tune and chromatic harmony enriches the proceedings, especially where deceptively resolved (m. 140). Be sure to supply the missing natural sign for the final G in the lower staff in measure 140. The chromatic harmony is further enriched in the *b* section's second phrase (esp. 144), and a falling chromatic scale in triplet eighths lends an admirable "sweep" to the sonic landscape. In the final two measures of *b* (145 f.), two different endings – one of them newly composed – are juxtaposed (compare the top voices of the bottom two staves).

In this statement of "Molly," we now return to *a* rather than proceeding to *c* as before. The air has suddenly cleared: the tune is presented in simple octaves against a chordal accompaniment once again returned largely to offbeat position, plus a familiar-sounding countermelody. That apparent familiarity, of course, has nothing to do with our actually having heard it before (strictly speaking, we haven't). But the source of its materials is clear enough, and Percy Grainger is much to be admired for being able to craft so many different gestures, all of them related but all of them distinctive, from such limited means. The final ending gesture (m. 154) is again adjusted.

Section *c* does now arrive, with its two ending bars (158 & 162) constrained to a single contour as earlier. The falling chromatics introduced in 143 now come back full-force, eventually to appear as complete parallel triads – the thickest texture by far of the entire composition. The countermelody begun in 147 is also continued here, conjunct harmonizing voices steer the harmony towards F minor, low bass instruments offer initially offbeat accompaniments soon supplanted by more gracious conjunctions, and the bells and vibraphone bang away on octave Fs. In the interest of accuracy, it would be a good idea to introduce slurs in measure 156 between D \flat and C in the lowest staff, as in 155, and in 159 f., in the same staff, from F across E \sharp to the following F, as in the figure that immediately follows it. Two sonorities stand out: the F $^{\flat 6}_5$ chord in measure 158 against the B \flat in the tune, and the whole-tone cluster in the second half of 162, against which the B \flat -A \flat of the fiddle tune stands wholly unresolved.

This last sets the stage for the final appearance of "Temple Hill," now cast in F Dorian and harmonized by drones sympathetic to that key. As in 99 ff., certain elements of these drones gradually drop out. The vibraphone plays an ostinato similar to those we've heard earlier; an adjusted sequence downward in measure 168 prepares the way for its own exit a few bars later. The music grows increasingly soloistic, with only a few instruments left at the very end, playing very softly. The mood is arguably solemn here – but Grainger has a wonderful trick up his sleeve. He gives the game away by marking this trick "merrily" (m. 177). The musical joke consists of a premature ending to "Temple Hill," extended artfully into the final statement of "Molly." (Correct your score by adding the missing slur between the first two eighth notes in m. 178.)

This last linkage – the one in 178 – must be played in the smoothest way possible, complete with crossing dynamics exactly as printed, so that the resulting arrival dynamic is exactly what Grainger wrote. The emphasis is now on a pared-down version of a countermelody we heard earlier (rather than the fiddle tune's *a* section), and the chordal accompaniment re-enters by fits and starts. The final statement of *b*, from the upbeat to 187, affords the composer a vehicle for his most imaginative experiments in augmented sixth chords. The first, on beat 2 of 188, is a German sixth with an appoggiatura in the fiddle tune (the tune itself supplies the chord third once it "resolves"). The next happens two measures later, on "and" of 1 (the second quarter note of 190). This might be thought of as an Italian sixth plus a "sharp fifth" (the C) – certainly not a textbook example of anything (try isolating this sonority and having the members of your ensemble play it – it's an ear

catcher). Both of the sonorities described above are repeated in the final four measures, at the corresponding places – although the chord previously described as a German sixth has now lost its fifth – and has therefore allied itself with Italy. The most outrageous gesture of all is to leave that highly irregular chord in the penultimate measure *separated* from its resolution by a rest, however short. And the final cadence – marked *pppp* – is from a V⁹ chord: actually a fairly weak ending. The ultimate “stinger,” of course, corrects that weakness.

Now, a word about the composer’s metronome marking. It’s useful to remember that the first setting of this composition was for string quartet, and subsequent versions also included settings for violin & piano and piano solo. The key was also G major, one of the most accessible keys for the stringed instruments and for the piano. Here, we have the same composition set in keys that are notoriously difficult for some of the instruments of the wind band (the oboe in particular – and Grainger, an oboist, should have known just how unlikely it is that the double reed players can negotiate this music successfully at such a breakneck tempo!). As a more general consideration, we also have to reckon with the fact that wind instruments, on the whole, “speak” more slowly and less certainly than the strings or the piano, and that their scales are less even (different registers, for instance, lend themselves with more ease or more difficulty to fast articulations). I am aware that many directors attempt to take Grainger’s metronome marking at face value. In principle, I applaud this decision: I believe that composers should always be taken at their word, at least until we encounter obstacles we simply cannot get beyond. I *also* have never heard this piece played convincingly by a wind band at Grainger’s tempo: sooner or later, some unavoidable sloppiness occurs that mars the effect irreparably.

I leave it to the reader to decide which way to err in this case. To be sure, Grainger has given us a range: he indicates the half note as from 112 to 126 beats per minute. There’s a noticeable difference between the two extremes of this range, and I certainly would favor the lower figure. Whether this work can actually be played accurately even at 112 beats per minute, however, I am very eager to find out. If I ever hear it done so, it will be the first time in my experience.

Copyright 2006 by David Goza, Director of Orchestral Activities, the University of Arkansas.
All rights reserved.