

A STUDY OF BRITTEN'S UNACCOMPANIED CHORAL CYCLES:
A BOY WAS BORN (1933), A.M.D.G. (1939), THE FIVE FLOWER SONGS (1951),
SACRED AND PROFANE (1975)

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Music
with a concentration in Choral Music
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

One of the most prolific composers of vocal music in the twentieth century, Benjamin Britten, emancipated British choral music from the grip of nineteenth century traditions. This study focuses on the four unaccompanied choral cycles, *A Boy Was Born*, *A.M.D.G.*, *The Five Flower Songs* and *Sacred and Profane*, and examines Britten's contribution to the partsong genre. *A Boy Was Born*, written when Britten was only nineteen, was a blueprint for other choral works that he would write throughout his lifetime and arguably the most accomplished unaccompanied choral work that he ever composed. Through a thorough analysis of each of the cycles I identify the consistencies of Britten's compositional approach, his unique treatment of the text and consider how these pieces connect to each other within their own collections.

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Introduction

The hope that British music would once again return to the brilliance it experienced in the eighteenth-century with composers such as Purcell and Handel, was a long-held ambition for those initiating a revival in the mid nineteenth-century. Amongst the leading figures in this movement to bring about a new British musical renaissance were the composers Charles Villiers Stanford, Charles Hubert Hastings Parry, and the eminent writer on music, George Grove. These men who were firmly rooted in the Germanic romantic tradition of Mendelssohn and Brahms, had an enormous influence on British music in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of their most notable achievements was to found the Royal College of Music in 1882 and in doing so, mold the next generation of British composers.¹

This next wave of British composers, who have been classified as the “English Pastoralists” (although they never classified *themselves* as this), included, Frederick Delius, Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, Herbert Howells, Arnold Bax, George Butterworth, Ivor Gurney, Gerald Finzi and Peter Warlock (Philip Heseltine). Most of them had been taught either by Stanford or Parry and were grounded in an essentially Germanic musical tradition. The “English Pastoralists” believed in the importance of reviving British musical traditions of the past to help strengthen and give identity to the

¹ The other British musical training institution The Royal Academy of Music was deemed not to be supplying suitable training for professional musicians. “In 1870 it was estimated that fewer than ten per cent of instrumentalists in London orchestras had studied at the academy.” The Royal College of Music replaced the failing National Training School of Music (NTSM) led by Arthur Sullivan. (Wright, 2005)

renaissance, which had begun with Parry and Stanford. The use of Tudor music,² British folksongs³ and modality were all characteristics of their music. Also important to them was a sense of place and landscape, with their music often being inspired by places in Britain they knew and had a strong affinity with. Most significantly, the “English Pastoralists” rejected European modernism, in particular, the music of Schoenberg, Bartók and Stravinsky. This is not to say that they didn’t admire the compositional qualities inherent in modern music of the European continent, but more, it was incompatible with their aims for British music at the time, which focused on “bridging the divide between composer and public”⁴. However as the “English Pastoralists” reach the 1920s and 30s, one notices how modernist techniques are beginning to influence their music. For example, in Vaughan Williams’ *Symphony No. 4* premiered in 1934 (the same year Britten’s *A Boy Was Born* premiered) one finds an unusually discordant harmonic language. Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling write: “The obsessively harsh *Symphony No. 4*, for many musicians and music-lovers revealed a frightening metamorphosis of ‘Uncle Ralph’ into an ‘Igor Hyde’ who had throttled his flutes and might even ensanguinate his whole orchestra”.⁵ Interestingly, one finds similar discordant harmony in Gustav Holst’s *Choral Symphony* of 1925.

² The revival of Tudor music, particularly choral music, was led by two eminent church musicians, Sir Richard Terry (1865-1938) Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral 1901-24 and Edmund Fellowes (1870-1951), editor of Tudor music and Church of England clergyman.

³ Vaughan Williams along with other musicians at the time (Cecil Sharp and Lucy Broadwood) were convinced that the great oral tradition of folksongs was about to die out and so they set themselves a task of travelling around the British Isles transcribing folksongs from ordinary working class people.

⁴ Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance 1840-1940* Second Edition Manchester University Press (2001) p. 101

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4. p. 96

As this new British musical renaissance progressed into the twentieth-century, it was to face the devastation of WWI, during which, Britain lost a generation of musicians, composers and poets. George Butterworth, a promising young composer was killed at the Somme, whilst Ivor Gurney who Stanford himself described to the young Herbert Howells as the “biggest of them all”⁶, suffered severe mental illness as a result of his experiences of war and consequently spent the last fifteen years of his life in a mental asylum. In many ways, the next group of British composers to emerge after WWI, William Walton, Michael Tippett and the young Benjamin Britten, were to create a stylistic turning point for British music. They began to embrace elements of modernism, loosening the German romantic influence, and increasingly looking towards the European continent for their inspiration.

During the nineteenth-century the composition of unaccompanied partsongs in Britain had grown in popularity. Writing music for a small mixed choral ensemble offered a welcome alternative to English church music with its characteristic ‘all male’ sound and indeed, to large scale choral and orchestral works designed for the many choral societies that were in existence. By far the most prolific composer of partsongs in England, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had been Elgar. He had even gone as far as grouping them into opus numbers, such as his famous sets of partsongs Op. 18, 53 and 71. Elgar’s musically challenging settings (the Op. 53 set of 1907 probably being the most well known) present some very thoughtful selections of

⁶ Charles Villiers Stanford quoted by Herbert Howells in “Ivor Gurney: *The Musician*”, Harry Plunket Green, *Music and Letters*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 1938), p. 14

text and were written mainly as 'test' pieces for the Morecambe choir festival and its organizer Canon Charles Gorton (1854-1912).

With his setting of Mary Coleridge's text *The Bluebird* (1910), Stanford broke new ground in the use of unresolved harmonies and the haunting use of the word "blue" sung by a solo soprano. Parry had conceived the *Songs of Farewell* in 1915, towards the end of his life, a set of six evocative songs for chorus, which, along with the Elgar collections, were amongst the more difficult and challenging repertory at the time. Vaughan Williams, with his *Three Shakespeare Songs* of 1951 written towards the end of his career (nearly twenty years after Britten's *A Boy Was Born*), probably came closest of all the "English Pastoralists", to breaking their own boundaries of acceptable tonality. However, it is with the unaccompanied choral music of Britten that one observes, as Hans Redlich states, "a new musical style", free of the constraints of the nineteenth-century school of British composers.

It is as a *choral* composer, apart from his probably even more popular achievements as a musical dramatist - that Britten seems to stand head and shoulders above his contemporaries (on both sides of the Channel). It is here more than in any other sphere of his work that the break with Edwardian conventions in particular, and with the nineteenth century in general, has become completest. It is here that he sets a shining example by creating a new musical style of idiomatic inevitability within a sonorous medium of very real limitations... Britten's choral style may (in the eyes of posterity) have the same significance as did Schubert's cyclically conceived *Lied* for the dawn of the Romantic movement.⁷

The choral cycles, *A Boy Was Born* (1933), *A.M.D.G.* (1939), *The Five Flower Songs* (1951) and *Sacred and Profane* (1975) were written at the beginning, middle and

⁷ Donald Mitchell, Hans Keller. (eds.) *Benjamin Britten, A Commentary on his works from a group of specialists, The Choral Music*, Hans F. Redlich, (1953) p. 85-86

end of Britten's career. *A Boy Was Born* is one of Britten's most accomplished choral works despite the fact it was written when he was only twenty years old. While in the United States, Britten composed two further unaccompanied choral works; *A.M.D.G.*, (1939) which was written using poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins but never published in Britten's lifetime, and the famous *Hymn to St Cecilia* (1942), using a poem written by W.H. Auden. The *Five Flower Songs* (1951) come shortly after the success of his opera *Peter Grimes* (1945) and at a time when he was rapidly becoming established as a creditable composer in post-war Britain. Almost 25 years pass until Britten writes, which turns out to be his final unaccompanied choral cycle, *Sacred and Profane* (1975).

When comparing and analyzing these works one is presented with a number of questions. Firstly, can consistencies of compositional style be identified across all of the cycles? Secondly, does Britten's approach differ or develop over time? (the chronological spacing of these works provide a perfect base for making such an assessment) Thirdly, how cyclical in character, apart from the literary connections, are these collections of part songs, can they be called 'cycles'? Clearly, *A Boy Was Born* has an initial melodic motive to connect each of the variations, but do the other three choral cycles have such a musical connection between movements? Lastly, what are the major influences on Britten's choral cycles, and how are they different to the work of earlier British composers? Can one identify the influence of one particular composer or group of composers on these works?

From the earliest choral works of Britten (*A Hymn to the Virgin* and *A Boy Was Born* were both written before his twentieth birthday), one observes a young composer completely confident in his compositional voice. Throughout the centuries composers

have struggled to achieve a balance of repetition and contrast within their music; striking the correct balance has often dictated their music's success and indeed has defined a composer's style. Britten's ability to create so many musical contrasts within a single work while retaining a sense of homogeneity could be seen as a compositional trait. However, this striking inventiveness incited much criticism from the musical elite of the 1930s. The German musicologist Theodor Adorno described Britten's "musical cocktails" as being made from "an insipid mixture of elements from a dead tradition and a few unimportant modern ingredients."⁸ The British press criticized the young composer for being "too clever" and even superficial. After the premiere of Britten's Piano Concerto in 1938, William McNaught in the *Musical Times* wrote: "This is not a stylish work. Mr. Britten's cleverness, of which he has frequently been told, has got the better of him and led him into all sorts of errors, the worst of which are errors of taste."⁹ Critical comments ranged from "clever, ineffective, undeveloped, promising, a bright young star fading, an exploiter of a brilliant faculty, a sower of wild oats and a fritterer of natural gifts."¹⁰ What a contrast then in the 1960s (and evidence that the musical landscape of Britain had changed considerably over thirty years), when Britten composed his *War Requiem* (1962) critics hailed it as a masterpiece. William Mann's review of the *War Requiem*, that appeared in *The Times* five days before its premiere (Mann had been given access to the score), stated that it was "the most masterly and

⁸ Ivan Hewett, *Benjamin Britten Centenary: how the composer proved the sneerers wrong*, *Daily Telegraph* (11/22/13)

⁹ Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, Allen Lane (2013) p. 140

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9. p. 141

nobly imagined work Britten has ever given us”, and suggested “that every performance it is given ought to be a momentous occasion.”¹¹

Britten is unusual amongst his contemporaries in the sheer breadth of his literary choices. For Britten, the selection of texts was extremely important and determined many of the musical decisions that he would make within his choral and vocal music. Text influenced the sentiment and character of Britten’s music; its tempi, its texture and its structure. His compositional process started with the careful selection of the text, often editing it heavily (deleting verses, changing words etc.) to suit his compositional aims. Britten’s interest in early medieval literature both sacred and secular is evident in many of his choral settings (*A Boy Was Born, Sacred and Profane*), but it is the simultaneity - the juxtaposition of old and new, sacred and secular - which is unique and stands out from other composers of his generation. This fascination with mixing and matching sacred and secular texts sometimes within a single movement, reaches its zenith in the *War Requiem* (1961), where Britten famously combines the Latin text from the Requiem Mass with the poetry of WWI poet Wilfred Owen.¹²

Britten’s significant contribution to British music and to the larger canon of twentieth-century music is undisputed. Although Britten’s life ended comparatively early at the age of just 63, he composed until the end, perhaps not with the fervor of his early years (where he would often be completing a score while simultaneously having a conversation) but certainly with the same clarity of judgment. Many composers go through phases of compositional change and with hindsight one often notices events or

¹¹ Ibid., 9. p. 457

¹² Wilfred Owen, Poet b. Shropshire, England 1893 d. France 1918

encounters in their lives that have heavily influenced their work. One of the most significant markers in Britten's early life was the outbreak of WWII and his move to the USA (from 1939-42). Whilst in the US, Britten completed some significant works: his *Violin Concerto* (1939), *Les Illuminations* (1939) and the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940). He meets American composer Aaron Copland and strikes up a warm and fruitful relationship with Serge Koussevitsky¹³, who through the Koussevitsky Foundation was to commission *Peter Grimes* in 1943. After 1942 and his return to the UK it is almost as if Britten has come of age. With the completion of *Peter Grimes* he enters the arena of serious composers, and indeed, in the period leading up to his death Britten completes twelve more operas (not including the church parables).

Although Britten's re-location to America is a very significant turning point in his life, more often ignored is the period of the early and mid 1930s. Arguably this was one of the most productive of his career, with his first commissions coming from the General Post Office Film Unit to write music for public information films. In a relatively short amount of time Britten wrote almost thirty scores for various GPO films, the most notable being *Night Mail* (1935), *The Coal Face* (1935) and *The Way to the Sea* (1936).

Hans Keller writes:

If and when film music embarks on musical history, *Night Mail* will be found – despite or indeed partly because of its elementary simplicity – among those legitimate points of departure from which so many of its successors have illegitimately departed.¹⁴

¹³ Serge Koussevitsky b. 1874 (Moscow) d. 1951 (Boston, USA). Founder of the Tanglewood Music Festival and Chief Conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1924-1949)

¹⁴ Hans Keller, Wintle and Garnham (eds.), *Britten: Essays, Letters and Opera Guides*, Boydell and Brewer, (2013)

It is during this time that Britten meets W.H. Auden;¹⁵ himself commissioned to write the spoken commentaries to many of the G.P.O. films. Philip Reed argues¹⁶ that the pressure to complete so much music in such a short amount of time got Britten through a composing block. Reed further states that it gave the composer a renewed sense of application and attention to detail. Certainly these film scores demonstrate Britten at his most descriptive, whether it is his use of a wind machine, a factory siren or the recording of a cart being pulled over an asbestos surface, writing for film fired Britten's imagination. In Britten's own words:

There are great possibilities in music for the films but it must be taken seriously by the director and the composer, and used as an integral part of the whole thing-not just as a sound effect, or to fill up the gaps during the talking.¹⁷

The film scores also exhibit Britten's inventiveness with limited resources, where often, he would only have a handful of instruments to write for. Arguably, the experience Britten acquired writing for film would later manifest itself in the skilled instrumental scoring for his chamber operas. Interestingly, it is within these film scores that Britten first uses the saxophone, paving the way for it to be used, more prominently, in the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940). During this period, one also sees the composition of the two radio cantatas, *The Company of Heaven* (1937) and *The World of the Spirit* (1938). Both use multiple literary sources as their genesis in a very similar way to the literary sources gathered for *A Boy Was Born* (1933). This eclectic way of collecting many

¹⁵ Wystan Hugh Auden, Poet. b. 1907 (York, UK) d. 1973 (Vienna, Austria)

¹⁶ *Britten on Film CD*, Philip Reed, NMC Recordings, 2007 (booklet note)

¹⁷ Brian Hogwood, *Working at the Coal Face-Britten on Film and Radio*, GoodMorningBritten.wordpress.com. (2013)

differing texts and presenting them within a single work becomes a trait of Britten's compositional style and one observes it in many of his later choral and vocal works.

Chapter I: Early Britten, The Juvenile Period

Britten's early works, from what often referred to as his Juvenile period, stretch from the very earliest, composed while he was at South Lodge Preparatory School and then Greshams School,¹ up until his entry to the Royal College of Music in 1930. When Britten was fourteen he was introduced to the composer Frank Bridge, by his viola teacher (and great friend of Bridge's), Audrey Alston. Alston introduced them in Norwich at the end of a performance of Bridge's orchestral work *The Sea (1911)* given as part of the 1927 Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Festival². By the end of 1928 Britten was receiving regular instruction from Bridge. Reflecting on this early tuition much later in his career, Britten concluded:

Even though I was barely in my teens, this was immensely serious and professional study; and the lessons were mammoth. I remember one that started at half past ten, and at tea-time Mrs. Bridge came in and said, 'Really, you must give the boy a break.' Often I used to end these marathons in tears; not that he was beastly to me, but the concentrated strain was too much for me. I was perhaps too young to take in so much at the time, but I found later that a good deal of it had stuck firmly.³

It is clear that Britten had a high regard for Bridge, although he did later recognize the limitations of Bridge's style, which was largely grounded in the German eighteenth and nineteenth-century musical traditions.

Bridge never wanted to influence me too strongly too young; and yet he knew he had to present something very firm for this stiff, naïve little boy to react about. He had no other pupils, and it was a

¹ Gresham's School, Holt, Norfolk, UK. Founded c.1555. Britten was a student there 1928-30

² The Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Festival. One of the oldest music festivals in England, dating back to 1772.

³ Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten, His Life and Operas* University of California Press, John Evans, (ed.) Second Edition (1983) p.21

very touching relationship across the thirty-four years separating us. In everything he did for me, there were perhaps above all two cardinal principles. One was that you should try to find yourself and be true to what you found, the other-obviously connected with it-was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one's mind.⁴

Having entered the Royal College of Music in 1930, Britten became a composition student of John Ireland. This relationship was far from perfect, and many accounts suggest that Britten received very little useful instruction from him. Ireland frequently missed lessons and failed to reschedule.

Thursday October 22, 1931: Have lesson at 8.45pm with Ireland, instead of 10am (owing to some muddle at RCM)-not a good one, which was not improved by the fact that he was quite drunk most of the time-fouly so.⁵

This situation only improved slightly when Bridge intervened and complained to the RCM both about the inconsistency of Britten's instruction and as a result of Ireland attending a concert where Britten's music was performed and not saying a word to Britten. In later life Britten played down the negative impact that studying with Ireland had on him, blaming himself for being a rather nonchalant young composer whom Ireland had to 'nurse' through a rebellious stage. Throughout his time at the RCM Britten was in close touch with Bridge. Indeed, Britten acted as a copier and proofreader for many of Bridge's compositions even when he was under the supervision of Ireland.

⁴ Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed. (eds.) *Letters From a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, (eds.) Volume I: 1923-1939, University of California Press (1991) p. 101

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4. p. 211.

During Britten's time at the RCM he was exposed to many musical styles in London concert halls. London was then, as now, on the world performance circuit for many international musicians. Britten was an avid concertgoer, and his diary entries during this period reflect the diverse amount of music he was becoming familiar with and experiencing at first hand. He was also fortunate to move in Bridge's musical circle's, which gave him the opportunity to mix with many professional musicians on the London circuit together with visiting international artistes. It is not surprising that one can identify in Britten's work the influence of other composers in these early formative years. Whether it was the rhythmic genius of Stravinsky or the harmonic intensity of Mahler, clearly, this young impressionable musician was affected by the new and varied music and musicians he was being exposed to. Interestingly, Britten commented much later in his life on the influence of others, a sensitive topic to many emerging composers. In a letter to the young composer Jonathan Harvey in 1967 Britten wrote:

Don't worry what silly people say about influences-unless we were all influenced by someone we'd write just nonsense.⁶

In many respects, apart from Ireland and Bridge the other composers whom he experienced in the concert hall were his other tutors. The influence of British composers including Vaughan Williams and William Walton has often been referred to in Britten's music. Stephen Sieck in his article *A Boy Was Born: An Examination of the Stylistic*

⁶ Philip Reed., Mervyn Cooke, (eds.) *Letters From a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, Volume VI: 1966-1976, Boydell and Brewer (2012) p. 99.

Influences on the Young Benjamin Britten (2009),⁷ argues that Britten was heavily influenced by Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* after hearing performances of the work in London soon after its premiere in Leeds in 1931. Sieck points to Britten's quartal/quintal approach to harmony in *A Boy Was Born* as being directly influenced by Walton's larger choral work. On Walton, Britten wrote: "He is so obviously the head prefect of English music and I'm the promising new boy!"⁸ However, the "new boy" did have an admiration for Walton (even if it wasn't reciprocated) that was encapsulated in a letter to Walton in 1963:

I don't know if I ever told you, but hearing your *Viola Concerto* and *Portsmouth Point* (works which I still love dearly) was a great turning point in my musical life. I'd got in a muddle; poor old John Ireland wasn't much help, and I couldn't get on with the 12-tone idea (still can't)-and you showed me the way of being relaxed and fresh, and intensely personal and yet still with the terms of reference which I had to have.⁹

In many ways, William Walton, a British composer born in the early part of the twentieth-century had much in common with Britten. Both composers had turned away from the German romantic influence (stemming from Stanford, Parry and Wood), which had pervaded the music of so many British composers in the latter part of the nineteenth-century, and to a degree the later "English Pastoralists". After serving for six years as a chorister at Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford, Walton entered Oxford

⁷ Stephen Sieck, *A Boy Was Born: An Examination of the Stylistic Influences on the Young Benjamin Britten*, The Choral Scholar, Online Journal of the National Collegiate Choral Organization Vol. 1, No. 1. (2009)

⁸ John Bridcut, *Essential Britten: A Pocket Guide for the Britten Centenary*, Faber and Faber (2013) p. 41

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4. p. 202

University as one of the youngest undergraduates, beginning his studies there at the age of sixteen. Whilst at Oxford he came under the influence of Sir Hugh Allen, the organist at Christchurch Cathedral and the future head of the RCM who introduced Walton to the music of Stravinsky, Debussy and Ravel. However, Walton received very little formal compositional instruction at Oxford. Neglecting his non-musical studies he never graduated and left Oxford in 1920. The defining point in Walton's career was his association with the Sitwell siblings¹⁰. Walton met Sacheverell Sitwell whilst at Oxford, who in turn introduced Walton to his older siblings, Osbert and Edith. The Sitwells were an influential group of writers who formed around them an identifiable clique of fellow writers and musicians, from around 1916-1930. After leaving Oxford, Walton went to live with the Sitwells in London. They recognized and nurtured Walton's musical talent, and introduced him to, amongst others, Ernest Ansermet the Swiss conductor and the Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni, with whom Walton took lessons. Both Ansermet and Busoni were very influential musicians in Europe, but importantly, were not part of the musical establishment in England. Consequently, Walton drew much of his musical inspiration and influence from the European continent including Bartók, the emerging group of French composers – Les Six, and the Second Viennese school. With *Façade* (1921), which he had written collaboratively with Edith Sitwell (Britten was to collaborate with Sitwell later in his career with the composition *Canticle III*, based on Sitwell's poem – "Still Falls the Rain" 1954), and later, the overture *Portsmouth Point* (1926), Walton had come to the attention of the British musical establishment as possibly the first British modernist composer, both pieces displaying the influences of Stravinsky and

¹⁰ Edith Sitwell 1887-1964, poet. Osbert Sitwell 1892-1969, writer. Sacheverell Sitwell, writer 1897-1988.

'Jazz'. However, unlike Britten, Walton would go on to take a retrogressive direction with rather nationalist compositions such as *Crown Imperial* (1937) written for the coronation of King George VI and later, a succession of film scores for a series of Shakespeare film adaptations, including, *As You Like it* (1936) and *Henry V*, (1944). By the 1950s he was being labeled as old fashioned.

Similarly, Britten's compositional training, although substantially more comprehensive than Walton's, was predominantly from a tutor on the periphery of the British musical establishment. Despite the fact that Britten had gone through the traditional RCM 'route' of British musical training and had studied with John Ireland, the dominating influence in his composing life was still his composition tutor from childhood, Frank Bridge. Bridge had studied with Stanford at the RCM, but he was neither a tutor at the RCM nor an Oxbridge professor. Paul Kildea in his biography of Britten describes Bridge as "A left-leaning pacifist and consummate craftsman, performer and conductor, a living, walking, performing example of what a British composer could be."¹¹ By the time Bridge began tutoring Britten, he had started to assimilate into his work many of the traits of the Second Viennese school. Bridge's *Third String Quartet* (1926) for example, although not totally embracing strict serialist techniques, shows the influence of Schoenberg and Berg and was indeed commissioned by a champion of modern music, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (Coolidge commissioned Schoenberg's *Fourth String Quartet* the following year).

¹¹ Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, Allen Lane (2013) p. 44

It was Bridge who introduced Britten to the music of the Second Viennese school, and probably one of the young Britten's most admired composers was Alban Berg. After Britten had finished at the RCM he was awarded the Arthur Sullivan travel scholarship. It was Britten's intention to go and study with Berg for a year in Vienna. However, the RCM authorities were suspicious of the Second Viennese School and Sir Hugh Allen, Head of the RCM at the time, reportedly convinced Britten's parents that studying with Berg would be a negative influence on the young Britten. Britten wrote in 1963:

There was at that time an almost moral prejudice against serial music - which makes one smile today! I think also that there was some confusion in my parents' minds - thinking that 'not a good influence' meant morally, not musically. They had been disturbed by traits of rebelliousness and unconventionality which I had shown in my later school days.¹²

With hindsight, if Britten had succeeded in travelling to Vienna, it was unlikely that he would have spent much time with Berg, for in 1933 Berg was working on his opera *Lulu*, the rise of Nazism had seen his work and performances dry up, and sadly, he was to die two years later in 1935.

The highly formulaic approach of the Second Viennese school focused on a rigid technique based on preserving the integrity of a set pattern of intervals, which must have attracted Britten. Indeed, Britten's music demonstrates a similar emphasis although in a tonal sense (apart from his two major works that use twelve-tone techniques, *Turn of the Screw*, 1954, and *Death in Venice*, 1973), and relies too on a rather rigid technique. Such an approach led to more harsh assessments of his music

¹² David Matthews, *Britten*, Haus Publishing (2003) p. 26

by English music critics of the 1930s. Criticism focused on the lack of depth in his work and described his music as being all technique and no substance, as if he were “merely a clever child performing conjuring tricks to divert indulgent grown ups”.¹³ After the first performance of *A Boy Was Born* critic M.D. Calvocoressi wrote in *Musical Opinion* (April 1934): “It seems to me that now and then he avails himself of his technical efficiency a trifle ostentatiously.”¹⁴

The influence of Vaughan Williams on Britten’s music is probably far greater than what Britten would have ever acknowledged (modality, use of folk songs, mutual admiration of earlier English composers), for their relationship was turbulent. In many ways Britten viewed the whole musical establishment at the RCM, in which RVW was a towering figure, as “amateurish and folksy”.¹⁵ After attending a performance of Vaughan Williams’ opera *Hugh the Drover* at the RCM in 1933, Britten wrote:

It needs a larger stage, of course—even so the First Act was very exciting and the rest was a dreadful anti climax. Vaughan Williams had shown in places apt use of chorus, in other dreadful disregard of natural movements. The music was full of folksongs (if you like that sort of thing) - it was best so - when not (as between Scenes in Act II) it was dreadful.¹⁶

¹³ Peter Parker, *Benjamin Britten: the Englishman who saved music*, *The Telegraph* (2/8/2013)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4. p. 330

¹⁵ Paul Kildea (ed.) *Britten on Music: Back to Britain with Britten*, (1959), Oxford University Press (2003) p.171

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4. p. 191

It is reported that, after Britten had won the Farrar¹⁷ Composition Award in 1931 at the RCM, Vaughan Williams made the comment, “Very clever, but beastly music”.¹⁸ As already mentioned, the criticism that Britten’s music was “clever” was not an uncommon reaction. Certainly to many, Britten’s music lacked the warm pastoral ‘feeling’ of Holst, Vaughan Williams’ and many of their contemporaries and it was to a degree non-conformist. David Matthews sums up this early period of Britten’s composing life: “It is perhaps because Britten at this time had a restricted emotional life that much of his music lacks real warmth. He was still the brilliant boy who had yet to grow up.”¹⁹ Whether Vaughan Williams’ disdain for Britten’s music went further than dismissiveness is unclear, but certainly there were acts of generosity on his part towards Britten, that are well documented. On one occasion, Vaughan Williams was at a rehearsal for the premiere of Britten’s *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936) at the Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Festival. The orchestra was clearly not enjoying the experience, and some players were being very disruptive during the rehearsal. As it happened, also on the program was Vaughan Williams’ *Five Tudor Portraits*. Vaughan Williams addressed the orchestra, stating that they were in the “presence of greatness” - not referring to himself - and if they refused to play Britten’s work then they would also not play his piece. An immediate sense of co-operation overcame the orchestra²⁰.

¹⁷ Ernest Bristow Farrar, composer b.1885 (London) d. 1918 (France)

¹⁸ Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, Henry Holt and Company (2013) p. 66

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12. p. 24

²⁰ Simon Heffer, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: Uneasy Listening*, *Daily Telegraph*, (12/5/2007)

Chapter II: The First Choral Cycle, A Boy Was Born Op.3 (1933)

The choral variations *A Boy Was Born* (1933) uses texts from medieval carols compiled by Edith Rickert for her anthology *Ancient English Christmas Carols* (1910)¹ and the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928)². Rickert was a medieval scholar at the University of Chicago and worked for sixteen years on a major commentary on the text of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales". Using these varied libretti, Britten crafts a seven-movement work based on an opening chorale, the words of which (translated) are taken from a German sixteenth-century chorale, "Puer natus in Bethlehem".

A BOY WAS BORN in Bethlehem;
Rejoice for that Jerusalem!
Alleluya.

He let himself a servant be,
That all mankind he might set free:
Alleluya.

Then praise the Word of God who came
To dwell within a human frame
Alleluya.

Written when Britten's father was in failing health *A Boy Was Born* was first broadcast, by coincidence, on the same day that Elgar died³ (23 February 1934). In fact, the final dedication of the work was to his father, who died later that year. The

¹ Edith Rickert, *Ancient English Christmas Carols*, Chatto and Windus, (1910)

² Dearmer, Shaw, Vaughan Williams (eds.) *Oxford Book of Carols*, Oxford University Press, (1928)

³ 1934 also saw the passing of two other dominating figures of English music, the composers Holst and Delius.

British newspaper, *The Observer*, heralded its “endless invention and facility...”adding that Britten “.... rivets attention from the first note onwards: without knowing in the least what is coming, one feels instinctively that this is music it behoves one to listen to.”⁴ *A Boy Was Born* signals a departure for Britten’s predominantly instrumental works; with the exception of *A Hymn to the Virgin* (1930) and *Christ’s Nativity* (1931), it marks his first major ‘religious’ choral work, and the first to use this anthological collection of secular and religious poetic texts. Excepting the poems by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), the sixteenth-century poet Thomas Tusser (1524-1580) and seventeenth-century poet Frances Quarles (1592-1644) all of the texts are by anonymous authors.

England in the early twentieth-century was still dominated by composers writing in a tonal style. Stanford and Parry, giants of the nineteenth-century revival of English music were all fundamentally tonal composers and even the younger “English Pastoralists” were using a harmonic language characterized with traditional harmonic functionality. This English trend stood in stark contrast to Europe, where enthusiastic acceptances of serial music and other non-conventional approaches seemed to mark the twilight of tonality. Young composers were faced with the dilemma, of how to sound ‘modern’ but still get their music performed. When evaluating Britten’s compositional ‘voice’ across his entire *oeuvre*, one must conclude that he is by no means an atonal

⁴ Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed. (eds.) *Letters From a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, (eds.) Volume I: 1923-1939, University of California Press. p. 363.

composer. Whether that statement would remain true had he studied with Alban Berg as he hoped to do will forever remain a point of conjecture⁵.

When one begins to examine the harmonic language used in Britten's *A Boy Was Born* the question of whether this music occupies a key center or specific tonal world is paramount. Britten's use of key signatures separate him from composers such as Hindemith, who tended to avoid key signatures altogether. Furthermore, despite the presence of a key signature Britten often moves away from the key it implies within the opening first few measures; very rarely do movements end with a triad of the same key. Despite a D-major key signature the "Theme" displays no adherence to traditional tonality. In fact, the "Theme" is notable for the absence of full triads. Instead, Britten develops his harmony from the interval set that comprises his principal motive. Upon closer examination, there are just nine separate chords used in the "Theme" (excluding any transpositions). Arnold Whittall points out that, six of these nine chords use the same basic tetrachord (0, 2, 5, 9/D E G B), which, suggest a mixed triadic structure that can be interpreted as a pentatonic chord or a seventh chord in inversion (based on E). Two of the chords spell a tetrachord, with a harsher semitone clash (0, 1, 5, 8 /D E ♭ G A ♭) and one of the chords is a quartal chord (0, 2, 4, 7/D E F♯ A).⁶

The dominance of this quartal/quintal harmony pervades all of the cycle's six movements. Clearly, the vertical harmony contained within the "Theme" and subsequent movements is driven, even dictated by the linear contrapuntal development of the different voice parts. In a recent interview with *The Guardian* given as part of the Britten

⁵ It was Britten's intention to study with Berg after winning the Sullivan travel bursary. He was discouraged in doing so by the then head of the RCM, Sir Hugh Allen.

⁶ Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett – Studies in Themes and Techniques*. Cambridge University Press, 1982. Second edition (1990) p. 25.

centenary celebration Oliver Knussen, a British composer, describes an early encounter with Britten in the Red House. Knussen’s father, an eminent bassist, introduced his son to Britten during one of the Aldeborough Festival concerts in which he played. Remembering Britten talking with him about the process of composition, Knussen recalls that Britten made a profound comment, which had stayed with him, all of his composing life: “counterpoint is harmony”.⁷ Certainly in this movement and across Britten’s music, the importance of individual vocal lines (and voice leading) is paramount, and, in many instances, the vertical sonorities are the direct consequence of linear writing. Interestingly, Mahler, who Britten greatly admired, spoke of a very similar idea: “there is no harmony only counterpoint”.⁸

When one examines the individual voice parts purely intervallically, one can see the predominance of the intervals of a second and third throughout (Table. 2.1).

M 1-5											
Soprano	M2	m3	m3	M2	M2	m3	m3				
Alto			M2	M2		M2	m2				
Tenor	M2	M2	m2	P4	P4	M2	m2				
Bass	M2	m2	M2	P4	m3	M2	P5				
M 5-9											
Soprano	M2	m3	m3	M2	M2	m3	m3				
Alto			M2	M2		M2	m2				
Tenor	M2	M2	m2	P4	P4	M2	m2				
Bass	M2	m2	M2	P4	m3	M2	P5				
M 9-14											
Soprano	M2	M3	m3	M2	M2	m3	m3	M2	M2	D4	P8
Alto			M2	M2			M2	M2	M2	m2	P8
Tenor	M2	m2	M2	P4	M2	m2	M2	P4	M2	D4	P8
Bass	M2	M2	m2	P4	M2	M2	m2	P4	M2	m2	P8

Table 2.1 *A Boy Was Born*. Linear intervallic analysis of the “Theme”.

⁷ Fiona Maddocks, *The Arts Interview with Oliver Knussen*, *The Guardian* (11/15/2013)

⁸ Karen Painter, *Symphonic Aspirations: German Politics and Music, 1900-1945*, Harvard University Press (2008) p. 57.

M 15-19														
Soprano	M2	M2	m2	P5	M3	m3	m6							
Alto	P4	M2	M2	m3	P4	M2	M2							
Tenor			M2	M3		M2	M2							
Bass	M2	m3	m3		m2	M3	M3							
M 19-23														
Soprano	M2	M2	m2	P5	M3	m3	m7							
Alto	P4	M2	M2	m3	P4	M2	M2							
Tenor			M3	M3		M2	M2							
Bass	M2	m3	m3		m2	M3	M3							
M 23-30														
Soprano	M2	m3	m3	M2	M2	m3	m3	M2	m3	m3	M2	P4	P8	
Alto			M2	M2		M2	M2			M2	M2	M2	P8	
Tenor	M2	m3	M3	P4	M2	m3	m3	M2	M2	M2	M2	P4	P8	
Bass	M2	M2	m3	P4	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	P8	
M. 30-36														
Soprano	M2	m3	m3	M2	M2	m3	m3	P5	M2	m3	m3	m2	m3	m3
Alto	P8		M2	M2		M2	m2	M2			M2		M2	m2
Tenor	M2	M2	m2	P4	P4	P5	M3	P5	M2	M2	m2	P4	P5	M3
Bass	m7	m2	M2	P4	m3	M2	P4	P4	M2	m2	M2	m3	M2	P4
M.38-45														
Soprano	M2	m3	m3	M2	m3	m3	M2	m3	m3	M2	m3	m3	M2	P4
Alto			M2			M2			M2			M2	M2	M2
Tenor	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	P4
Bass	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2	m2	M2	M2

Table 2.1 *A Boy Was Born*. Linear Intervallic analysis of the “Theme” (contd.)

Britten’s repetitive use of particular intervals gives this opening theme an immediate coherence. It is quite remarkable how he creates the majority of the harmonic and melodic material from the [0,2,5] motive. Indeed, the linear movement in each voice part is dominated by the [0,2,5] motive not just through complete statements of this thematic idea but also in the way that individual voice parts tend to move by intervals of a major second and minor third, the two intervals contained within the [0,2,5] motive. One almost doesn’t notice the absence of functional tertian harmony, because of the prominent use of thirds, which create the illusion of tonality but lack the defining fifth to complete a triad. In the hands of any lesser composer, this approach may have

resulted in music that sounds contrived, even mechanical. This is not the case in Britten's opening theme. Instead, one is drawn into the music by the composer's inventiveness and remarkable mastery of compositional technique.

Section 1 (mm. 1-14) A ¹	Section 2 (mm. 15-30) A ²	Section 3 mm. (30-46) A ³
(0,2,5) mm. 1-5, 5-9 (2) "Alleluia" mm. 9-14 (3)	(0,2,5) mm. 15-23 (2) "Alleluia" mm. 23-29 (4)	(0,2,5) mm. 30-38 (2) "Alleluia" mm. 38-46 (5)

Table 2.2 *A Boy Was Born*, "Theme". Structure of movement.

A Boy Was Born clearly shows a newfound technical control in Britten's work. If one compares it to *Christ's Nativity* (1931) or even the "Quartettino" in the *Phantasy Quartet* (1932), a work written immediately prior to *A Boy Was Born*, one sees that in that short period a distinct honing of style has occurred, suggesting that he was searching for, as Christopher Mark describes as, "a very dynamic but focused, even concentrated, form that involved not only economy of material but also economical control of that material."⁹ Certainly if one compares *A Boy Was Born* to *Christ's Nativity*, written some eighteen months before (although never performed in its entirety in Britten's lifetime), one observes a different compositional voice at work. *A Boy Was Born* is more focused, more confident in style and in some ways less reliant on the Victorian and Edwardian models and standard conventions of English choral music, which had its roots firmly in the Germanic tradition of the nineteenth-century.

⁹ Christopher Mark, *Simplicity in Early Britten*, *Tempo*, No. 147 (Dec., 1983) pp. 8-14.

Structurally, the opening “Theme” is divided into three sections (mirroring the three stanzas of the poem), the second and third being variations of the first (Table 2.2). The first stanza begins with the [0,2,5] motive in the soprano followed immediately by its repetition transposed up a whole tone. In addition to this melodic similarity, the accompanying voices (A, T, B) are also repeated up a step. The concluding “alleluia” (m.9), although altered rhythmically, is actually the [0,2,5] motive transposed up a perfect fourth from the original. The only deviation from the [0,2,5] motive comes where, in measure 13, instead of the expected leap of a minor third, Britten uses an ascending leap of a diminished fourth, immediately followed by a descending octave. In the second stanza (m.15) Britten places the [0,2,5] motive in the bass part, a minor third lower than the original. Correspondingly, the soprano part imitates the melodic shape of the bass part in the opening stanza. The [0,2,5] motive, still in the bass, reverts to its original pitch level (m.19); again, the soprano part follows suit, mirroring the melodic shape of the bass part (mm. 5-9.) For the second “alleluia” (m.23) the [0,2,5] motive now returns to the soprano, transposed down a tone. The stanza concludes with the same descending octave that occurred in measure 14, now harmonized with the alto and bass’ E₄. The final stanza (m.30) reverts to the original voicing and position of the [0,2,5] motive, but now transposed an octave higher. The expected restatement of the motive that occurred in stanzas one and two (mm. 5, 17), is instead transposed down a perfect fourth. Britten does this to avoid overextending the range of the soprano part and, as in Classical Sonata form, to insure return to the motive’s pitch center for the final ‘alleluia’. The avoidance of a descending octave at the end of this “alleluia” section

facilitates the transition into “Variation I,” in which a descending fifth replaces the octave. It is this interval that forms the beginning of the ostinato that dominates the first variation.

“Variation I – Lullay, Jesu,” uses text from an anonymous fifteenth-century carol found within the *Ancient English Christmas Carols* anthology compiled by Rickert. As he does in later variations, Britten does not use the entire original text; of the eight verses in the Rickert anthology, he sets only five (1, 2, 3, 7, 8). Apart from the obvious reason (the poem is too long), Britten perhaps chose to delete verses 4-6 because they deal with the Passion.

The dominance of the quartal harmonic language of the “Theme” continues in “Variation I”. The movement lacks a clear or predictable harmonic direction; even if some key centers are implied they are not tonicized in the traditional sense. The harmonic language is underpinned throughout by the use of ostinati, which act as a harmonic basis of the movement’s other textural strands. Ostinati appear abundantly in this cycle, from the oscillating eighth note figure in “The Three Kings” to the falling quarter note pattern in “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” and, most skillfully of all, in the vast finale.

From the outset the implied tonal center of “Variation I” is D-minor, not only because of the key signature (1 flat) but also because of the A-D ostinato in the soprano parts at the beginning of the variation which suggest a dominant-tonic (V-I) progression. However, Britten’s omission of the third or sixth scale degrees (the “modal” degrees) creates a very typical tonal ambiguity. The music could be in either D-minor or A-minor. In fact, B \flat is not heard until measure 34. Whereas the opening “Theme” immediately established seconds and thirds as the principal basis of the linear part writing, in

“Variation I” Britten relies primarily on fourths and fifths, used both within parts as the basis of the ostinato (Ex. 2.1) and as the predominant vertical interval between parts (Ex. 2.2).

S
- lay, lul - lay, lul - lay, lul - lay, lul - lay, lul -

T
Ma - ry rock'd her Son so free; So fair she rock'd and sang 'by -

B
Ma - ry rock'd her Son so free; So fair she rock'd and sang 'by -

Ma - ry rock'd her Son so free; So fair she rock'd and sang 'by -

Ma - ry rock'd her Son so free; So fair she rock'd and sang 'by -

Ped. 16'

Ex. 2.1 *A Boy Was Born*, “Variation I” mm. 10-14

30

Mine own dear mother,

Your grievance, tell me what it is.

in me is? Your grievance, tell me what it is. Je

Your grievance, tell me what it is.

in me is? Your grievance, tell me what it is.

poco

Ex. 2.2 *A Boy Was Born*, “Variation I” mm. 30-34

As Britten shifts the ostinato from A-D to E-A (m.12, Ex. 2.1), he introduces B \natural into the melody (m.19). This accidental, coupled with the transposition of the [0,2,5] related material up a fifth, suggests a shift from D-minor to A-minor. Again, this rather traditional modulation is not confirmed melodically (leading tone) or harmonically. Another shift in the ostinato (B-E, m. 27) occasioned by the introduction of an F \sharp produces the strongest suggestion of a tonal center, E-minor. This conclusion remains ambiguous because of the lack of a leading tone, the raised sixth degree (C \sharp), and the lack of a V-I cadence. As the music intensifies with added textural strands one senses the beginning of a development section (Fig.12). This central climactic section, framed by two outer sections, suggest that this variation, like the preceding "Theme" has a ternary design. In this central section, Britten alternates the ostinato several times, each change implying tonal digression, even if this process is never codified. The movement comes to a close because the ostinati of the opening resume their central role and tonality, the movement closing as it began with the rocking alternation of the pitches A and D. Clearly, Britten's transposition of the ostinato throughout the course of the movement creates a sense of formal coherence that counters the insertion of contrasting textural strata and the dominance of linear writing. Indeed, the changes in the ostinato's pitch center (A-D, A-E, E-B, B-F \sharp) suggest, however loosely, a conventional 'circle of fifths pattern', more confirmation the role this pair of related intervals plays in both vertical (harmonic) and linear (melodic) dimensions.

Texturally and thematically, "Variation I" along with the finale of the work, is one of the most complicated of the variations. As confirmed by later work, textural 'layering'

is becoming an integral part of Britten’s contrapuntal language. There are no fewer than four separate strands of motivic material within this movement (Table 2.3).

	Textural Strata				
	A= "Lullay"	B= "Jesu" [0,2,5]	C= "Mary Dialogue"	Cn= Narration	D=Jesus Dialogue
Boy Trebles		D--	D-----		D-----
Soprano	A-----	C--- B-----A-----B-----A-----B			
Alto	B--	C-----	B---A-----B-----A-----A/B-----A--		
Tenor	Cn---B----	B-----A-B—A-B-----A-----			
Bass	Cn---	A----- B-	B-----	A-----	

Table 2.3 *A Boy Was Born* “Variation I”, Textural strata.

The ‘rocking’ syncopated descending fifth (later on alternating with a descending fourth) on the word ‘lullay’ that opens the variation (SI, SII), is nearly immediately joined by a version of the [0,2,5] motive in the alto (‘Jesu’, m.5). In fact, the appearances of this motive throughout the movement all appear in connection to that text. The first of the ‘dialogue’ parts, which starts as the voice of a narrator and subsequently ‘Mary’, enters (m.6) with thematic material that begins with an ascending minor third. This initial interval is preserved in all entrances of this theme. The other dialogue part enters in the boy treble part (m.15) with the voice of ‘Jesus’.¹⁰

The texture gradually builds by accretion of strands, reaching a textural climax in measures 56-72. The music is then dominated by the ‘rocking’ theme and statements

¹⁰ Interestingly (although not nearly as complex a texture), Britten chooses a similar treatment and registration for the voice of ‘Jesus’ in the fifth movement from *Sacred and Profane*-“Yif ic of luve can”.

of the 'Jesu' theme [0,2,5] together with the 'Jesus dialogue' in the boy treble part. Although all the motives used in "Variation I" sound very different in character, the fact that they are all ultimately derived from the [0,2,5] motive is remarkable, yet shows Britten's ability to generate contrasting themes from simple material (Ex. 2.3, 2.4).

The image shows three staves of music from 'A Boy Was Born'. The top staff is for Alto (measures 2-6), the middle for Tenor (measures 6-9), and the bottom for Boys (measures 15-18). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 4/4. A bracket labeled '[0,2,5]' spans the first three notes of the Alto part. A circle highlights the first three notes of the Alto part, and a vertical line connects this circle to a circle around the first three notes of the Tenor part. Another vertical line connects the Tenor part to a circle around the first three notes of the Boys part. A bracket labeled '[0,2,5] Retrograde' spans the last three notes of the Boys part. The lyrics are: Alto: 'Je - su - - - - -'; Tenor: 'So bless'd a sight - - - it was to see'; Boys: 'Mine own - - dear mo - ther, sing - - - lu - lay!'.

Ex. 2.3 A Boy Was Born "Variation I" motivic material derived from [0,2,5]

Within the movement Britten carefully separates the dialogue of Mary, Jesus and the narration within the text, by assigning Jesus' speech to the boy trebles (semi chorus), Mary's to the women's voices and the narrator to the men's voices. Take for example the first 'dialogue' motive that of 'Mary' (m. 6): although there is no rising major second of the original [0,2,5] motive, Britten makes prominent use of the motives minor third (A-C). Much the same can be said about the 'Jesus' dialogue (m. 15). Here is a falling major second followed by a rising minor third and a subsequent descending minor second on the 'strong' beat of the bar. Although the connection with the [0,2,5] motive is less obvious here, the overall intervallic properties of the motive bear strong similarities to the [0,2,5] motive. Subsequent appearances of this 'Jesus' dialogue

motive are similar to the ‘Mary’ dialogue in that they contain the characteristic rising and falling minor third element, again, showing similarities with the [0,2,5] motive (Ex. 2.3). Even the descending fourth/fifth ‘rocking’ bears some relation to the original [0,2,5] motive in that it outlines the overall melodic range (D-G-D).

Ex. 2.4 *A Boy Was Born* “Variation I” mm.59-63. Entries derived from [0,2,5] motive.

The second variation - “Herod” opens with a variant of the [0,2,5] refrain sung to “Noel” by tenors and basses (divisi). Britten then reprises the first phrase of the opening “Theme” (including text) (Ex. 2.5). The variation is constructed as a type of rondo (Table 2.4) with the opening “Noel” theme/text returning, interspersed with four main episodes. Interestingly, the original poem as it appears in Edith Rickert’s anthology

Ancient English Christmas Carols (1910)¹¹ does not contain the word “Noel”. One could argue that Britten inserts this in the text to provide a ‘verse-refrain’ structure, making it very similar to the other poems used in the cycle. This element of repetition, which he sets as a type of rondo theme enables him to be slightly freer with the musical treatment of the verses, yet maintaining a musical consistency. Clearly not in a ‘strict’ rondo form, the returning rondo material is characterized by punctuating descending minor thirds (“Noel”) and usually, a quotation of the [0,2,5] motive. As the “Theme” and “Variation I” show a similar structure (ternary) so too, does “Variation II” and “Variation III”, both

Rondo mm 1-11	1 st Episode mm 12-17	Rondo mm 17-23	2 nd Episode mm 24-30	Rondo mm. 32-43	3 rd Episode mm. 44-52	Rondo mm. 53-68	4 th Episode mm. 69-85.	Rondo mm.77-90
Three expositions of 0, 2, 5 motive, 1 st and 3 rd fragmented and set to word ‘Noel’.	Very angular melodic shape, depicting Herod. Dominance of perfect 4ths.	[0,2,5] motive exposed in the bass “That Mary bare” followed by “Noel” refrain	‘Angular’ thematic material returns. Cyclical thematic material found in variation IV (m. 27, 30)	‘Noel’ refrain. Sequential treatment of the ‘Noel’ descending minor 3 rd ‘cell’, particularly in the soprano part.	Musical depiction of the ‘Flight of Mary’ with Jesus, to avoid Herod. Music is <i>pp</i> marked <i>Sotto Voce</i> (m. 50). First Perfect 5 th interval in the movement on ‘Egypt’, also first unison writing in parts.	Thematic material from variation IV included here. Sopranos and altos enter for the first time in the movement (m. 58.) Two textural strands created (m. 64-68) with all parts.	Climax of the piece marked <i>fff</i> . First recognizable major triadic harmony on the word ‘Jesus’ (Eb major) albeit in first inversion. Opening episodic material last heard in m.44 returns m.75	‘Noel’ refrain interspersed with final text of the movement.

Table 2.4 A Boy Was Born “Herod” Structure of movement.

containing four main sections, suggesting a similar pairing. We see this ‘pairing’ of movements in many of Britten’s other works where movements are either connected thematically, structurally or a combination of both.

¹¹ “Herod” appears on p. 128 of Edith Rickert’s anthology *Ancient English Christmas Carols*, Chatto and Windus (1910) under the subheading - “Worship we this holy day, that all innocents for us pray”

Herod

VARIATION II
Allegro con fuoco (♩ = 168-176) 18

SOPRANO I & II
 ALTO I & II
 TENOR
 BASS
 ORGAN

Allegro con fuoco (♩ = 168-176) 18

TEN. I
 TEN. II
 BASS I
 BASS II

Allegro con fuoco (♩ = 168-176) 19

ORGAN

Ex. 2.5 *A Boy Was Born* “Herod” mm. 1-15

We are in no doubt as to the genesis of the thematic material contained within this variation. The [0,2,5] motive is emphatically announced three times at the opening of “Variation II – Herod”. Firstly, it appears fragmented in four vocal parts simultaneously on the word “Noel” (Ex. 2.5). Secondly, the [0,2,5] motive is sung a tone higher in the tenor with a ‘pedal’ B sung in the bass, and then thirdly, it is exposed again fragmented

across the parts (m.8.) After another short silence we move into the first episode (m. 12), with the text describing the “Massacre of the Innocents”. The music of the episodic material becomes more angular, in keeping with the more sinister character of the text.

When one examines Britten’s use of intervals linearly across all of the parts, one observes as in other movements, the dominance of seconds, thirds and fourths, clearly derived from the [0,2,5] motive. The “Noel” refrains (rondo theme), are punctuated by rather angular disjointed motivic fragments. These melodic fragments are almost always sung in unison (apart from measures 27-29 - the “body of Christ”) and vary rhythmically and intervallically. This episodic material, although very disjointed, demonstrates some consistencies each time it appears. Apart from the obvious initial descending perfect fourth, which characterizes each entrance of this ‘Herod’ motif, there is another consistent melodic fragment within the motive, usually consisting of an ascending fifth followed by an ascending fourth (Ex. 2.6). Even as Britten expands and develops this ‘Herod’ motive he manages to maintain the rhythmic and intervallic integrity of this smaller melodic cell.

He rod that was so wild and wode full_ much he shed

Bass mm. 12-14

He rod slew with pride and sin_ thou sands of two_year and with in_

Soprano mm. 24-27

Ma ry with Je su forth y fraught

Bass mm. 44-46

Ex. 2.6 *A Boy Was Born*, “Variation II”, intervallic consistencies in thematic material

Tonally, in “Variation II” there is a given key signature of two sharps. Despite there being no functional implication of a tonal center such as a leading tone, the music leans towards B-minor particularly as Britten accompanies the [0,2,5] motive with a pedal B (m. 5). As the ‘Herod’ motive is introduced (m.12) and Britten adds more accidentals, the music implies a shift to the tonic major, B-major. This tonal shift is short-lived as the music moves back to an implied B-minor tonality with the G and D natural in the tenor parts on the word “slay” (m.16). Certainly, Britten makes a distinction throughout the movement between the “Noel” sections and the contrasting episodes, by changing the tonality together with motivic and textural changes. However, with the continued use of the quartal/layering harmonic approach that we have seen throughout the work, clear key attributions remain ambiguous. A clever manipulation of the [0,2,5]

82). Here, for the first time since the “Theme” we encounter some chordal homophony. Still retaining the quartal harmonic language, it is clear that the change in the sentiments of the text - the redeeming nature of Christ - has inspired this textural change. With the closest example to tertian harmony occurring on “Jesus” (E \flat -major), coupled with the fact that this is the loudest measure (*fff*) in the whole variation, let alone the whole work, it is clearly Britten’s intention is to make this the climax of the movement. The tonal harshness and tension of the descending minor third in contrary motion to the rising major second that we encountered in the previous “Noel” section is now resolved (m. 77) as both parts move in similar motion. Linearly they retain their original intervallic properties but vertically they now sound together as a descending perfect fourth and fifth.

“Variation III – Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour”, is the shortest movement in the cycle. The key signature of three sharps is misleading, as the music is neither in A-major nor F#-minor. Britten’s harmonic language is again dominated not by a sense of functionality but by a quartal/quintal approach, with a series of layered bare fifths and fourths making up the chordal harmony. However, unlike other movements there are a number of more easily identifiable triads. C# minor seventh, G# minor seventh, A major, and G major seventh chords can be found scattered throughout the movement. Most significantly, in terms of harmonic functionality, a C# minor seventh chord resolving to a G# minor seventh chord (mm. 5-6, 29-30) implies a kind of Plagal cadence in G# minor, on the words “through thy virtue.”

Melodically, one might categorize this movement as being amelodic, particularly with the static soprano part, although the inner parts do at times have a sense of thematic interest. Certainly the way the chords pivot around the soprano B \natural throughout the movement is a unique aspect, and it is the B that supplies an element of harmonic unity needed in order for this piece to hang together.¹² This pivotal approach to harmony enabling often un-related chords to sit side by side in a progression is something that one sees across Britten's work. For example, in "O Deus, ego amo te" from *A.M.D.G.* a similar technique is used where harmonically unrelated chords happily sit in a progression due to there being 'common tones' between each of the chords.

This movement ("Variation III") creates an uneasy stillness within the cycle, not unlike the stillness in Mahler's setting of "Mensch" from the *Third Symphony* (1898) or the final pages of *Das Lied von der Erde* (1909). Britten admired Mahler at a time when the musical establishment in England, and the rest of Europe, regarded him as a 'local' composer. George Bernard Shaw, in his role as music critic, thought that the musical audiences of the 1930s would find Mahler (and Bruckner) "expensively second-rate".¹³ Composer-conductor Julius Harrison described Mahler's symphonies as "interesting at times, but laboriously put together" and lacking creative spark.¹⁴ Britten commented on Mahler's music in an essay in 1942. Reflecting on a performance of Mahler's *Fourth Symphony* (1901), Britten wrote having heard the work for the first time:

¹² A similar texture can be found in "Prayer I" from *A.M.D.G.* where the dominance of A within the harmonic progressions is striking.

¹³ George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw's Music, Volume III 1893–1950*. London. The Bodley Head. (1981)

¹⁴ Julius Harrison, *The Orchestra and Orchestral Music*. Bacharach, A.L. *The Musical Companion*. London: Victor Gollancz. (1934) pp. 127-282

But what I heard was not what I had expected to hear. First of all, in spite of a slack, under-rehearsed and rather apologetic performance, the scoring startled me. It was mainly 'soloistic' and entirely clean and transparent. The coloring seemed calculated to the smallest shade, and the result was wonderfully resonant. I wasn't bored for one of its forty-five minutes, whereas I was for every one of the fashionable new concerto's twenty-three. The form was so cunningly contrived; every development surprised one and yet sounded inevitable. Above all, the material was remarkable, and the melodic shapes highly original, with such rhythmic and harmonic tension from beginning to end.¹⁵

Structurally, the movement ("Variation III") is very simply made up of four, seven bar homophonic phrases, each one connected by a solo treble part on the word "Jesu", the only exposition of the [0,2,5] motive within the movement (Ex. 2.9). Britten chooses to use only two verses of the original poem's five¹⁶. The final three verses of the original poem reflect on the visit of the Three Kings and Christ's crucifixion.

5 BOY SOLO *pp* 28
 † Je - su!
 — through Thy vir - tue. *ppp* *pp* Je - su, as Thou art our
 — through Thy vir - tue. *ppp* *pp* Je - su, as Thou art our
 — through Thy vir - tue. *ppp* *pp* Je - su, as Thou art our
 — through Thy vir - tue. *ppp* *pp* Je - su, as Thou art our

Ex. 2.9 A Boy Was Born, "Variation III" mm. 5-9

¹⁵ P. Kildea, (ed.) *On Behalf of Gustav Mahler (1942), Britten on Music*, Oxford University Press, (2003) p. 38.

¹⁶ "Jesu as Thou art our Saviour" appears in the Rickert anthology of *Ancient English Christmas Carols*, Chatto and Windus, (1910) pp. 176-177.

Again one finds a repeated refrain-like element within the poem. There are two refrains; the first “Jesu, Jesu, Jesu, Jesu, save us all through thy virtue” provides the text for the first seven measures of music and then it is repeated for the fourth and final phrase (mm. 25-31). When this refrain appears at the end of the movement, it retains many of the musical characteristics of the opening phrase; a repeat of the same syncopated rhythm and an implied Plagal cadence (mm.25-31). The second shorter refrain, “Blessed be thy name Jesu”, follows each of the two central phrases, setting the two verses selected from the original poem (mm. 14-15, 22-23). When this shorter refrain appears both times, it uses the same characteristic triplet rhythm. Each of the four phrases increases with intensity, rhythmically and harmonically, and in many ways every subsequent statement is a development of the preceding phrase. It is interesting how this comparatively short homophonic movement, focusing on Christ as Savior, comes in the middle (structurally) of the whole work, surrounded by three movements either side of it. In a very similar way, “Yif ic of luve can” the fifth movement from *Sacred and Profane*, another homophonic setting focusing on the crucifixion, is also placed centrally within the cycle. Their vivid contrast to the surrounding movements is striking, almost like the central panel in a religious triptych.

“Variation IV - The Three Kings” sets an anonymous fifteenth-century text found in the Rickert anthology under the title “Now is Christmas Come”¹⁷. Britten chooses only to use four of the original twelve verses as they appear in the anthology (vv. 3, 7, 8, 11).

¹⁷ “Now is Christmas Come” appears in the Rickert anthology of *Ancient English Christmas Carols*, Chatto and Windus (1910) pp. 110-111

Texturally, the most striking feature of “Variation IV” is a ‘running’ motive that continues throughout the movement. Commonly split between two voice parts, it not only provides the link to the [0,2,5] motive, but also gives a sense of movement and continuity. This provides a contrast to the setting of the narrative contained within the text, which is often quite angular and disjointed. When one examines this eighth-note motivic material which first appears as an eight bar pattern (mm. 2-9), before it repeats, one notices that it is actually made up of a number of small motivic one measure cells. Each cell contains at least one statement of the [0,2,5] motive including inverted and retrograde versions of the original theme (Ex. 2.10). These cells appear throughout the movement in all voices and in various patterns (sometimes transposed). In the final section of the work (m. 55) Britten uses these melodic cells to create a quasi-canonic passage, adding six extra variations (I-N), two of which can be identified in the original motivic material.

The image displays musical notation for Variation IV, showing motivic variants A through N. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature. Variants A through H are grouped into two rows of four measures each. Variants I through N are grouped into a third row of four measures each. Two boxes labeled '[0,2,5]' and '[0,2,5] Retrograde' point to specific notes in the first two measures of the first row. A bracket labeled 'I (m. 67)' spans measures 67 and 68, and another bracket labeled 'J (m. 34)' spans measures 34 and 35.

Ex. 2.10 *A Boy Was Born*, Variation IV, motivic variants.

Within the movement, one finds direct thematic quotations from other movements within the cycle. For example, Britten places a direct quotation of the “Noel” motive as the text deals with Herod (m. 26, Ex. 2.11), closely followed by a chromatic melisma on the word “moody”.

21 *pp* *mf* 33
 knight - a. Of He-rod, that
 knight - a. (No - el!)
 TEN. I (*p*) *poco cresc.* (*dim.*) Ah Ah
 TEN. II *p sempre legato* Ah Ah
 They took their leave, both old and ying,
 They took their leave, both old and ying,

Ex. 2.11 *A Boy Was Born*, “Variation IV”, mm. 21-26

The whole movement is scattered with a series of bare fifth quasi ‘mini fanfares’ sung in various voice parts, usually set to the words “there came” or “they came”. Many of the vocal entries which more narrative portions of the text, in a way, mirror the character of these fanfare like motives, firstly in their brevity (usually only two measures) and secondly, they nearly always begin with an interval of a perfect fourth, perfect fifth or an octave. The dominance of the octave is striking in these narrative entries, and in indeed unique within this movement, appearing ten times. Although not directly linked, the shape of these short two bar phrases reflects the rise and fall of the running eighth-

note motives, both in terms of pitch and dynamics. Arguably, this arch-like scheme is replicated on a larger scale within the movement itself. Again, there are very defined textural strata; firstly, the running eighth note motive that first appears in both bass parts, secondly, the fanfare like motivic material and thirdly, the setting of the narrative of the text, short two bar rather angular motives. Clearly, Britten groups these differing strands into pairs of voices, a characteristic of much of his other choral writing.

Structurally, a loose ternary form can be identified which is outlined by changes of tonal centers, but also by the careful use of dynamics. This quasi arch shape dynamic scheme already mentioned, coupled with the registral rise and fall of the music gives a sense to the listener that one is witnessing the kings approaching as the music gets louder, presenting their gifts at the climax of the movement and then returning as the whole movement gets quieter. As always the modulatory shifts that Britten takes, are well judged and are often prompted by the text. For example, the music moves to a tonal center of A major at the word “bright” (m.35). The word “myrrh” an ointment for preservation of the dead and of course the gift, symbolic of Christ’s ultimate fate, signals a flattening of the key signature as we return to E ♭ -major.

“Variation V”, is a setting of the famous “In the Bleak Mid Winter” poem by Christina Rossetti,¹⁸ sung by the semi chorus of women, and the fifteenth-century “Corpus Christi Carol”,¹⁹ sung by the boy’s chorus. Britten was probably familiar with

¹⁸ Christina Rossetti Poet b. 1830 (London) d. 1894

¹⁹ The fifteenth-century “Corpus Christi Carol” is found in Rickert’s anthology of *Ancient English Christmas Carols* Chatto and Windus (1910) p. 193

Gustav Holst's hymn-like setting of the text famously published in the English Hymnal²⁰ in 1906 and maybe even Harold Darke's more complex arrangement of 1909. It is the only poem by Rossetti that Britten sets to music in his lifetime and of course unlike the settings by Holst and Darke he chooses to use only the first stanza.

Ex. 2.12 *A Boy Was Born*, Variation V, mm. 35-37

Tonally, Britten reveals yet another referential sonority that of the A/B \flat clash which characterizes the whole movement. Indeed, in every measure there is a major or minor second sounding together, whether the A/B \flat or another pair of pitches. With the key signature of one flat, the main choir parts (women's chorus) predominantly remain in D-minor. However, with the introduction of the E \flat (m. 44) a tonal shift to C-minor is implied. This D-minor/C-minor tonality contrasts with the treble chorus who imply an F-major key center. Phillip Rupprecht describes the long pedal points at the beginning of

²⁰ The English Hymnal, first published in 1906, edited by Percy Dearmer and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

the movement emphasizing the A and B ♭ clash, as “effacing semantic identity”.²¹ Certainly, Britten’s treatment of the Rossetti text is far from sentimental or melodic, in contrast to the earlier settings at the turn of the century and of course compared to the simultaneous setting of the fifteenth-century “Corpus Christi Carol”.

Texturally, Britten succeeds in creating and combining two very different contrasting ‘strata’. The long held pitches of the women’s chorus, and subsequently the effective musical setting of the “snow on snow” Rossetti text sung by the older voices provides a ‘figureless’ background to the rather buoyant melody (12/8) of the fifteenth-century anonymous “Corpus Christi Carol”, sung by the young treble semi-chorus (Ex. 2.12). The sense of conflict that Britten creates in this movement, is striking. Not only does one experience the contrasting texts, one secular, one semi-religious but also opposing key signatures, unresolved major/minor seconds occurring in every measure and two very different motivic elements both rhythmically and intervallically. One could argue that the reason this piece succeeds, is because these opposing elements are made to strangely compliment one another. One witnesses throughout Britten’s work a fascination with juxtaposing and layering wildly contrasting musical material, and in many ways, it is Britten’s own form of counterpoint. Within Britten’s music this textural counterpoint happens on so many other levels; it is not just contrasting notes and rhythm that he succeeds in bringing together but also unrelated keys, tertiary and non-tertiary harmony, and importantly, text. Moreover, with the multi-movement works one has to consider the musical contrasts that are created between the movements

²¹ Philip Rupprecht, *Britten’s Musical Language*, Cambridge University Press (2001) p. 191

themselves and indeed how Britten pairs movements together. Although written at the start of Britten’s career, out of all the movements within this cycle, “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” points to a trajectory that would ultimately lead to the composition of the War Requiem combining all of these compositional elements on a much larger scale.

Inverted [0,2,5] motive Use of duplets to highlight religious text

51 *pp* And by that bed-side there stand-eth a stone, ... *pp* Cor - pus Chris - ti writ - ten there - on. ...

pp snow on snow...

snow, ... *pp* snow on snow...

on snow... *pp* snow on snow...

pp Snow on... *pp* snow, *pp* snow on

Ex. 2.13 *A Boy Was Born*, “Variation V”, mm. 51-53

“Variation VI – Finale - Noel”, is almost as long as the other movements put together. It follows the structural format in the earlier movement “Herod” that of a repeating refrain inter-dispersed with contrasting episodes, a type of Rondo form (Table 2.5). The opening section is typically economical in the musical material that it uses. Britten uses three textural strata; firstly, a compound figure quoting the [0,2,5] motive, secondly, a short melismatic motive in the female voices, on the word “Wassail”, again using the [0,2,5] motive, and thirdly, a rising fifth figure (A-E) in the basses (Ex. 2.14). As the second note of this two-note figure is held on it acts as type of drone to the other two strata.

Rondo mm. 1-80	Text: “Noel! Wassail!”
Episode 1 mm. 80-130	Text: “Good Day, Good Day” – Anon. fifteenth-century carol, found in Rickert anthology: “Ancient English Christmas Carols” (1910) p. 129. Britten only sets verses one and two of the original carol.
Rondo mm. 131-195	Text: “Noel! Our King! My Lord Sir Christêmas!” paraphrased from “Good Day, Good Day”.
Episode 2 mm. 196-231	Text: “Get ivy and hull, woman, deck up thy house.” Thomas Tusser (1558). Found in the Rickert anthology: “Ancient English Christmas Carols” (1910) p.225
Rondo mm. 232-326	Text: “Welcome be Thou, heaven-king” Anon. fifteenth-century carol taken from Rickert Anthology “Ancient English Christmas Carols” (1910) p. 121-122. The carol also appears in “The Oxford Book of Carols” (1928). Britten uses verses one and five. He discards verses two, three and four.
Coda mm. 327-414	Text: Begins with Frances Quarles text “Glory to God on high, and jolly mirth”, found in the Rickert anthology: “Ancient English Christmas Carols” (1910) p. 212. During the setting of the first two lines of this text, motivic material from earlier in the finale and previous movements is sung in the treble part. The “Sing Hosanna” refrain is taken directly from the opening “Theme”.

Table 2.5 *A Boy Was Born*-“Variation VI- Finale Noel!” Structure of movement with text selections.

52
46

49 *p* *dim.* *mf*
Was-sail! Was-sail!

p *dim.* *mf*
Was-sail! Was-sail!

-el, no-el, no-el, no-el!

p
No-el, no-el, no-el, no-el, no-el, no-el!

p
No-el, no-el, no-

p
No-el!

49 *p*
(Ch.) *p*
(Sw.)

Ex. 2.14 *A Boy Was Born* -“Variation VI- Finale Noel!” mm. 46-53

As this opening section reaches a climax, all three strands become more intense in their treatment and frequency, leading into the first episode – “Good Day” (m. 80).

It is interesting how Britten transitions into the first episode by means of a thematic pivot. He uses the ascending major second, characteristic of the “Noel”, “Wassail” themes ([0,2,5] motive), and joins it with an inverted version of the drone motive (found in the bass - ascending fifth), to move into the first episode. In the first episode, we have two textural strata (Ex. 2.15). The first is a dotted quarter-note homophonic figure, which as described, derives from the two intervallic elements from the previous section. This motive, however varied, is dominated by the intervals of a major second and minor third [0,2,5] and perfect fourths and fifths (both vertically and horizontally) and nearly always appears as a homophonic chorale-like figure (SATB, SSAA, TTBB). This motivic material is gradually extended in length throughout the episode. The resultant vertical sonorities are typically non-tertian (quartal/quintal) and contain very little harmonic functionality in their sequential placement. The second motive within this episode is a short eighth-note figure generally beginning with an octave leap, (occasionally a perfect fourth - reminiscent of the “Three Kings”), which weaves in and out of the dotted quarter note figure. There is a strong resemblance to a Baroque chorale variation texture, with the eighth-note figure functioning almost like an obbligato. Britten concludes the episode with the rising second of the “Good Day” motive as well as inverting and augmenting the descending fifth (mm. 129-130) to pivot into the next “Noel” refrain (m. 131).

97 [54] *f* Good day, good day!
f Good day, good day!
 com - ing. *mf* Good day, good day!
mf com - ing. *mf* Good day, good day,
mf - ing. *mf* Good day, good day, good day, My Lord Sir Chris-të- mas!
mf Good day, good day, *f* Good day, good day!
 com - ing. *mf* Good day, good day, *piüf.* Sir
mf Good day, good day, good day, good day, good day, *f* Sir Chris-të-
 [54] *mf* Ch.

Ex. 2.15 *A Boy Was Born* -“Variation VI- Finale Noel!” mm. 97-103

Many elements of the opening are retained in this next refrain (m. 131), apart from the “Wassail” theme, which is replaced by the “Sir Christëmas” motive that was introduced in the previous episode. Britten plays with the interval of the fifth throughout this section from the cascading bell like movement (mm. 138-151) to the very bold statements of “Our King!” in the extension or variant of the “Noel” refrain (m.154). Britten changes the texture completely for the following episode (m. 196) and initiates a patter like accompaniment, consisting of four strands of continuous eighth-notes, each strand being a derivation of the other (very reminiscent of the middle section of *Hymn to St. Cecilia*, 1942). Above this, he brings back the boy’s voices in a soaring contrasting theme, retaining elements of the [0,2,5] motive now expanded (mm. 206-209, mm. 222-22). A return of the “Noel” theme (m.232) is now accompanied by ascending and

descending scale patterns. Britten inverts the “Noel” motive (m. 296) before leading into an augmentation of the motive (m. 305). The perfect fifth that has pervaded this entire movement (“Noel”, “Our King!”) returns at measure 313 before Britten leads into the climax of the movement, the coda.

The coda (m.327) opens with a ‘bell-like’ pedal D staggered throughout the parts, the first note of the [0,2,5] motive. The boys herald the return of the [0,2,5] motive with thematic material heard earlier in “Variation IV – The Three Kings”. The [0,2,5] motive returns in triumphant style (m.334). The D pedal is continued while the boys quote from earlier movements, the “Wassail”, earlier in the “Finale” and “Lully, Lullay” from “Variation V”. The D pedal returns for further quotes from earlier movements - “Herod”, “Lullay, Jesu” and the “Hosanna” theme from earlier in the “Finale” (m. 206). Britten extends and develops the motivic material heard earlier (m. 206), which is based on [0,2,5] before reintroducing material heard at the opening of the work, in the “Theme” - “Sing Hosanna”. It is interesting how Britten harmonizes this short section (mm. 359-368) with recognizable triadic chords. The treatment of the “Sing Hosanna” motive (m. 368) is almost identical to that which can be found in the opening “Theme”, combining it with the new motivic material heard earlier (m. 206, m. 359). The music leads into a quasi development section, with the “Sing Hosanna” motive and the motivic material introduced at measure 206 providing the main textural strata. The movement reaches its climax (m. 406) with the final exposition of the [0,2,5] motive. The D pedal returns (m.410) and as one anticipates the final rendition of the [0,2,5] motive (‘Noel’) to move

to the note E or G to finish, instead, the melody moves unexpectedly to the note A. This is harmonized with a root-position D-major chord, the only such vertical sonority in the whole work.

One could argue that the *A Boy Was Born* is a defining moment in Britten's career. The work demonstrates all of the skill and artistry of an established composer confident and sure in their compositional voice, not the work of a nineteen-year old just entering music college. Texturally it is a 'tour de force', where often very contrasting motivic material is used simultaneously to great effect. It is as if he has moved on from the lessons learnt in *Hymn to a Virgin* (1930) where there is antiphonal exchange between the small chorus singing in Latin and the large chorus singing in English, although never singing simultaneously. As mentioned, the success of the work relies upon these very contrasting textural strata complimenting each other, a form of textural counterpoint. We see this textural component in many later works not least in his most defining work the *War Requiem*, where significantly we see again the successful juxtaposition of secular and religious texts.

Rupprecht says: "Britten's ability to match shifts of speaking presence within a text is a technical precedent".²² Within *A Boy Was Born*, Britten goes to great lengths to distinguish the narrative from the 'spoken' text. Generally the voice of Christ (usually one voice part) is placed at the top of the textural landscape with often very contrasting motivic material both intervallically and rhythmically. This is in contrast to the 'other' narrative text, which is most typically presented in two simultaneous voice parts in

²² Ibid., 21. p. 171

differing registers. From the gentle 'rocking' motive in "Variation I" to the angry disjointed "Herod" motive in "Variation I", from the 'mini fanfares' heralding the arrival of the kings to the falling 'snow' layered seconds in "Variation V", the portrayal of the text is so important to Britten. For Britten, text is simply not a framework from which to hang musical ideas but a genesis to the musical material itself.

CHAPTER III: A.M.D.G. [Ad majorem Dei gloriam] (1939)

A.M.D.G.-Ad majorem Dei gloriam was written in the summer of 1939, one of Britten's first projects after arriving in America in the summer of 1939. It was a set of seven¹ unaccompanied part songs written for Peter Pears' professional London group – the Roundtable Singers, using poetry by Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit priest (1844-1889). Little is known about why the set was never published. Mervyn Cooke suggests that Britten's decision to remain in the US indefinitely (they were due to be performed in November of 1939) and the outbreak of WWII may have influenced his decision to pull them and assign their opus no. (17) to his opera *Paul Bunyan* instead.² When Britten and Pears left the USA in 1942 the score to *A.M.D.G.* was left with Dr. William Mayer in America, because US customs would not allow Britten to take all of his work with him aboard ship for fear that some of it might be secret code. When Britten died in 1976, the Meyers returned the manuscripts to the British Library; following the death of Peter Pears in 1986, the scores were given to the Britten-Pears Library.

Interestingly, all seven movements exist only as pencil sketches, "God's Grandeur" being left unfinished (music for only the first sixty measures and no text underlay after measure 26). Britten's original title page lists the partsongs, but both "The Soldier" and "Prayer I" are crossed off the listing. The partsongs were never performed in their entirety during Britten's lifetime. For the first public performance given by the BBC Northern Singers at the Aldeburgh Festival (1984), only four movements – "Prayer

¹ There is evidence that eight movements were conceived. *Letters from a Life*, vol. II p. 720

² Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: Sacred and Profane and other choral works*. Hyperion records. Sleeve note. (2001)

I”, “Rosa Mystica”, “O Deus, ego amo te” and “Heaven-Haven” were sung. Later that year, the London Sinfonietta Voices performed all seven of the part songs at the Purcell Room in London, using Colin Matthews’ completion of “God’s Grandeur”. Curiously, their recording of the cycle, conducted by Terry Edwards in 1988, presents them in a different order, than the printed Faber score (Table 3.1).

London Sinfonietta Voices Recording (1988)	Published Faber Score
<i>Heaven-Haven</i>	<i>Prayer I</i>
<i>O Deus, Ego Amo Te</i>	<i>Rosa Mystica</i>
<i>Rosa Mystica</i>	<i>God’s Grandeur</i>
<i>The Soldier</i>	<i>Prayer II</i>
<i>Prayer II</i>	<i>O Deus, Ego Amo Te</i>
<i>God’s Grandeur</i>	<i>The Soldier</i>
<i>Prayer I</i>	<i>Heaven- Haven</i>

Table 3.1 *A.M.D.G.* Varied order of movements

Terry Edwards has stated that he recorded them in the order in which he received them from the publisher, who gave no instruction as to the order in which they should be performed. In the recording by the London Sinfonietta Voices, the movements tend to follow each other much easier both stylistically and harmonically. However, one could argue that, since the movements are not connected thematically or use the theme and variation format used in *A Boy Was Born* the number of movements performed and the order of their performance is left to the discretion of the performer.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in Essex in 1844. After an academically brilliant time at Oxford, (graduating with a first class honors degree in Classics) he decided to

become a Jesuit priest. Ordained to the priesthood in 1877, Hopkins served as a priest, preacher and missionary across much of England; he also taught Classics at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire. However, he is primarily known, and is important historically, for his poetry. Appointed professor of Greek Literature at University College, Dublin, in 1884; Hopkins found the environment uncongenial and complained of being over-worked. For much of his life he was not in good health; indeed, his poetry shows a sense of desolation, spiritual aridity and a feeling of artistic frustration. His poetry largely dealt with the contemplation of religious life and the nature of the Divine. His two collections of Sonnets - the first from 1875, includes, arguably his most famous work, *The Windhover* and the second 1885 collection - are probably amongst his best-known works. Hopkins was also a talented composer and artist, with most of his journals illustrated with details of flowers, trees and waves. Unfortunately, not much of his poetry was printed before his death due to typhoid fever in 1889. His work later saw a revival with his friend and Poet Laureate Robert Bridges publishing and distributing his poems amongst other fellow poets and to a wider audience in 1918.

Many attribute Manley Hopkins with the development of a new style of poetic rhythm in his poetry. Prior to Hopkins, most English poetry was based on a rhythmic structure inherited from the Norman side of English literary heritage. These rhythms involve repetition of groups of two syllables, which are referred to as 'iambic feet'. Within each 'foot' the stressed syllable falls in the same place on each repetition-usually the second syllable. The most commonly used form of this poetic rhythmic structure was iambic pentameter, where each line of text contains five iambs or 'feet'. An example of

this traditional iambic pentameter can be seen in the opening line of Shakespeare's

Sonnet XII:

/ x / x / x / x / x

When I do count the clock that tells the time

'x' - stressed syllable

'/' - unstressed syllable

Hopkins called this traditional form, "running rhythm" and although he wrote some of his early verse in this style, he became increasingly fascinated with the older rhythmic structure of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, *Beowulf* being the most famous example. Hopkins called his own rhythm founded on these older principles – "sprung rhythm". Sprung rhythm involves a fixed number of metrical "feet", ("free verse" is not fixed) comprised of a variable number of syllables, generally between one and four syllables per "foot"; that contain a stress that always falls on the first syllable in a "foot". It is a form of accentual verse, although Manley Hopkins' poems are certainly not predictable and have a spontaneous energy to them. "Pied Beauty" is a poem written by Manley Hopkins, which is in "sprung rhythm". (Table 3.2) 'Sprung rhythm' is similar to what Robinson Jeffers called "rolling stresses"³. Hopkins saw sprung rhythm as a way to escape the constraints of "running rhythm" (iambic pentameter), which, he felt inevitably, pushed poetry written in it to become "same and tame".⁴ In this way, Hopkins can be seen as anticipating what would later become known as 'free verse', becoming a

³ John Robinson Jeffers b. Pennsylvania 1887 d. California 1962. A poet who rejected conventional meter.

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges (Poet Laureate), Bartleby.com, (1999 reprint of 1918 original) Author's Preface.

prophet of modern poetry. His work was a major influence on twentieth century poets such as T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis.

"Pied Beauty" Gerard Manley Hopkins 1883	Metrical 'feet'	Rhyme Scheme
Glory be to God for dappled things-	5	a
x / x / x / x / x		
For skies of couple- colour as a brinded cow;	5	b
/ x / x / x / / / x / x		
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;	5	c
x / x / x / / / x / x		
Fresh- firecoal chestnut- falls; finches' wings;	5	a
/ x / x / x x / x		
Landscape plotted and pieced-fold, fallow, and plough;	5	b
x / x / / x / x / / x		
And á trades, their gear and tackle and trim.	5	c
/ x x / x / x / / x		
All things counter, or iginal, spare, strange;	5	d
x / x / / x // x x		
What ever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)	5	b
/ x / x / x / x / x		
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; a dázze, dim;	5	c
/ x x / x / x x		
He fathers- forth whose beauty is past change:	5	d
/ x / x / x / / x x		
Práise him.]	2	c
x x		

x = accented syllable / = unstressed

Table 3.2 "Sprung rhythm" structure found in "Pied Beauty", Hopkins.

The seven movements within the collection demand a high level of technical accomplishment from any choir that chooses to perform them. Ranging from the high tessitura required by the soprano and tenor parts in the first movement "Prayer I", to the highly chromatic, and angular subjects in "God's Grandeur", and the rhythmic complexities in "The Soldier" and "Prayer II"; each movement has its own unique technical challenges. Britten presents the listener with seven, very different, musical representations of Hopkins' poems. The first movement "Prayer I" begins with a second

inversion D–major chord (reminiscent of Britten’s later work *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* - 1943) and contains some of the richest harmonic writing of the whole collection. “Rosa Mystica”, a ternary form waltz, characterized by a pedal-point ostinato accompanying parallel thirds, at four minutes in length, dominates the set. The third movement, “God’s Grandeur”, contains highly imitative sections with chromatic representations of the words, “bleared” and “smeared”. “Prayer II”, displays a heterophonic texture, consisting of a core melody in octaves that alternates between the parts. The fifth movement “O Deus, ego amo te”, consisting of nearly all root-position chords, is characterized by speech-like rhythms. The martial rhythms of the sixth movement, “The Soldier”, fittingly represent the sentiments of the text, if at times, suggesting a hint of irony. As in other movements, the music is dominated by thirds. “Heaven-Haven”, the seventh and last movement of the cycle is a simple binary setting of this short poem by Hopkins, characterized by nautical metaphors.

“Prayer I”, is the abbreviated title given (by Britten) to the setting of a poem by Hopkins entitled: *Oratio Patris Condren: O Jesus Vivens in Maria*. This first movement in *A.M.D.G.* displays many Brittenesque harmonic and textural characteristics. Indeed, many parallels can be drawn between this movement and movements from Britten’s other unaccompanied choral works. Within “Prayer I”, Britten, uses two textural strata. The first is a homophonic texture that accompanies a highly lyrical, even dramatic, solo part for the soprano, tenor and eventually the chorus itself (m.16). Although there is a given key signature of D-major, save for the opening few measures and the final chord, the music very rarely remains within that tonal center. The first twist harmonically that

we encounter is the raised fifth - A \sharp in measure two in the soprano. Under normal circumstances it might suggest a modulation up a semitone (as Britten does later) but rather than modulatory, the A \sharp reverts to A \natural , as a resolution of a temporary dissonance. The familiar 'Brittenesque' Mixolydian flattening of the seventh is seen in measure three in the bass which moves from D-major to B \flat -major, then modulating to E-major on the word "well" (m. 4, Ex. 3.1).

PRAYER I

Gerard Manley Hopkins
(1844–1889)Benjamin Britten
(1913–1976)

Largo
f espress.

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Ex. 3.1 *A.M.D.G.* "Prayer I", mm. 1-6

Again, in measure six Britten flattens the seventh in the F-major chord (F7) to lead to a tonal center of E \flat -minor, from which he carefully pivots enharmonically on the flattened

third to F#-major and then, again using a flattened seventh (E \flat), later in measure seven to G-major.

Measure 13 sees a return of the raised fifth - A #/B \flat heard in measure two, but here Britten uses it as a pivot to move to E \flat -major, and then raising the fifth again in measure 15, the music moves to E-major (m.16). In measure 16 the ascending scale (A Mixolydian) first heard in measure three, returns, now sung in the tenor, bass, soprano and alto respectively affirming the key of E-major (m. 18.) The voices then leave their textural strata to proclaim - "To the Glory of the Father, Amen." Their scale begins in E-major but consists of whole tones, formally cadencing in Phrygian to A (m. 20). To make the tonality even more typically ambiguous, Britten inserts a mediant chord of F-major with a flattened seventh to act as a substitute dominant to cadence to D-major. With frequent modulations often to un-related keys together with unprepared dissonances and chromaticism the harmony is certainly not functional in the traditional sense. However, Britten gives a sense of homogeneity to the chordal progressions by using a series of common tones and half-step pivots. A common tone between two harmonically unrelated chords gives an immediate sense of connection, whereas the half-step pivotal movement lends a 'faux' sense of preparation to successive chords. Striking is the re-appearance of A natural in over half of the 22 measures of the movement. These harmonic 'techniques' compensate for a lack of functionality and become a characteristic of Britten's harmonic language seen throughout his work.

The setting of Hopkins' poem "Prayer I" is clearly text driven, a feature found throughout Britten's work. His ability to directly represent words musically and let the

natural speech rhythms of the text shape the music is very clear. The unexpected A# that we encounter in measure two, certainly creates a musical sense of the word “dwell” - the ‘incarnation of God’. The movement of the syncopated soprano line halts and one is forced to “dwell” on this harmonically ‘foreign’ note, reinforced by Britten sustaining this note for two and a half counts. The recitative-like setting of “in the spirit of thy holiness” and “in the fullness of thy force and stress” create a sense that the soprano line is the primary narrative, even rhetorical line. This textural stratification between one voice (solo or choral) as a primary melodic narrative and a sustained homophonic accompaniment appears in “Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour” and “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” from *A Boy Was Born* or “Yif ic of luv can” from *Sacred and Profane*. Interestingly, Britten reserves this texture for when the text focuses on Christ.

In measures seven and eight, of “Prayer I”, Britten highlights the text “thy pattern” by having the alto, tenor and bass sing a syncopated figure across the bar, each note lasting three counts, possibly implying a triple meter. Britten eventually changes the time signature to triple meter, making the earlier implied meter real. On the word “mysteries” the music moves abruptly from Bb to an implied A-major (missing its defining C#.) After the ‘melody’ part moves to the tenor (m. 11), at measure 16, Britten re-introduces the rapid ascending scale (Holy Ghost) first heard in measure 3, now in E-major.

“Rosa Mystica”, the next composition in Britten’s A.M.D.G. collection sets selected portions of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem. When one examines the poem,

which is arranged in rhyming couplets, one notices that the metrical feet are dominated by three syllables (dactyl). One can only assume that this poetic rhythm influenced Britten to set the poem as a Waltz. Britten's setting is also in a loose ternary form (Table 3.4). In Hopkins' poem, Mary is likened to a rose, whose blossom is Jesus Christ, a popular analogy among religious poets. It is interesting to note what text Britten chooses to set and what he discards. Such editorial abridgement is nearly universal in Britten's setting of texts, whether in solo songs or choral works.

'The rose is a mystery'-where is it found?
Is it anything true? Does it grow upon the ground?
It was made of earth's mould, but it went from men's eyes,
And its place is a secret and shut in the skies.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine,
Find me a place by thee, mother of mine.

But where was it formerly? Which is the spot
That was blest in it once, though now it is not?
It is Galilee's growth: it grew at God's will
And broke into bloom upon Nazareth hill.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine,
I shall look on thy loveliness, mother of mine.

What was its season then? How long ago?
When was the summer that saw the bud blow?
Two thousands of years are near upon past
Since its birth and its bloom and its breathing its last.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine,
I shall keep time with thee, mother of mine.

Tell me the name now, tell me its name.
The heart guesses easily: is it the same?
Mary the Virgin, well the heart knows,
She is the mystery, she is that rose.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine,
I shall come home to thee, mother of mine.

Is Mary the rose then? Mary, the tree?
But the blossom, the blossom there-who can it be?
Who can her rose be? It could but be One
Christ Jesus our Lord, her God and her son.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine,
Show me thy son, mother, mother of mine.

What was the colour of that blossom bright?
White to begin with, immaculate white.
But what a wild flush on the flakes of it stood
When the rose ran in crimsonings down the cross-wood!
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
I shall worship His wounds with thee, mother of mine.

How many leaves had it?--Five they were then,
Five, like the senses and members of men;
Five is their number by nature, but now
They multiply, multiply--who can tell how?
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
Make me a leaf in thee, mother of mine.

Does it smell sweet, too, in that holy place?
Sweet unto God and the sweetness is grace:
The breath of it bathes great heaven above
In grace that is charity, grace that is love.
To thy breast, to thy rest, to thy glory divine
Draw me by charity, mother of mine."

Table 3.3 Original text from Hopkins' poem "Rosa Mystica". Britten's text selection, highlighted.

He feels no compunction about altering the text (by deletion) or repeating it to realize his larger artistic purpose. The resulting text begins with "In the Gardens of God", a phrase that occurs as the fifth line of every verse of the poem save the last (Table 3.3).

Section I (A ¹) mm. 1-29	Section II (A ²) mm. 29-56	Section III (A ³) mm. 56-99	Section IV (B) mm. 99-141	Section V (A ⁴) mm. 141-180
Text: Stanza 1	Text: Stanza 2	Text: Stanza 4, using lines 5-6 of stanza 2 as ostinato	Text: Stanza 5	Text: Stanza 8

Table 3.4 *A.M.D.G.*, “Rosa Mystica”. Structure of movement

Britten realizes this text, “In the gardens of God”, as a syncopated figure that becomes an ostinato/drone heard throughout the entire piece. The ostinato starts in the tenor and bass at the beginning of the movement and continues throughout most of the movement, at times switching between voice parts and occasionally giving way to brief episodes of homophony. As mentioned, the ostinato begins with the text of the fifth and sixth lines of the first stanza of the poem and then proceeds to use the fifth and sixth lines of the second and third stanzas. Use of rhythmic or melodic ostinato is very widespread in Britten’s writing, arguably, the result of the early influence of such composers as Stravinsky and Bartok and, later, as a manifestation of exposure to Balinese music. Whether a strict melodic or, as is often the case a ‘rhythmic template’ used repeatedly throughout a movement, such repeated gestures are a major component of Britten’s overall style. As one might expect there are many examples of such ostinati in the unaccompanied choral cycles. For example in *A Boy was Born* - “Variation I”, Britten creates an ostinato in a very similar way to “Rosa Mystica”, although not on one pitch, but instead, on two pitches to the word “Lullay”. Again in “Variation IV”, there is a melodic and rhythmic pattern, which runs throughout the movement. Although not strictly an ostinato due to the frequent intervallic changes, its

rhythmic repetitiveness certainly gives it an ostinato quality. In the “Finale” of *A Boy was Born* we find numerous examples of ostinato patterns most notably in the ‘noel’ refrains, which pervade the movement. Similarly, numerous examples of ostinati can be found in Britten’s later choral work, *Sacred and Profane* (1975). In the second movement - “I mon waxe wod”, Britten introduces an ostinato in the soprano and alto – “Fowles in the frith, the fishes in the flod” which is then is repeated in m. 10.

Curiously, in his setting of “Rosa Mystica”, Britten chooses to highlight the text, “Mother of mine”; the final three words of all eight verses of Hopkins’ poem. Most of the aforementioned rhythmic ostinato sets this text. Britten’s mother died just two years prior to the composition of *A.M.D.G.* (due to a deadly outbreak of influenza in early 1937). It is possible that these words exercised a powerful emotional appeal over him in this composition and this setting is in some way a memorial to his mother, although there is no dedication. Generally, one senses some sense of a personal ‘connection’ within all of the unaccompanied choral cycles. Clearly, when one examines the texts chosen for these works there is a strong emphasis on religion. Despite the secular texts chosen in *Sacred and Profane* and the *Five Flower Songs* there are clearly religious ‘themes’ even in the seemingly secular texts that Britten selects. Certainly in *Sacred and Profane* there is a sense of personal reflection on penitence, new birth, the sacrifice of Christ and ultimately, death throughout all the texts chosen. Even in the *Five Flower Songs*, there is a reflective tone struck in the selection of the poetry particularly in the first movement, “To Daffodils”.

In his thesis, *Prolongation in the Music of Benjamin Britten*⁵ David Forrest draws parallels between “Rosa Mystica” and Medieval organum. He points out that in this particular movement, there is an, ‘important’ melody, a ‘vox originalis’, which has a subsidiary part moving in parallel motion, mainly in thirds (Ex. 3.2). Britten, essentially, creates a two-layered texture, consisting of an isorhythmic ostinato (drone) and the principal melody. Of course these textural attributes - that of an important melody which other parts show an accord - also have parallels with the heterophonic music of the Far East, which heavily influenced Britten’s music, particularly after his visit to Bali in 1951.⁶ One observes these textural characteristics not just in this movement, but also across Britten’s *oeuvre*.

8
42

_____ though now it is not? _____ It is Ga - li-lee's

_____ though now it is not? _____ It is Ga - li-lee's

love - li-ness, _____ Mother of mine, _____ Mother of mine.

_____ Mother of mine. _____ I shall look on thy love - li-ness, _____

Ex 3.2 A.M.D.G., “Rosa Mystica”, mm. 42-47

⁵ David Forrest, *Prolongation in the Music of Benjamin Britten*, Texas Tech University (2009)

⁶ Britten was first introduced to the music of Bali in 1939, by the Canadian composer Colin McPhee, while playing through McPhee’s Balinese piano transcriptions. Michael Kennedy, *Britten*. J M Dent. (1983)

“God’s Grandeur”, the third movement of *A.M.D.G.* is a setting of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem of 1877 (Table 3.5). Britten decides not to edit the poem, as others in the collection. The poem is in an Italian sonnet format. A sonnet is a dialectical construct, which in essence allows the writer to explore the nature and ramifications of two contrasting ideas. Generally it is divided into two sections; the first, the octave, the first eight lines, and second, the sestet, consisting of six lines. The rhyming scheme of the octave often uses the pattern ABBAABBA, whereas the sestet most commonly uses the pattern CDCDCD. In “God’s Grandeur”, the first quatrain of the octave describes the presence of God’s power in nature, and how that power runs

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Table 3.5 A.M.D.G. “God’s Grandeur”, Hopkins.

like a creative current (much like electricity); a similar energy is momentarily visible in Britten’s setting of the words “shining from shook foil”. The second quatrain of the octave describes humanity’s lost connection with the natural grandeur, the power of

God by prioritizing things economic over things spiritual. The concluding sestina (the last six lines of the poem) in contrast to the octave, notes that despite man's loss of this spiritual connection, God's grandeur remains in evidence. "Because the Holy Spirit over a bent world broods, with warm breast and bright wings", suggests that God is still watching over this fallen world, offering the promise of new birth, much like a mother hen broods over her clutch in expectation of new hatchling birds.

Britten begins with a bold musical gesture, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God", set as a descending major sixth and ascending major tenth that portray both the depth and height of God's grandeur. The visible 'electricity' of God – "it will flame out, like shining from shook foil" is rendered by the introduction of the E natural and G flat, creating an immediate discord with the repetitive thematic material in the tenors and basses. When the 'grandeur' theme is heard again in measure 15 it is inverted and juxtaposed with a chant-like motive in the upper voices. Although the poem does not use Hopkins' signature 'sprung rhythm' it does depart from the iambic pentameter lines of the traditional Italian sonnet. Take for example the fourth line of the poem "Why do men then now not reckon his rod?", which, consists of stressed syllable after stressed syllable. Britten chooses to highlight this stressed syllable text by introducing a very plain almost monotone motive (m. 16), which cleverly transforms into an off beat 'musical painting' of the marching feet, mirroring the onomatopoeic nature of the text.

The imitative section, which follows (m. 24), is both intervallically and rhythmically angular. Syncopations on the words "bleared" and "smeared" (mm. 26-27), portray the

destructive power of man's accomplishments and are thematically derived from the melodic motive first heard in measure eight. This fugal/imitative section, based on the opening 'grandeur' idea, develops and reworks the musical material presented earlier in the movement. This is yet another example of Britten's economical yet imaginative use of thematic ideas. An interesting textural change comes at measure 52 with a repetitive staccato, quarter note motive exploiting this minor second interval derived from the material in measure eight, and which characterizes much of the thematic material within the movement. The text at this point is concerned with the continued disconnection of man with nature particularly with shoes that people wear, providing a further alienation from man's feet and the earth they walk on - "the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod". Britten's use of musical material here is very direct, a kind of amplified, fast, march, more intense than its predecessor (m.19), by virtue of sequential transposition upwards.

The final sestina of the poem is woven into Britten's/Matthew's⁷ (there is no text setting by Britten after measure 26) setting at measure 83 – "and for all this nature is never spent". The poem takes a more reflective and optimistic tone at this point and is reflected musically using more lyrical, less disjointed thematic material. Still containing the characteristic chromatic element, and features of the opening 'grandeur' theme such as the large interval (used between the third and fourth note in the original), this more lyrical theme is encased within and contrasted to the earlier motivic material of the outer parts. The movement concludes with the 'grandeur' theme returning in each voice part

⁷ The movement was completed (m. 60-) for the work's publication in 1989 by Faber Music, by composer Colin Matthews.

beginning in measure 115, marked pianissimo, followed by the whole choir singing a harmonized version of the 'grandeur' theme measure 120 fading out to finish.

The text for "Prayer II" is taken from a poem written by Hopkins in 1885. Britten chooses to entitle it "Prayer II", probably due to the petitionary-like nature of the text. The only text alterations that Britten makes are to insert an "a" before fountain and to more radically, omit Hopkins' last verse.

PRAYER II

The musical score for "Prayer II" is presented in two systems. The first system includes the vocal staves for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B), along with the piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Andante con moto" and the dynamics are "pp legato". The lyrics for the first system are: "Thee, God, I come from, to thee go, All day long I -". The second system continues the vocal parts and piano accompaniment, with lyrics: "like a fountain flow, flow - From thy hand out, swayed a - bout Mote - I - like a fountain flow From thy hand out, swayed a -". The score uses various musical notations including slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 3.3 *A.M.D.G.* "Prayer II" mm. 1-9

“Prayer II” like “Prayer I”, involves an essentially bipartite texture. However, if one closely examines the ‘lines’ one could argue that, as in other movements, Britten creates a core melody of which the other part(s) decorate with derivative/related material. In the opening of “Prayer II”, the ‘core’ melody lies in the soprano and tenor parts, which sing the same melody in octaves. The alto and bass parts (moving in contrary-motion) form an imitative pair that rhythmically mirrors the soprano and tenor parts (Ex. 3.3). Interestingly, the interval of a third, which dominated the earlier movements particularly “Rosa Mystica” is dominant here again (between parts vertically and linearly). Both parts come together in measure 14 and then the quasi-canonic effect continues through to measure 21, when Britten replaces it with a heterophonic texture in which, the soprano and tenor elaborate the alto and bass parts.

At the ‘animato’ section (m. 26) Britten now moves the opening melody to the lower voices (alto and bass) displacing it rhythmically. Britten uses this shift in register and rhythmic displacement to highlight the text - “Once I turned from thee and hid” (Ex. 3.4). The counter melody, which now appears at the beginning of the ‘animato’ section, in a type of contrary-motion movement, is clearly derived from the theme, first heard in the alto and bass at the beginning of the movement. The music gets faster and louder, reaching its climax (m. 34) on the word “sinn’d” (Ex. 3.5) Although there is a tritone occurring between the bass and tenor, one does not necessarily hear C as the ‘root’ as the vertical sonority sounds more like a D_2^4 chord.

26 *Animato* *p*

Once I turned from thee and hid, Bound on what thou hadst for -

Once I turned from thee and hid, Bound on what thou hadst for -

Once I turned from thee and hid, Bound on what thou hadst for -

Once I turned from thee and hid, Bound on what thou hadst for -

Ex. 3.4 A.M.D.G. "Prayer II" mm. 28-32

31 *rall.* *mf* *fx* *Lento* *p*

- bid; Sow the wind, I sinn'd: I re-pent of what I

- bid; Sow the wind I would; I sinn'd: I re-pent of what I

- thou hadst for - bid; Sow the wind, I sinn'd: I re-pent of what I

- bid; Sow the wind I would; I sinn'd: I re-pent of what I

Ex 3.5 A.M.D.G. "Prayer II" mm. 31-35

The ensuing unison *Lento* section, "I repent of what I did" mirrors the opening both tonally and melodically, where the same minor third was the melodic goal. The minor

tonality reflects the penitential nature of the text. In measure 37, the ‘core’ melody moves to the two inner parts (m. 37), now at the same octave. The music follows a similar pattern to earlier reiterations with the ‘core’ melody (alto, tenor) being decorated with a quasi counter melody in the soprano and bass parts. As in previous areas of the movement “what I know of thee I bless” (m. 14), “of thy holiness” (m. 23-25) “I have life” (m.52) all employ a major tonality, which contrasts the largely minor tonality which characterizes the movement, but also adding an unquestionable element of word painting. The texture changes again (m. 51) with the ‘core’ melody being restricted to the bass. The other parts adopt a more homophonic role largely reminiscent in rhythm to the ‘counter melody’.

The text for the fifth movement in the cycle “O Deus, ego amo te – O God I Love You”, is widely attributed to St. Francis Xavier⁸ an early Spanish Jesuit missionary himself a pupil of his fellow countryman, St. Ignatious of Loyola.⁹ Britten uses the English translation by Hopkins, which appears in Robert Bridges’ anthology of 1918.¹⁰

Section A mm. 1-7	Section A ¹ mm. 8-19	Section A ² mm. 20-31	Coda mm. 32-end
Text: Lines 1-4	Text: Lines 5-12	Text: Lines 13-21	Text: “Amen”

Table 3.6 A.M.D.G. “O Deus, ego amo te” Structure of movement.

⁸ St Francis Xavier, Early Jesuit Missionary b. 1506 (Castille, Spain) d. 1552 (Canton, China)

⁹ St Ignatious of Loyola, Founder of the Society of Jesus b. 1491 (Castille, Spain) d. 1556 (Rome)

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

The most striking feature of this movement is Britten's use of harmony. Immediately noticeable is, again, the lack of harmonic functionality. Britten uses chord progressions that are harmonically unrelated but instead are connected with a series of common tones (Ex. 3.6).

O DEUS, EGO AMO TE

Presto - senza misura

Soprano: O God, I love thee, I love thee, I love thee —

Alto: O God, I love thee, I love thee, I love thee —

Tenore: O God, I love thee, I love thee, I love thee —

Basso: O God, I love thee, I love thee, I love thee —

Presto - senza misura

[Con moto]

5 *mf* *dim.* *pp*
 Not out of hope of heaven for me Nor fearing not to love and be In the e-ver-lasting bur - ning.

mf *dim.* *pp*
 Not out of hope of heaven for me Nor fearing not to love and be In the e-ver-lasting bur - ning.

mf *dim.* *pp*
 Not out of hope of heaven for me Nor fearing not to love and be In the e-ver-lasting bur - ning.

mf *dim.* *pp*
 Not out of hope of heaven for me Nor fearing not to love and be In the e-ver-lasting bur - ning.

[Con moto]

Ex. 3.6 *A.M.D.G.* "O Deus, ego amo te", mm. 1-7

There are, however, places where Britten tends not to connect chords by common tones; at the beginnings of phrases and places where he wants to highlight the text. A good example of this is found in the three short phrases beginning in measure 12 - "For

my sake suffer'dst nails and lance" - "Mocked and marred countenance" - "Sorrows passing number". None of them begin with a chord that has a common tone to the previous ending. One could argue that Britten does not aim to represent the pathos inherent in the text as in other examples where the crucifixion of Christ is a focus, such as in movement five of *Sacred and Profane* - "Yif ic of luvē can", where there the overall textural, harmonic and melodic choices reflect the anguish of the Passion in a more immediate sense. In contrast, Britten's setting of "O Deus, ego amo te" (particularly the 'con moto' section mm. 11-19) focuses on the suffering Christ, making very little attempt to mine the text's dramatic potential. In fact, the entire movement uses predominantly major triads in root position; but in measures 16-19 the music becomes darker (minor triads, low tessitura) to reflect the themes of death and sin.

It could be argued that Britten's focus is not on the physical act of Christ's sacrifice, but the devotional aspect of this poem, the 'love of God' that is demonstrated by the subject. Britten exploits changing sentiments in the text. "O God, I love thee" is re-stated in the first four measures to emphasize rhetorically the importance of its text. Sweeping upward gestures, maybe prayers directed up to heaven, full of rhythmic impetus, seek to represent the more positive even 'joyous' elements of the text, for example at the opening- "O God, I love thee" and - "Then I, why should not I love thee" (m. 20), a quasi recapitulation of the opening theme but still having this highly rhythmic force behind it. Even in the last measure the upward surge of energy created by the ascending diminished seventh arpeggio on the word "Amen" is striking. Descending more pedantic musical gestures such as those found in mm. 5-7 and 11-19 are used to portray the more reflective, penitential text of the poem. This very free ("Senza Misura"),

at times highly syncopated, rhythmic aspect of the text gives the music an almost 'breathless' quality. Indeed Britten uses an identical rhythmic pattern in only two separate measures (11, 18). This fast-paced music slackens only towards the end (mm. 27-31) to emphasize, "I will love thee" and in order to allow two little recitatives emerge through the texture. The final "Amen" is interesting harmonically and adds a dramatic conclusion to the movement. Vertically, the last measure consists of a series of major triads; linearly, with the voices again grouped in pairs (S/T, A/B), each vocal pair, outline a diminished seventh arpeggio pattern. Like most of Britten's vocal music this movement is clearly text driven. In many ways, the text dictates the structure of the setting (Table 3.6). In this short movement Britten lets the natural speech rhythms provide the music momentum. At times the influence of Anglican chant can be identified in Britten's choral textures and indeed there are present in this short movement, small sections, where a chordal recitation quality can be identified, albeit used at a faster harmonic pace.

Britten's choice to set Hopkins' text "The Soldier" is an interesting one. Completed in August of 1939, it suggests that Britten was perhaps struggling with his own pacifist stance and regretting his decision to leave England for America on the brink of WWII. The war was unfolding in Europe and indeed Britain was to enter the war just a few weeks after this setting was completed. The poem is written in Italian sonnet form but using the "sprung" rhythmic meter that Hopkins devised. Britten remains faithful to Hopkins' poem apart from omitting the word "Now" in the third line of the sestet. In his poem, at the onset, Hopkins asks the question "Yes. Why do we all, seeing of a soldier, bless him?". He answers his own question at the end of the poem (sestet) identifying

Christ as the ‘supreme’ soldier. The soldier’s ultimate sacrifice of laying down his life for another is ultimately ‘Christ like’. Britten revisits this literary parallel of Christ as warrior/soldier later on in the War Requiem – where, in the “Agnus Dei”, he selects the Wilfred Owen poem to “At a Calvary near the Ancre”, to intersperse and comment upon the text of the “Agnus Dei” (Table 3.7).

<p>Tenor: One ever hangs where shelled roads par In this war He too lost a limb, But His disciples hide apart; And now the Soldiers bear with Him. Chorus <u>Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,</u> Dona eis requiem.</p> <p>Tenor: Near <u>Golgatha</u> strolls many a priest, And in their faces there is pride That they were flesh-marked by the Beas By whom the gentle Christ's denied. Chorus: <u>Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,</u> Dona eis requiem.</p>	<p>Tenor: The scribes on all the people shove And bawl allegiance to the state, Chorus: <u>Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi...</u> Tenor: But they who love the greater love Lay down their life; they do not hate. Chorus: Dona eis requiem.</p> <p>Tenor: <u>Dona nobis pacem.</u></p>
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Table 3.7 *War Requiem* “Agnus Dei” text

Appropriately, Britten’s setting of the “The Soldier” is filled with martial style rhythms from beginning to end. The movement begins with both vocal pairs (soprano and alto, tenor and bass) declaiming the poems opening question, in thirds, in a true Brittenesque fashion. Here again we see Britten’s use of textural strata. After the initial unison statement, the melodic interest moves into the tenor and bass still retaining the ‘military’ dotted rhythms with interjecting statements, almost ‘military march’ like in the two upper voices (Ex. 3.7).

8

dim. *p* *3*

red - coats, our tars? Both of these

dim. *p* *3*

red - coats, our tars? Both of these

pp *3*

red - coats, our tars? Why do we all, see - ing of a sol - dier,

pp *3*

red - coats, our tars? Why do we all, see - ing of a sol - dier,

p *3*

pp *3*

12

pp *3*

be - ing, the greater part, But frail clay, nay but

pp *3*

be - ing, the greater part, But frail clay, nay but

pp *3* *più p*

why do we all _____ bless Our red - coats, our red - coats,

pp *3* *più p*

why do we all _____ bless Our red - coats, our red - coats,

pp *3* *più p*

pp *3* *più p*

Ex. 3.7 *A.M.D.G.*, "The Soldier", mm. 8-15

In measure 17, Britten adopts a series of pedal points that provide the movement's harmonic underpinning. From measures 18-23 an inverted pedal occurs in the soprano on D and then from m. 25-33 a G# is held in the alto and tenor. In the bass an F is held from 36-42 (albeit using a rhythmic pattern) simultaneously with a high A in the soprano. Some brief homophony is introduced in measure 43 until the music

returns to the 'hocketing/close canonic' effects, which are commonplace earlier on in the movement (mm. 18-22). In measure 51 the opening theme returns in a slightly rhythmically altered version. In the third statement of this theme Britten inverts the parts so that the melody appears in the alto and bass. The movement closes with the final stanza of the sonnet - "Were I come o'er again" cries Christ "it should be this". "This" referring to precisely what Christ, were he to return to earth would be doing - namely, "all that man can do". As in previous sections of the movement this 'Christ' action is represented by a D-major tonality again with the characteristically ever-present thirds between the soprano and alto, and tenor and bass.

"Heaven-Haven" is a very simple poem with a rather enigmatic message. Hopkins leads us to believe that the words of the poem are the thoughts of a nun about to take the 'veil' or profess holy orders and is a comment on religious life that uniquely demands one to give up all earthly pleasures in hope of a better life in heaven. The poem was clearly inspired by an earlier English poem by George Herbert *The Size*¹¹ which addresses similar themes, that one should not expect material happiness in this world but instead accept times of hardship as a spiritual preparation for the next life.¹² Indeed, Herbert uses nautical analogies and ends his poem "These seas are tears, and heav'n the haven", "Heaven-Haven" being the title of Hopkins' poem. Hopkins' use of nautical references as a way of understanding life surely must have attracted Britten, for whom the sea was a recurring inspiration (e.g. *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* etc.) Musically,

¹¹ George Herbert, Poet, Priest. b. 1593 (Powys, Wales) d. 1633 (Salisbury) *The Size* is contained within a collection of poetry entitled *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633).

¹² David Coomler, *Heaven-Haven: Refuge from the Sea of Tears*, retrieved from: <https://hokku.wordpress.com/tag/heaven-haven-analysis/> (2013)

the setting is an extremely simple two-part texture and characteristically quite economical in its use of musical material (Ex. 3.8). Again one sees that the counterpoint is organic in its genesis, that is, each part is derived from the other. One has an immediate sense of this from the opening measure where the soprano part emerges from the D pedal in the alto. Furthermore, as one observes so often in Britten's music, the music is constructed with the use of very short motives or cells. Simply, one can identify three main components to the motivic scheme. Firstly, the ascending motive which outlines a major seventh chord in the first measure and subsequently a minor seventh chord (m. 12.) Secondly, the falling fifth motive, which is often countered by a rising fifth in the lower part and thirdly, an ascending scale pattern, which again is often countered by descending pattern in the lower part. Harmonically, neither stanza has a strong functionality. Instead, the music is given a sense of coherence by the use of repetition both motivic and intervallic. Indeed, the falling fifth, a motive that gives the music appropriately a sense of 'longing', facilitates a kind of very loose sequential modulatory effect. It certainly is used to facilitate moves to different tonal centers. Striking in this setting is the use of discord, which we experience almost immediately as the soprano heads to a C# (m.2) underpinned by a D in the alto. There are also numerous examples of a quasi-harmonic suspension effect, which Britten uses in both stanzas giving the music an undisputed sense of conflict and tension.

HEAVEN-HAVEN

55

Andante tranquillo

pp *espr.*

S I have de-sired to go Where springs — not fail, — To

A I have de-sired to go Where springs — not fail, — To

5 *poco accel.* *rall.* *dim.*

fields where flies no sharp and si-ded hail — And a few li-lies blow, — and

fields where flies no sharp and si-ded hail — And li-lies blow, — and

10 *pp* *pp*

few — li-lies blow.

few li-lies blow.

And I have asked to be Where no — storms

And I have asked to be Where no storms —

15 *poco accel.* *rall.*

come, — Where the green swell is in the ha-vens dumb, — And

come, — Where the green swell is in the ha-vens dumb, — And

19 *dim.* *ppp*

out — of the swing, — the swing — of the sea.

dim. *ppp*

— out of the swing, — the swing — of the sea.

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Woodstock, N.Y., August 15th, 1939

Ex. 3.8 A.M.D.G., "Heaven-Haven"

The second stanza generally uses the same motivic material as the opening eleven measures and is also of equal length. However, the lowering of the opening theme an octave in the tenor and bass and the 'flattening' of many of the tones certainly

gives the music a darker quality perhaps in an attempt to portray the sentiments of the text and the final transition into death. Apart from the obvious flattening of pitches much of the motivic material in the second stanza keeps its intervallic integrity, apart from one noticeable place. In measure 15 instead of keeping the two falling fifths on the same pitches as in the opening stanza (mm. 4-5) Britten raises the second, up a minor third. Although the music is darker in character much of the tonal and harmonic ambiguity present in the first stanza remains. This ambiguity that exists throughout the setting mirrors the conflict that is inherent in the text and is only brought to a resolution in the perfect fifth, which concludes the movement.

Chapter IV: The Five Flower Songs Op.47 (1951)

The *Five Flower Songs* were written in 1950 as a 25th wedding anniversary gift to Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst, both of whom were instrumental in setting up the Dartington College of Arts and underwriting the English Opera Group, later to be known as English National Opera. The Elmhirsts were also keen horticulturists, hence Britten's choice of texts. The work's premiere was at Dartington (outside), given by a student choir led by Imogen Holst, in July 1950. For the five settings Britten chose three English poets: Robert Herrick ("To Daffodils", "The Succession of Four Sweet Months"), George Crabbe ("Marsh Flowers"), and John Clare ("The Evening Primrose"), along with the anonymous poem "Green Broom". Britten had already used poetry by the Suffolk poet, George Crabbe, for his earlier opera *Peter Grimes*. Peter Evans criticizes the settings for "not conveying much of the quintessential Britten".¹ Arnold Whittall calls the settings "slight" but adds, "they are sharply focused and vividly characterized".² Certainly when one compares these five settings to *A Boy Was Born* or *A.M.D.G.*, they are not as long, nor, arguably, are they as complex compositionally, particularly texturally and rhythmically. Moreover, the texts chosen lack the direct religious themes and sentiments that characterize so many of Britten's other choral works.

The first setting in the collection, "To Daffodils", uses a poem by Robert Herrick³ the seventeenth-century poet and author. Herrick, born into a wealthy family (his uncle was goldsmith to the King) became a clergyman and poet. He was a member of the

¹ Peter Evans, *The Music Of Benjamin Britten*, University of Minnesota Press (1979) p. 431

² Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett – Studies in Themes and Techniques*. Cambridge University Press, 1982. Second edition (1990) p. 123

³ Robert Herrick b. 1591 (London) d. 1674 (Devon, England)

influential group *Sons of Ben*, a group of poets and playwrights who closely followed the work of the playwright Ben Jonson. Jonson’s movement, turned to the classical Roman writers for their inspiration, which was considered in the early seventeenth-century to be quite old fashioned. Poets at the time were more influenced by the metaphysical poets, John Donne and Andrew Marvell. Herrick’s most important work was a collection of poems entitled *Hesperides - Works both human and divine of Robert Herrick* (1648) in which the poem “To Daffodils” appears.

To Daffodils, Robert Herrick	Syllable Count	Rhyme scheme
Fair daffodils, we weep to see	8	a
You haste away so soon:	6	b
As yet the early-rising sun	8	c
Has not attained his noon.	6	b
Stay, stay,	2	d
Until the hasting day	6	d
Has run	2	c
But to the evensong; (<i>Britten omits the word 'the'</i>)	6	e
And, having prayed together, we	8	a
Will go with you along.	6	e
We have short time to stay as you;	8	a
We have as short a spring;	6	b
As quick a growth to meet decay,	8	c
As you, or anything.	6	b
We die,	2	d
As your hours do, and dry	6	d
Away,	2	c
Like to the summers rain;	6	e
Or as the pearls of morning’s dew,	8	a
Ne'er to be found again.	6	e

Table. 4.1 “To Daffodils”, Robert Herrick

The over-riding message of Herrick’s poem “To Daffodils” (the short life of a daffodil as a metaphor for human life), and indeed much of Herrick’s poetry is that “life is short, the world is beautiful, love is splendid, and we must use the short time we have to make the most of it”.⁴ In the poem, one observes a rather irregular rhyming scheme and syllabic count which mirrors the sense of haste and insecurity within the text (Table 4.1). The poem is divided into two stanzas, each ten lines long, and which contain identical rhyming schemes and syllabic counts. The first stanza focuses on the short life of the daffodil, the second, making the comparison with the short life of the daffodil and human life. Britten uses the structure of the poem to dictate the structure of his musical setting, essentially in binary form (Table 4.2).

Section A mm. 1-39 Lines 1-10	A mm. 1-15 Lines 1-5	A1 mm. 17-32 Lines 6-10	Codetta mm. 33-39 Line 10
Section B mm. 40-77 Lines 11-20	B mm. 40-57 Lines 11-15	B1 mm. 58-72 Lines 16-20	Codetta mm. 72-77 Line 20

Table 4.2 *Five Flower Songs*-“To Daffodils”. Structure of movement.

In his setting, Britten gives the direction “Allegro impetuoso”, which suggests a musical ‘hurriedness’ to depict the short life of the daffodil. From the opening of the movement one observes a number of typically Brittenesque techniques. The first is the existence of two separate textural strata, the pairing of soprano and bass, alto and

⁴ Alfred Pollard, *Life of Herrick. Works of Robert Herrick: The Hesperides and Noble Numbers*. George Routledge and Sons (1898)

tenor. The soprano and alto imitate each other at the sixth and the tenor and bass at the fifth, creating, initially, a double canonic effect (Ex. 4.1). The close overlap between the pairs further reinforces the sense that “life is short”.

Allegro impetuoso

SOPRANO
Fair daf-fo-dils, we weep to see You haste...

ALTO
Fair daf-fo-dils,..... we weep..... to see.....

TENOR
Fair daf-fo-dils,..... we weep..... to see.....

BASS
Fair daf-fo-dils, we weep to see You haste...

PIANO
(rehearsal only)
f
mf cresc.

..... a-way so soon:..... As yet the ear -

.... You haste..... a-way so soon:..... As

.... You haste..... a-way so soon:..... As

..... a-way so soon:..... As yet the ear -

mf cresc.

Ex. 4.1 *Five Flower Songs*, “To Daffodils” mm. 1-9

Ex.4.2 *Five Flower Songs*. “To Daffodils”, mm. 43-48

The music assumes a more homophonic character at the ‘Sempre Allegro’ signaling the beginning of the second stanza of the poem. Moving away from the E \flat -major tonal center established at the beginning of the movement, the music modulates to C-major. The lone bass voice permeates the chordal texture with a downward sequential treatment of the opening motive, using text from the first stanza of the poem (Ex. 4.2). The C-major tonality is soon disturbed by an E \flat in the tenor (m. 45) and we slowly move back to the E \flat -major tonality to finish albeit by way of E \flat -minor and D-major.

For the second movement, “The Succession of Four Sweet Months”, Britten sets another Herrick poem. As is often the case in Britten’s choral works, the choice of text is of paramount importance both globally thematically (flowers) and locally (the impetus of this musical setting). The poem consists of four pairs of rhyming couplets, each line containing eight syllables (Table 4.3). The musical setting consisting of two reiterations of the poem, is essentially in binary form, mirroring the structure of the first movement, “To Daffodils”, (section A mm. 1-19, section B mm. 20-29, codetta mm. 30-33).

The Succession of Four Sweet Months, Robert Herrick.	Syllable Count	Rhyme Scheme
First, April, she with mellow showers	8	a
Opens the way for early flowers;	8	a
Then after her comes smiling May,	8	b
In a more rich and sweet array;	8	b
Next enters June, and brings us more	8	c
Gems than those two that went before;	8	c
Then, lastly, July comes, and she	8	d
More wealth brings in than all those three.	8	d

Table 4.3 *Five Flower Songs* “The Succession of Four Sweet Months”, Herrick

Each of the four months (April, May, June, July) is given a voice of its own: April in the soprano, May in the alto, June in the tenor and July in the bass. The voices operate separately; indeed there is not one point during the movement where more than one part sings the same words. As in “To Daffodils”, imitation plays a pivotal role, Britten assigns each couplet to a different voice but uses very similar rhythms for each. Each

part retains the intervallic and rhythmic integrity of the soprano's first four notes, except for the bass entry (m. 15) that begins with a minor rather than a major second, and is augmented. Imitation, in a traditional sense, extends to the traditional vocal pairs (S/T, A/B), each pair beginning on the same pitch (S/T, e; A/B, b), (Ex. 4.3).

Soprano mm. 1-5

First, A-pril, she with mel-low showers O pens the way for ear ly flowers, for ear ly flowers,

Alto mm. 5-12

Then af ter her___comes smil_ ing___ May in a more rich and sweet ar

ray, In a more rich and sweet ar ray,___ more sweet ar ray,

Tenor mm. 11-15

Next en ters June and brings us more gems than these two that went be fore,

Bass mm. 15-20

Then last-ly Ju - ly___comes and she_ more wealth brings in than all_ those three,

Ex. 4.3 *Five Flower Songs*, “The Succession of the Four Sweet Months”. Vocal entries.

Tonally, in “The Succession of Four Sweet Months” we are given the key signature of G-major. The opening subject is answered in measure five in the alto now a

fourth lower. The subject returns (m. 11) in the tenor, a repetition of the opening subject but now rhythmically displaced to fit with smiling May's 'more sweet array'. The subsequent answer appears augmented in the bass (m. 15) before moving into a short 'development' which consists of a sequential treatment, retaining the characteristic triplet motif (mm. 18-19) first heard in measure three. As Britten repeats the poem, a stretto-like treatment of the opening subject begins at measure 20. Interestingly, this stretto section seems to organically evolve from the D-major tonality that we arrived at on the first beat of measure 20, with the first note of all four parts outlining a D-major triad, in contrast to the G-major tonality set at the beginning of the movement. The stretto section concludes with an F-major chord (m. 29), a sudden harmonic shift from the previously established tonality. Finally, the movement closes with a G-major seventh chord spelt out across four measures, which is given a final harmonic 'twist' with the tenor ascending chromatically as the bass implies a Perfect cadence.

"Marsh Flowers", uses a poem by George Crabbe.⁵ Crabbe was an eighteenth-century poet, surgeon and clergyman from Aldeburgh, Suffolk. Indeed, the literary source for Britten's most famous opera, *Peter Grimes* is "The Borough" by Crabbe. "The Borough" is a collection of poems that Crabbe arranges in a sequence of 24 letters detailing the life of a borough and its inhabitants. Crabbe moved in the literary and artistic circles of the late eighteenth-century and was admired by many poets of the day such as Sir Walter Scott, Wordsworth and Byron. Byron said of Crabbe, "He is

⁵ George Crabbe, Poet b. 1754 (Aldeburgh, England) d. 1832 (Wiltshire, England)

nature's sternest painter, yet the best."⁶ Certainly this movement is one of the darkest texts in the cycle. The "Marsh Flowers" text that Britten uses for this setting is an amalgamation of two poems by George Crabbe. The first poem is taken from "Letter XVIII-The Poor and their Dwellings" from "The Borough" (1810). The second poem comes from a later collection of poetry – "Tale X -The Lover's Journey" (1812). To provide the text for "Marsh Flowers", Britten uses two lines of text from "Tale X", and inserts them between lines four and five of the original text from "The Borough", further deleting lines seven and eight of the original. Both poems are arranged in Heroic couplets, with each line having an even syllabic count (Table 4.4).

Marshflowers Poetry by George Crabbe, edited by Britten.	Syllable Count	Rhyme Scheme
Here the strong mallow strikes her slimy root,	10	a
Here the dull night-shade hangs her deadly fruit;	10	a
On hills of dust the henbanes faded green,	10	b
And pencil'd flower of sickly scent is seen;	10	b
[Here on its wiry stem, in rigid bloom,] Added text from <i>Tale X</i>	10	c
[Grows the salt lavender that lacks perfume;] Added text from <i>Tale X</i>	10	c
At the wall's base the fiery nettle springs,	10	d
With fruit globose and fierce with poison'd stings,	10	d
[Above (the growth of many a year) is spread] Deleted	10	
[The yellow level of the stone crop's bed;] Deleted	10	
In every chink delights the fern to grow,	10	e
With glossy leaf and tawny bloom below:	10	e
These, with our sea-weeds, rolling up and down,	10	f
Form the contracted Flora of <i>our</i> [original uses ' <i>the</i> '] town.	10	f

Table 4.4 "Marshflowers", George Crabbe

To open the movement Crabbe chooses the two sinister plants Mallow and Nightshade,⁷ in D-minor. Again, Britten pairs voices, the alto/bass and soprano/tenor singing unison melodies. The opening motive is characterized by dotted rhythms (reminiscent of a 'Scotch snap') and angular intervallic treatment. Other more sinister

⁶ Edwin Miller, *English Literature: an Introduction and Guide to the Best English Books*, J. B. Lippincott Company (1918) p. 396.

⁷ Mallow-the slimy roots of which were originally used to produce Marshmallow

flowers are to come - Henbane, Salt Lavender and the fiery Nettle. After the chromatic poison of the fiery nettle, the music then settles into a G-minor section (mm. 19-20) to depict the fern. From measures 21- 30 Britten creates a ‘double canonic’ effect between the pairs of voices, S/T, A/B. The music returns to a more angular and chromatic depiction of seaweed (m.32) with the first triplets of the movement. Britten perfectly describes here the tide rolling the seaweed up and down on the rocks of the shore. The movement ends with a solitary F# in the alto and bass, perceived as a Tierce de Picardie to the largely D-minor tonality of the movement. However, the last chord of the movement could also be seen as providing a quasi-cadential effect between this movement and the next. (V-I, Evening Primrose’s first vertical sonority is a B⁶ chord)

Examining the melodic structure of this movement, one is struck how the vocal parts tend to oscillate within a relatively small range. Particularly notable in this movement as in many examples of Britten’s choral writing, is the predominance of the third. All of the vocal lines share a characteristic alternate rising and falling minor third beginning in the alto and bass - “strikes her slimy root” (Ex. 4.4). A cyclic motivic element is suggested as Britten references the minor third, that is so prominent in “To Daffodils”. For example, in measure 29, the alto precisely replicates the opening soprano melodic gesture from the first movement and, later, Britten’s use of triplets (mm. 32-33) is similarly an echo of “To Daffodils” (Ex. 4.5).

ALTO

Here the strong mal-low strikes her slimy root, her slimy

Ex. 4.4 *Five Flower Songs*, “Marsh Flowers” Alto part mm.1-2

1st Movement, *To Daffodils*, soprano m.1 3rd Movement, *Marsh Flowers*, alto m.29

Fair daf-fo dils,

fen - ny bed.

1st Movement, *To Daffodils*, soprano m.25 3rd Movement, *Marsh Flowers*, alto mm.7-8

Prayed_ to

On hills of dust the hen-bane's fad - ed green

Retrograde

Ex. 4.5 *Five Flower Songs*. Illustration of motivic connections between movements.

In the fourth setting in the cycle “The Evening Primrose”, Britten sets a poem by John Clare⁸, an ‘East Anglian’ born in Northamptonshire in the late eighteenth-century. Raised within an agricultural family, Clare reflects a love of nature in his poetry, often using slang words found in local dialects; for example, words such as “pooty” (snail), “lady-cow” (ladybird), “crizzle” (to crisp) and “throstle (song thrush) are used in his work. His rudimentary education as a farm laborer is occasionally apparent in the lack of punctuation in his poems. Clare spent the latter years of his life in an asylum but was encouraged to continue with his poetic writings. In his biography of John Clare, Jonathan Bate writes: “Clare was the greatest laboring-class poet that England has ever produced. No one has ever written more powerfully of nature, of a rural childhood, and of the alienated and unstable well.”⁹

⁸ John Clare, Poet b. 1794 (Northampton, England) d. 1864 (Northampton, England). Britten uses part of ‘May’ a poem by Clare in the *Spring Symphony* (1949)

⁹ Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2003)

Section I (mm. 1-11)			Section II (mm. 12-19)		Section III (mm. 20-31)	
A mm. 1-4 Lines 1-2	B mm. 5-7 Lines 3-4	A' mm. 8-11 Lines 5-6	A mm. 12-15 Lines 7-8	B mm. 16-19 Lines 9-10	A mm. 20-25 Lines 11-13	B mm. 26-30 Line 14

Table 4.5 *Five Flower Songs*, “Evening Primrose”. Structure of movement.

In his article *Words and Music: Benjamin Britten’s Evening Primrose*¹⁰, Chester Alwes examines Britten’s setting with particular emphasis on how the poetry influences Britten’s musical choices. Alwes rightly points out that the form and texture of the poem influence the form, thematic material and overall texture of the music (Tables 4.5, 4.6). As is the case in other movements, Britten edits the text of the original, to serve his musical intentions. We see this most radically in line seven, where the text stress is made to match that of the first line of the poem - “When once the sun sinks in the west”. Clearly, Britten wanted to bring a degree of parallelism to the text, particularly as line seven marks the beginning of the second section of the movement.

Evening Primrose, Clare	Britten’s text alterations	Syllable Count	Rhyme Scheme
When once the sun sinks in the west,		8	a
And dewdrops pearl the evening’s breast;		8	a
Almost as pale as moonbeams are,		8	b
Or its companionable star,		8	b
The evening primrose opes anew		8	c
Its delicate blossoms to the dew;		9	c
And shunning, hermit-like, the light,	<i>And, hermit-like, shunning the light,</i>	8	d
Wastes its fair bloom upon the night,		8	d
Who, blindfold to its fond caresses,		9	e
Knows not the beauty it possesses;		9	e
Thus it blooms on till night is by;	<i>Thus it blooms on while night is by;</i>	8	f
When day looks out with open eye,		8	f
Bashed at the gaze it cannot shun,		8	g
It faints and withers and is done.	<i>It faints and withers and is gone.</i>	8	g

Table 4.6 “Evening Primrose”, John Clare

¹⁰ Chester Alwes, *Words and Music: Benjamin Britten’s “Evening Primrose”*, *The Choral Journal*, Vol. 45/1 (August, 2004), pp. 27-33.

As in other works by Britten, texture is more important than tonal center, in creating structure within the music. In “Evening Primrose” one observes how Britten emphasizes the form of the poem by using different textures. Except for the third section, the musical texture changes at every couplet of the poem. The work opens with homophony (lines 1-2), which reappears in the setting of lines 5-7 and 11-13 of the poem, interspersed with sections of quasi-canonic imitation (lines 3-4, 8-9, 14). In these imitative sections, again, one sees the melodic prominence of the third (major or minor).

Together with textural differences, Britten also uses two types of melody to differentiate the sections of the movement. For example, all of the imitative sections begin with an arpeggio figure, again stressing the importance of the third; while the homophonic sections, contain similar intervallic characteristics each time they appear (Ex. 4.6).

Soprano mm. 1-2
When once the sun sinks in the west
P4 M2

Soprano mm. 8-9
The evening primrose opens a new
M2

Soprano mm. 24-25
Bashed at the gaze, it can not shun,
m2

Soprano mm. 12-13
And hermit like, shunning the light,
P4 m2

Ex. 4.6 *Five Flower Songs* “Evening Primrose”, melodic intervallic similarities.

Within the homophonic sections it seems as though the melody always occurs in the soprano part; however, upon closer examination, there is often a clear 'pairing' of parts, melodically, rather than just a vertical sonority, where many of the intervallic characteristics are replicated (S/T, A/B).

Although given a key signature for B major (G#-minor), the tonality of the work conforms to neither expectation. One witnesses an immediate departure with A \flat appearing in the tenor (m.2). The A# returns (m.3) and the music immediately modulates to F#-major (m.4). In fact, nowhere within the piece is there a cadence to B; thus B-major cannot be seen as the overall key of the piece. Even the final chord is a bare fifth (F# and C#) absent of any third, reflecting the sad ending to the text and heightened poetically, by Britten's text alteration, changing "done" to "gone". Arguably, the tonality that is more prevalent is that of D-major. Alwes suggests a possible use of the keys of D and B pictorially, with D-major representing 'night' and B-major representing 'day'. The clearest manifestation of such a dichotomy appears where the D-major tonality established in mm. 20-21 ("thus it blooms on while night is by") moves to B-major mm. 22-25 ("When day looks out with open eye, bashed at the gaze it cannot shun.")

Britten tends to compensate for a lack of harmonic functionality and dissonance by using statement and re-statement to bring homogeneity to the whole. The series of seemingly unrelated harmonies at the beginning gains identity through Britten's repetition of it. Although changed rhythmically (mm. 3-4) to fit the stresses of the words, the melody (mm. 1-2, 3-4) is basically unaltered, despite the harmony being completely

different. The dissonances that occur in these opening measures recur consistently; while for example, the sonority heard at ‘sun’ is dissonant (F# sounding against E ♮), Britten prepares it by the presence of F# as the top pitch of three chords that precede it. None of the dissonances occur ‘randomly’- they are prepared though very careful and elaborate voice leading. Next, he introduces an A ♮ into the chord on the word ‘sinks’ – thus spelling a B major seventh chord, but by excluding the third (F #) the chord sounds even more displaced. A further dissonance occurs in the second measure on the word “the” where the G # in the bass clashes very stridently against the A ♮ in the tenor (Ex. 4.7).

SOPRANO *pp*
When once the sun sinks..... in the west,

ALTO *pp*
When once the sun sinks..... in the west,

TENOR *pp*
When once the sun sinks..... in the west,

BASS *pp*
When once the sun sinks..... in the west,

PIANO *pp*
Andante tranquillo
(recursals only)

3

SOPRANO *p*
And dew - drops pearl the eve-ning's breast; Al-most as pale as moon -

ALTO
And dew - drops pearl the eve-ning's breast;.....

TENOR
And dew - drops pearl the eve-ning's breast;.....

BASS
And dew - drops pearl the eve-ning's breast;.....

PIANO
p

Ex. 4.7 *Five Flower Songs*, “Evening Primrose” mm.1-5

Another unifying factor in this opening section is how the non-functional chords are connected with the common tone of A, a typical Brittenesque method of creating a 'faux' sense of functionality within the harmony. Looking ahead at the second phrase (mm.3-4) dissonances coincide with those in the first phrase (4); on the word 'pearl' between the A# in the tenor and the B \natural in the soprano but also between the A# in the tenor and the E \natural in the alto, creating a tritone. Again, there is a discord (tritone) on the second half of the word - "evening's" (coinciding with "the" in m.2) created between the B in the tenor and the E# in the alto. The E# has a degree of functionality serving as the raised leading note leading into F#-major, where the music cadences to in measure four (Ex. 4.7).

The "Ballad of Green Broom", which uses an anonymous text, pairs very neatly with the *Ballad of Little Musgrave*, the choral work that Britten wrote seven years earlier, for the POW camp Oflag VIIb in Germany in 1943 and that was smuggled into the camp on microfilm. Certainly the subject matter is closely related, two medieval stories of love, Musgrave ending more tragically than this Ballad. Britten's musical approach is tied to a textural strata being set up almost immediately. The origins of this poem are unknown, but it provided the text for a popular English folksong, "Green Broom". "Green Broom" appears in three major collections of folksongs. Firstly, in the 1882 book of *Northumbrian Minstrelsy - A Collection of the Ballads, Melodies and Small-Pipe Tunes of Northumbria* edited by Collingwood Bruce and John Stokoe, it appears titled as "Broom, Green Broom". Secondly, the same song is included in *A Selection of Collected Folk Songs* (1908), edited by two of the most prolific collectors of folk songs at the time,

Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharp.¹¹ A footnote in the 1908 collection, lists the folk-song “Green Broom” (Ex. 4.8) as being noted from John Farkell (aged 75), on April 10, 1907 in Bridgewater, Somerset. One could therefore assume from these two sources, where the “old man” lives in the west

Green Broom

There was an old man and he lived in the West,
 And his trade was a-cutting of broom, green broom;
 He had but one son and his name it was John,
 And he li-ed a-bed till 'twas noon, bright noon,
 And he li-ed a-bed till 'twas noon

There was an old man and he lived in the West,
 And his trade was a-cutting of broom, green broom;
 He had but one son and his name it was John,
 And he lied abed till 'twas noon, bright noon,
 And he lied abed till 'twas noon.

The old man arose and to his son goes,
 And swore he'd set fire to his room, his room,
 If he would not rise and unbutton his eyes,
 And away to the woods from green broom, green broom,
 And away to the woods for green broom.

Then Jack he did rise and did sharpen his knives,
 And he went to the woods cutting broom, green broom;
 To market and fair, crying everywhere:
 O fair maids, do you want any broom, green broom?
 O fair maids, do you want any broom?

A lady sat up in her window so high,
 And she heard Johnny crying green broom, green broom;
 She rang for her maid and unto her she said:
 O go fetch me that lad that cries broom, green broom,
 O go fetch me that lad that cries broom.

Then John he came back, and upstairs he did go,
 And he entered that fair lady's room, her room,
 Dear Johnny, said she, O can you fancy me,
 Will you marry a lady in bloom, in bloom?
 Will you marry a lady in bloom?

Then John gave his consent, and unto the church went,
 And married this lady in bloom, in bloom,
 Said she: I protest there is none in the West
 Is so good as the lad who sells broom, green broom,
 Is so good as the lad who sells broom.

Ex. 4.8 “Green Broom”, *A Selection of English Collected Folk Songs*, Novello, (1908).

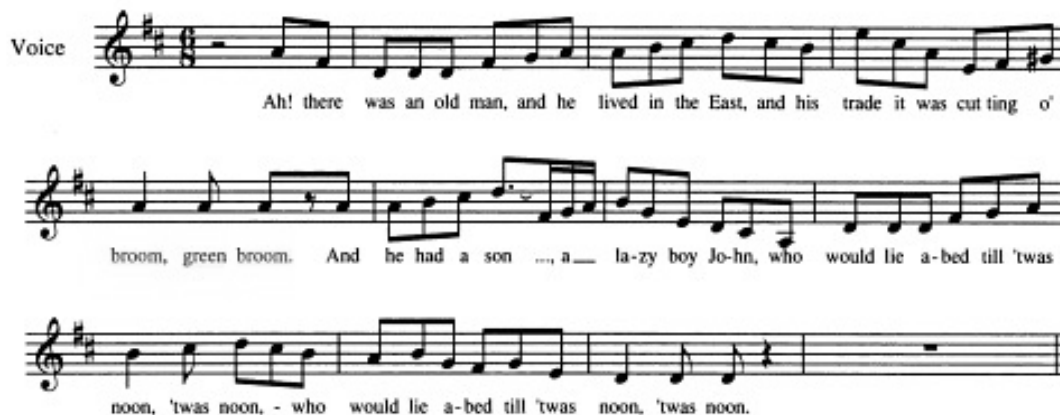
¹¹ Cecil Sharp, b. 1859 d. 1924. Founding father of the folklore revival in England in the early twentieth-century

(although one does appear in the Northumbrian collection), “Green Broom” had its origins in the western counties of England.

Green Broom

Anon

Voice



Ah! there was an old man, and he lived in the East, and his trade it was cutting o'
 broom, green broom. And he had a son ..., a la-zy boy Jo-hn, who would lie a-bed till 'twas
 noon, 'twas noon, - who would lie a-bed till 'twas noon, 'twas noon.

- 1 Ah! there was an old man, and he lived in the East,
 And his trade it was cutting o' broom, green broom;
 And he had a son, a lazy boy John,
 Who would lie a-bed till 'twas noon, 'twas noon.
- 2 His father came up to his bedroom one day,
 And swore he would fire the room, the room,
 If Jack did not rise, and sharpen the knives
 And go into the wood to cut broom, green broom.
- 3 Master Jack, being sly, he git up by and bye,
 And go into the town to cry broom, green broom;
 So loud did he call, and so loudly did bawl.
 "Pretty maids, do you want any broom, green broom?"
- 4 A lady looked out of her lattice so high,
 And spied Jack a-crying o' broom, green broom;
 Says she, "You young blade, won't you give up your trade
 And marry a maid in full bloom, full bloom?"
- 5 So they sent for the parson, without more delay,
 And married they was in the room, the room;
 There was eating and drink, and a kiss when you please,
 Says Jack, "This is better than cutting o' broom."
 (From Miss F. Hamond, Swaffham.)

Ex. 4.9 “Green Broom”, *English County Songs*. Broadwood, Fuller Maitland (eds.) (1893)

However, in the third major collection that “Green Broom” appears - the Lucy Broadwood¹² collection of folk songs¹³ (Ex. 4.9) the “old man” lives in the “east”, thus it was probably relatively well-known across England and had regional variations both in text and tune (The Broadwood version has only five verses). It is interesting, that the tune that Broadwood dictated from Mrs. F. Hammond, from Swaffham, in Norfolk, varies significantly from the tune that Vaughan Williams dictated in 1907 and which appears in the 1882 Northumbrian collection. In his setting, Britten chooses to separate the poem from any regional connection by editing the first line, the “old man lived out in the wood” (Table 4.7).

Ballad of Green Broom (Britten’s Text Alterations)

There was an old man lived out in the wood,
 And his trade was a-cutting of broom, green broom,
 He had but one son without thought without good
 Who lay in his bed till 't was noon, bright noon.

The old man awoke one morning and spoke,
 He swore he would fire the room, that room,
 If his John would not rise and open his eyes,
 And away to the wood to cut broom, green broom.

So Johnny arose and slipp'd on his clothes
 And away to the wood to cut broom, green broom,
 He sharpen'd his knives, and for once he contrives
 To cut a great bundle of broom, green broom.

When Johnny pass'd under a Lady's fine house,
 Pass'd under a Lady's fine room, fine room,
 She call'd to her maid: "Go fetch me," she said,
 "Go fetch me the boy that sells broom, green broom!"

When Johnny came into the Lady's fine house,
 And stood in the Lady's fine room, fine room,
 "Young Johnny" she said, "Will you give up your trade
 And marry a lady in bloom, full bloom?"

Johnny gave his consent, and to church they both went,
 And he wedded the Lady in bloom, full bloom;
 At market and fair, all folks do declare,
 There's none like the Boy that sold broom, green broom.

Table 4.7. Britten’s text alterations, “Ballad of Green Broom”

¹² Lucy Broadwood b. 1858 d. 1929. Collector of folk songs and editor of the English Folk Song Journal.

¹³ Lucy Broadwood and John Fuller-Maitland (eds) *English County Songs*, J.B. Cramer and Co. IMSLP (1893)

Indeed Britten changes the text in every verse, while keeping the general structure of the poem the same (six verses). The “Ballad of Green Broom” is the only setting in the collection, which had already been set to music as a folksong. Interestingly, as an acknowledgement of the setting’s origins, Britten chooses to add the prefix of “Ballad” to the title and retains the compound meter that one finds in all three of the original transcriptions. He also retains the two eighth-note ‘pick-up’ beats that appear in the Norfolk version of the song, augmenting them into two dotted-eighths. Melodically, however, Britten decides to compose a completely different melody to the text, unlike many of his other folk song arrangements, where the original melody is retained. The movement may be seen as a series of six variations, one for each verse of the poem (Table 4.8). Although the melody in each variation is the same (transposed), Britten surrounds it with a series of related, yet evolving accompaniments. Clear comparisons with this movement can be

Verse 1 (20) mm. 1-20	Verse 2 (16) mm. 20-35	Verse 3 (17) mm. 36-52	Verse 4 (17) mm. 52-66	Verse 5 (14) mm. 67-80	Verse 6 (24) mm. 80-104
Melody in tenor. Ostinato accompaniment in other parts.	Melody in bass. Ostinato accompaniment in other parts.	Poco animando. Melody in soprano. Accompanying ostinato now rhythmically displaced.	Melody in alto. Antiphonal, oscillating accompaniment in tenor and bass.	Animato. Melody now in canon; tenor/bass and then soprano/alto (m.73).	Vivace. Melody now in alto and bass, with loud ‘bell-like’ divisi accompaniment in other parts. Accelerando to final choral flourish.

Table 4.8 *Five Flower Songs*–“The Ballad of Green Broom”. Movement structure.

drawn with many of Britten’s settings of English Folk-Songs where the central melody remains relatively unchanged but the piano accompaniment often operates as a

separate rhythmic stratum. The textural and harmonic characteristics of this movement are very reminiscent of the English folk song setting by Britten of *O Waly, Waly* (1946).

The performance direction given for this movement is *Cominciando esitando* which, translated, means beginning hesitantly, falteringly. The march-like texture, which is created by the ‘accompanying’ voices, oscillates between tonic and dominant. One cannot ignore the onomatopoeic element of the word “broom” in connection with a military snare drum. As the first solo entry occurs in the tenor (m. 5) the D-major tonality is very firmly established. Britten carefully uses the text as a guide to his musical choices, for example we see an emphasis on the word “noon” (mm. 15-16), which, coincides neatly (rhyming) with the rest of the chorus’ augmentation of their ostinato like figure in “green broom” (mm. 17-18). If that wasn’t perfectly crafted enough Britten uses this as an opportunity to modulate to the dominant leading into the second verse where the basses continue the exposition of the story (m. 20). The second verse is almost identical both in composition and length, to the first.

The third verse returning to D-major slightly quickens in pace retaining the same melody as the sopranos continue telling of the exploits of Johnny. Britten adds elements of syncopation and suspension to the vocal ostinato (Ex. 4.10). In verse four the ostinato is altered further with an oscillating figure appearing in the tenor and bass with the soprano retaining the rhythm of the original ostinato. The melody now appears in the alto part in the key of F-major/D-minor. The verse does not end with the augmentation of the ostinato but with an acclamation of “go fetch me the boy” heralding a return to D- major. The fifth verse, *animato*, uses a stretto canon at the fourth, sung

first in the bass and tenor (m. 67) then replicated in the alto and soprano (m. 73). For this verse the ostinato completely disappears and the canonic writing overtakes the whole texture.

34 2 poco animando

So John - ny a-rose and slippd on his clothes
 green Broom, green Broom, green
 green Broom,..... green..... Broom,..... green.....
 green Broom, green Broom, green

2 poco animando

40

And a-way to the wood to cut Broom, green Broom, green Broom,.....
 Broom, green Broom, green Broom,
 Broom,..... green Broom, green a -
 Broom, green Broom, green Broom,

cresc.

Ex. 4.10 *Five Flower Songs*- “The Ballad of Green Broom”, mm.36-42

Britten uses an antiphonal ‘bell like’ ostinato to introduce verse six, appropriately for the verse depicting the marriage between Johnny and his “blooming”

lady. A closer examination of this ostinato reveals that it is derived from the opening ostinato accompaniment. In essence it is made up of a series of alternating major seconds, which mirror the soprano part in much of the first verse. The melody is now placed in octaves in the alto and bass parts until the melody moves to the soprano (m. 87) with the other parts now providing a homophonic type accompaniment matching the rhythm of the melody. The verse reaches its climax (m. 96) with the bell like ostinato first appearing in measure 80 now returning with a higher soprano part, actually the exact pitches of the soprano part at the opening of the movement thus creating a tritone C sharp-G natural on the word 'green'. The movement closes with a choral flourish on the word 'broom' ending with a D major second inversion chord in a very similar fashion to how Britten finishes "Marsh Flowers" and the last movement "Death" in *Sacred and Profane*.

Chapter V: The Last Choral Cycle, Sacred and Profane Op. 91 (1975)

Sacred and Profane Op. 91, the set of eight Medieval lyrics set to music by Britten in 1975 add to his relatively small output for unaccompanied choral ensemble and mark an almost forty-year gap between the composition of his first choral cycle (*A Boy Was Born*) in 1933. Written just before the end of his life, it could be argued that each of the settings has the ability to stand alone as a musical work without relying on performance of the cycle as a whole. Britten discovered the texts in the famous R.T. Davies' collection, "Medieval Lyrics: A Critical Anthology" (1963). In his anthology Davies presents over 180 poems from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Interestingly, this collection also contains the "Hymn to Mary" (12th Century) that Britten famously used for his unaccompanied choral work *Hymn to the Virgin* (1930) and the "Corpus Christi Carol" that he used in *A Boy Was Born*. One can only speculate that Britten may have been attracted to this new anthology because it included poems that he already knew. Britten's earlier access to "Hymn to Mary" would have probably come via access in the Gresham's School Library in the anthology the *Oxford Book of English Verse* compiled by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1900. Also included in that earlier anthology was the lyric "Lenten is come with love to toun". Indisputably, Britten at the end of his life¹ was not composing at the rate that he had once worked, as a younger composer. At the time these works were written he was seriously debilitated by a heart condition that had required highly invasive surgery. Despite his illness, these short

¹ *Sacred and Profane* was completed in January 1975. Britten died 4th December 1976.

choral pieces are “Quintessential Britten”², demonstrating the same clarity of thought and command of compositional technique found in many of his earlier works.

Godric of Finchale³ was a medieval hermit born in Walpole just thirty miles from Britten’s own birthplace. Earlier in his life, as a sailor and entrepreneur, he spent many years at sea. A visit to Lindisfarne Island, off the Northeast coast of England and an encounter there with St Cuthbert (this was not a physical encounter as St. Cuthbert had been dead for many years) changed his life forever, devoting himself to Christianity. After many pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Godric settled in the northeast of England, for almost sixty years, in a hermitage beside the river Wear. He was a popular figure in Medieval Christendom and figures such as Thomas Becket and Pope Alexander III sought his advice. Even after his death (although never formally canonized), he continued to be a revered saint throughout medieval times. Godric reportedly had a vision of the Virgin Mary, who gave him a song of consolation to help him overcome grief or temptation. The poem contains many of the popular themes from medieval poetry such as the romance tinge of Mary as ‘bower of Christ’, and the flower imagery. Godric in Old English meant ‘God’s Kingdom’, so, in the poem there is even a little play on his own name.

“Sainte Marye” is thought to be one of the oldest surviving notated pieces of music set to an English text.⁴ In its original form it follows the standard pattern of the time - a uniform series of four-line stanzas. The rhyme scheme is identical for both

² Anthony Milner, *The Britten Companion: The Choral Works*, (ed.) Christopher Palmer, Cambridge University Press (1984) p. 345

³ Godric of Finchale, medieval hermit b. 1065 (Norfolk) d. 1170 (County Durham)

⁴ Brian Trowell, *Godric*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Oxford University Press (2001)

stanzas (AABB). In his setting, Britten reflects the structure of the poem with a corresponding bipartite structure (Table 5.1) and by repeating elements within the music, for example, the C-major vertical sonority and the triplet rhythm (mm. 1-3), is replicated at the beginning of the second verse (mm. 15-16).

Section A mm. 1-14	Section B mm. 15-24	G.P. m. 25	Coda mm. 26-33
Text: Verse 1	Text: Verse 2		Text: Line 1 of Verse 1

Table 5.1 *Sacred and Profane* “St. Godric’s Hymn”. Structure of movement.

Interestingly, the poem contains elements of ellipsis, a common rhetorical device where words implied by a previous clause are omitted. For example, in lines three and four of the hymn, the literal translation would be “Receive, defend, help thy Godric” (line 3) “Received, bring on high with thee in God’s kingdom” (line 4). This declamatory even rhetorical, style, is reflected in Britten’s setting, where rhythms, strongly reflect the stresses and emphases in the original text, i.e. important words fall on strong beats of the bar and certain words are repeated to reflect their importance within the text - “Sainte” and “Moder”.

The most distinctive feature of Britten’s homophonic setting of this text is his use of harmony and tonality. In his analysis of the movement, Arnold Whittall suggests that the movement is an overall tonal struggle between C-major and C-minor⁵. Certainly the three statements of “Sainte Marye” (mm. 1, 15 and 26), which create the movement’s musical form (Table 5.1), all begin with a C-major triad but soon move to the tonic minor. This movement involves no elaborate modulation but is accomplished through a

⁵ Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett – Studies in Themes and Techniques*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Second edition (1990) p. 275

series of non-triadic notes being added to the vertical sonorities. As in Britten's other works, such adding of non-triadic notes to a chord is a consistent stylistic trait. Typically, the most often added 'color' notes involve either a second or a ninth, creating a characteristic, major/minor second clash within the vertical sonority. Another harmonic color, displayed throughout this setting, is the flattened seventh (a reference to Mixolydian mode) of the tonic triad (mm. 2, 16, 26³, 30), which appears as the second sonority of each major section. Interestingly, this chordal coloration always occurs when the text mentions "Mary".

For P. P. and the Wilbye Consort

Sacred and Profane

EIGHT MEDIEVAL LYRICS

Benjamin Britten, Op. 91

1 St. Godric's Hymn

(Mid 12th century)

Broad and rhetorical (♩ = 52)

© 1977 by Faber Music Ltd.

Example 5.1 *Sacred and Profane*, "St. Godric's Hymn" mm. 1-11

The first departure texturally from the homophony that dominates the movement occurs in measures 7-10 (Ex. 5.1), where Britten separates the two soprano parts from the lower voices to sing the word "schild" (shield/defend); it may be that he sees them as the embodiment of the angels that accompanied Mary when the song was given to Godric. The harmonic landscape is ambiguous as C-minor (m. 6) pivots to E \flat -major (m. 7). Aside from this single measure neither the E \flat -major nor C-minor triads sound without some degree of mixture (e.g. C-minor/E \flat -minor - m. 8). Such non-functional progressions are accomplished by connecting each of the vertical sonorities with common tones, a technique we see across Britten's work. Britten depicts Godric being "received on high" as the music moves back albeit rather abruptly to a C-major tonal center (m. 12).

The second verse brings back the opening sonority (m.15), but now with a higher pitch (E) that is a major third above the first. This enables Britten to develop the major third motif (m. 2) into a full rising major arpeggio (mm. 16-17) eventually transforming it to a C minor triad (m. 18), mirroring the shift to C-minor that we encountered in the opening measures of the movement (m. 6). The unusual Britten 'Tristan' chord (C minor triad with an added flattened second) that one hears in measure five returns on the word 'flower' (m. 19). With this 'Tristanian' chord used for the appearance of Jesus within the text, clearly, Britten is making a connection musically between the two words by using the same vertical sonority. The tonal ambiguity displayed in measures 7-9 returns in measures 20-21 dominated by the rising arpeggio motive in the soprano and tenor. The chromatic descent (mm. 22-24) depicts a process

of descending tonal 'purification' leading to the C major chord on the word "God". Britten often used the tonality of C-major to represent purity, the key without sharps or flats. Indeed in this setting the word "God" is always set to a C-major chord (mm. 12, 24) as is the word "Mary" although usually with an added flattened seventh to the chord, as mentioned. The coda section (m. 26) returns the opening material now translated an octave lower, dispersed with dramatic silences.

The fourteenth-century Middle English lyric "Fowles in the Frith" is less well-known than other poems in Davies' anthology. The original medieval manuscript contains five lines of music scored for two voices and takes up less than a page of velum. The poem is not thought to be part of anything else, and scholars are not exactly sure whether the poem is complete as it was found amongst a collection of legal documents.⁶ The poem evokes in the first two lines a 'harmonious' nature, which is then disrupted by "And I mon waxe wod" - and I (the poet) must go mad. The fourth line proposes a cause of the 'madness' as the poet is "Mulch sorw I walke with" - walking with much sorrow. The fifth line offers a solution in kind (on account of the "beste of bon and blod") but nonetheless adds some confusion as what is "beste of bon and blod" and why does it cause such sorrow? Consequently, why do these sorrows have anything to do with the fish and the birds?

The poem was believed to be a secular love lyric, interpreting the last two lines as "I walk with much sorrow because of a woman who is the best of bone and blood".

⁶Thomas C Moser, Jr., "And I Mon Waxe Wod": *The Middle English "Foweles in the Frith"* Modern Language Association (periodical) Vol. 102, No. 3 (May, 1987) pp. 326-337

However, in recent scholarship, questions have arisen as to whether the text is secular or conversely sacred. Edmund Reiss, the medieval literary scholar suggests that the poem may emphasize “man as deranged and out of harmony with the world”, a disharmony that results from “living after original sin” (“much sorrow I live with”). To Reiss, the “beste of bon and blod” might mean humankind as “beast” or “Christ” the man of sorrows who was the ‘best of living beings’.⁷ However one interprets this poem, its ambiguity may well have been what fascinated Britten.

Section A mm. 1-9		Section A ¹ mm. 10-16		Coda mm. 17-19	
Lines 1 and 2 of text	Sopranos close canonic ostinato S.1-S.2 (mm.1-8)	Lines 1 and 2 of text	Soprano close canonic ostinato S.2-S.1 (mm. 10-13)	Lines 1 and 2 of text	Partial recap of opening ostinato, dispersed with one bar rest.
Line 4 of text	Basses and tenors in unison (mm. 2-8)	Line 5 of text	Basses and tenors in unison (inversion of motive heard in mm. 2-8)	“Bon” and “Blod” from line 5 of text	Basses and tenors in unison singing two notes- D and B \flat .
Line 3 of text	Alto sings on note ‘G’ (pitch not used in other voices)	Line 3 of text	Alto sings on note ‘C’ (pitch not used in other voices)	“Waxe” and “Wod” from line 5 of text	Alto sings cadenza-like figure.

Table 5.2 *Sacred and Profane* “I mon waxe wod”. Structure of movement.

Britten immediately establishes three textural strata (Table 5.2, Ex. 5.2). The first is a two-part ostinato in the two soprano parts. The second, is the interjectory third line of the lyric sung by the alto “And I mon waxe wod” - and I must go mad, which is framed by the third strand in the tenor and bass, who sing the fourth line of the text “mulch sorw I walke with” - much sorrow I walk with (mm. 2-8, 9-15, 17, 19).

⁷ Edmund Reiss, *The Art of the Middle English Lyric, Essays in Criticism*, University of Georgia Press (1972) pp. 376-377

bass setting of the fourth and fifth lines of the lyric with an even quarter note figure, a 'walking' motif. The alto interjects on a G, a note not used by the other voices singing, "and I mon waxe wod" leading into a bizarre solo melisma on the word "wod" - mad. The second soprano starts the repeat of the opening ostinato canonic figure, with the alto again interjecting on the same text of line three of the lyric, this time on the other unused note, C. The piece ends with a brief reiteration of the ostinato figure again interjected briefly with the 'mad' theme now highly melismatic, somewhat cadenza like.

"Lenten ys come", originated in a collection of medieval poems found in the so called "Harley" Lyrics MS. 2253, part of a much wider collection of manuscripts known as the Harleian Collection.⁸ Such poems later appeared in eighteenth and nineteenth-century anthologies that were made because of renewed interest in the distant past. The Harley manuscript has around 116, verse and prose works in Anglo-Norman, Middle English and Latin and was copied around 1340. The word "lyric" is derived from Greek ("of the lyre"), and its first known appearances in English are from the late sixteenth-century. Contained within the collection are both secular and religious lyrics. The secular lyrics often had a musical accompaniment, and formed the basis of popular songs (e.g. "A Song of Lewes", a popular 'drinking' song of the day),⁹ whereas, the religious lyrics, were probably written for liturgical use, and did not always have a musical accompaniment.

⁸ The manuscript collection of more than 7,000 volumes, more than 14,000 original legal documents, and 500 rolls, formed by Robert Harley (1661–1724), now housed in the British Library.

⁹ Susanna Fein, "Harley Lyrics" *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* Oxford University Press (2006) pp. 519-522

Many of the lyrics were either copied from political posters found at the side of roads or transcribed from listening to memorized songs; others existed on scraps of paper or were inserts in the margins of sermons. It is thought that the man responsible for collecting these lyrics lived in Ludlow, on the English/Welsh border between 1331 and 1348. The “Harley Scribe”, as he is known, was probably a legal scrivener and chaplain, possibly to a wealthy family in the region. It is highly likely that he had other scribes assisting.¹⁰ Without this man’s work in collecting and copying these varied pieces of prose, later generations would have had little idea that such widespread literary activity existed in English several decades before Geoffrey Chaucer¹¹ and William Langland,¹² the “Piers Plowman” poet.

“Lenten ys come” brings the traditional springtime song to its richest artistic development. Nature surrounds the speaker with beautiful, amorous, harmonious sights and sounds: blooming flowers, sprouting herbs, singing birds. Moon, Sun, stream, and even dew participate in a setting of quickened movement and light. Animal nature happily partakes in this season of mating: the “wild dreakes” woo, and all creatures strive to please their partners. The poem is divided into three verses; each verse twelve lines in length. The rhyme scheme for each verse follows the pattern AABCCBDDBEEB. Britten reflects the three verses found in the original poem with three clearly defined sections within the musical setting (Table 5.3).

¹⁰ Susanna Fein, *The Four Scribes of Harley MS 2253 The Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History*, Vol. 16, (2013)

¹¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, b. 1343 (London), d. 1400 The “Father of English Literature” and author of “The Canterbury Tales”.

¹² William Langland b. 1330 (Worcestershire) d. 1400. Presumed author of one of the greatest examples of Middle English alliterative poetry, generally known as “Piers Plowman”, an allegorical work with a complex variety of religious themes.

Section A mm. 1-20	Section A (repeated) mm. 21-40	Section A ¹ mm. 41-71
Text: Verse 1	Text: Verse 2	Text: Verse 3

Table 5.3 *Sacred and Profane* “Lenten is come” Structure of movement

In Britten’s setting of “Lenten is come” again one finds much tonal ambiguity. Clearly, there is a struggle between diatonic and modal tonalities. The descending Dorian scale passage in the first soprano, is accompanied in the alto by an ascending Mixolydian scale. This is immediately answered in the second soprano with an ascending D-major scale accompanied with a reiteration of the motive (Dorian) from the first soprano (m.1). The rising seventh at the beginning of the movement is striking. It gives the whole motive an impetus, a ‘leap in the spring’. This ‘Spring motif’ (rising minor seventh followed by descending scale) at whatever transposition is nearly always accompanied by an ascending scale sequence in another vocal part. This contrary motion effect appears at numerous points and is a characteristic of the movement. Despite the fact that the tonality at times is very ambiguous a significant unifying factor to the movement is the rhythmic patterns particularly the repeated 3+3+2 pattern implicit in the 8/8 time signature. This rhythmic patterning is particularly reminiscent of the “Spring Carol” from the *Ceremony of Carols* (1942), which also begins with a leap (along with an ascending harp glissando.)

The second strophe of the lyric is set using the same music as the first, both ending with a D–major triad. However, Britten’s musical approach to the third strophe (m.41) changes. The ‘Spring’ motive (soprano) now appears augmented, is lowered by a minor third and placed in the Phrygian mode (Ex. 5.3). The contrapuntal texture of the opening is replaced by a more homophonic treatment and as a result, the setting of the

third strophe is ten measures longer than the first two. A rare glimpse of triadic harmony suggests Britten is placing a degree of importance on the text. This may be explained by the mention of the sun and the moon, significant in that the Paschal moon dictates when Easter falls (Easter Day falls on the immediate Sunday after the Paschal full moon) but also it is the first mention of an immortal element within the text. Indeed, Britten sets the word "moon" to an E-major chord with the introduction of a G# (mm. 41, 44) also suggesting a Lydian tonality (raised fourth). Parallels can be drawn musically between this 'descent' passage (mm. 41-46) and a similar one later in the movement (measures 61-65), and yet another similar passage in "St Godric's Hymn" (mm.22-25.) Britten takes elements of previous motivic material and uses the setting of this third strophe as a kind of development section. Firstly, in measure 47 the motive heard in the bass in measure three, returns, and is heard in every vocal part. Secondly, the 'Spring motif' is inverted and augmented in a very short canon (mm. 52-55) before returning in its original form (in part) in the sopranos (m. 55). Thirdly, the motive first heard in the soprano (m. 8) reappears briefly in measure 58 in the bass, tenor and alto parts. Throughout all of these motives the dominance of the minor third is compelling. As the sentiment of the text changes in the last three lines of the poem—"If I don't have what I want of one, all this happiness I will abandon, and quickly in the woods be a fugitive"—an antiphonal exchange of the 'Spring' motive returns in the tenor and bass (m. 65) leading into a descending A Phrygian scale to close the movement.

41 *p smooth*
 The mo - ne mand - eth hir - e light,
 The *mō* - ne mand - eth heer - e licht,

p smooth
 The mo - ne mand - eth hir - e light,
 The *mō* - ne mand - eth heer - e licht,

p smooth
 The mo - ne mand - eth hir - e light, hire light,
 The *mō* - ne mand - eth heer - e licht, heer licht,

p smooth
 So doth the sem - ly son - ne
 So *dōth* the *saym* - ly *sīn* - ne

p smooth
 So doth the sem - ly son - ne
 So *dōth* the *saym* - ly *sīn* - ne

Ex. 5.3 *Sacred and Profane* “Lenten is come”, mm. 41-46

Britten’s fourth setting of the cycle uses the poem “The long night”, which suggests the first traces of a thirteenth-century northern winter. The writer laments the passing of summer but also displays a degree of penitence – “And I with very great wrong”, “Sorrow and mourn and fast”. The movement begins retrospectively with the ‘Spring’ motive (original Dorian mode) from “Lenten is Come” - looking back at the cheerfulness of spring and summer. As the “blast of the winter draws nigh” Britten changes the tonality and texture of the movement as the music moves to G-minor and a highly imitative texture (mm. 5-20, Ex. 5.4). As the voice parts enter (beginning with the male voice parts “with force”) it becomes clear that although they retain almost exactly the same rhythm, the various lines show minor intervallic differences. For example, the first bass entry (m. 5) begins with an ascending minor third whereas the tenor entry one

and a half bars later opens with an ascending augmented fourth, and so on. This initial bass entry is answered firstly by the tenor a fourth above, then the alto a fifth above that, followed by the two sopranos entering an octave and compound minor third above respectively. Britten pairs the voices (a common Britten compositional characteristic) and allows the pairs to finish their stretto-like exposition of the canonic material before the other pair enters, concluding with the entry of the first soprano (m. 15). Common to each of the entries are sequential elements within the material itself such as the descending scale figures (mm.6-7) and the rising fifth, falling fourth element (mm. 8-9).

5 Lively, with force (♩ = 132)

- last,
- läst,

8 *f* Oc nu nec - eth wind - es blast, And we - der strong, and
Ök nōō nairch-eth wind - es bläst, And wē - der strong, and

f Oc nu nec - eth wind - es blast, And we - der strong, and we - der, we - der strong, —
Ök nōō nairch-eth wind - es bläst, And wē - der strong, and wē - der, wē - der strong, —

5 Lively, with force (♩ = 132)

Ex. 5.4 *Sacred and Profane* The Long Night, mm. 5-9

The fugato like texture is interjected a by a brief homophony—"Ey! Ey! What this night is long!" Here, the voice parts sing a trichord – comprised of a central pitch and its chromatic upper and lower neighboring tones; first, between the notes C#-D-E b (mm. 20-21) and then between the notes A-B b -C b (mm. 22-24). The central note of the latter figure acts as a pedal tone in the bass over which a scale motive is heard (upper voices

in thirds), echoing the rhythm of the fugato theme (mm. 21-22, 24-26). A brief return to the earlier fugato like texture (mm.26-31) leads to a descending canonic triplet section where the voices are again grouped in pairs and in thirds. As in other movements, the dominance of the minor third is very noticeable.

The fifth setting in the cycle, “Yif ic of luvē can”, evokes Christ’s Passion and becomes the second “Sacred” piece. Probably one of the most non-diatonic settings of the whole cycle along with “Death”, it takes tonal boundaries to their limit. This setting resembles “Variation III - Jesu, as Thou art our Savior” from *A Boy Was Born*, both in the text chosen and the texture created. It also occupies the central place in the *Sacred and Profane* cycle. The setting begins homophonically and is made up from a number of short sequential phrases. Tonally, there is a key signature of two sharps, although the harmony lacks any real functionality and is dominated by a quartal/quintal layering technique. Despite a distinct lack of tertian harmony, each of the short phrases (apart from mm. 12, 33) begins with a B-major triad, which acts as a type of harmonic genesis. Indeed, some of the phrases conclude with a B-major vertical sonority also. Furthermore, the chords seem to pivot around the almost static alto part, which is dominated by B \sharp . Interestingly, “Variation III” from *A Boy Was Born* displays a very similar approach where the other voices ‘hang’ from the completely static B \sharp in the soprano.

Section A mm. 1-20	Section A ¹ mm. 21-41	Codetta mm. 42-47
Text: Lines 1-8 (SATB)	Text: Lines 1-7 (SATB) Lines 8-12 (Solo Soprano)	Text: Line 7 (SATB) Line 12 (Solo Soprano)

Table 5.4 *Sacred and Profane* “Yif ic of luvē can”. Structure of movement

The movement is divided into two strophes, essentially in bipartite form. The second strophe (m. 21) is almost an exact repeat of the first with the addition of an obbligato in the soprano part and a small codetta (Table 5.4). As already mentioned, the movement is dominated by the speech-like ‘chanting’ rhythms used by Britten (again, they echo the triplet rhythms used in “Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour” from *A Boy Was Born*.) It is as though he has established this textural ‘strata’ to represent the narrator maybe even the crowd, (perhaps recalling the Turba choruses in the Renaissance settings of the Passion.) Indeed, in the Passions, the vocal ranges used, reflected the various figures in the passion story. In employing this rather limiting textural ‘strata’ Britten is able to make a stark contrast when the solo voice enters (m. 20) with the words, “Well ought I to weep and sins to abandon, I know of love.” One assumes this lone voice is that of the anguished Christ, but one questions whether it could also be Mary.

Again, the similarities between the texture of this movement and “Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour” (“Variation III, A Boy Was Born”) are striking. However, whereas in “Jesu, as Thou art our savior” the boy soprano part sings a pentatonic motif which is repeated almost identically at each reiteration, here, the solo soprano part is more of a heterophonic decoration of the second soprano part (Ex. 5.5). One can only speculate, given the many similarities between “Yif ic of luv can” and “Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour”, that Britten was using a work written at the beginning of his career as a blue print for a work coming at the end of his life, further underlining the importance of *A Boy was Born*. The movement reaches a climax in measure 37 with the solo voice

juxtaposed with the homophonic choral writing in a very anguished sequence of rising perfect fourths leading into a descent of the solo voice. Interestingly, at this point all parts have staccato markings, possibly emulating the nails being driven into Christ. The movement finishes in a major tonality, signifying that in Christ's death we have a new hope.

20

And sin - - - nes for to let - en,
 And sin - - - nes for to layt - en,
 stond - en Ma - rye and Jo - han, And his rig
 stond - en Må - ree and Jø - han, And his rig
 stond - en Ma - rye and Jo - han, And his rig
 stond - en Må - ree and Jø - han, And his rig
 stond - en Ma - rye and Jo - han, And his rig
 stond - en Må - ree and Jø - han, And his rig

Ex. 5.5 *Sacred and Profane* “Yif ic of luv can”, mm. 26-30

“Carol” is an anonymous fourteenth-century lyric. Much conjecture surrounds the actual meaning of this Lyric. The poem seems to be entirely ‘popular’ in origin and meaning, “the maiden” being a folkloric figure. With the title “Carol”, one can assume that it was tied to a song or dance of secular origin. It can be found in an altered version

in the manuscripts of Richard de Ledrede¹³, the Franciscan Bishop of Ossory, who commonly wrote pious Latin lyrics for existing vernacular poetry. In this collection, The Bishop of Ossory substitutes the “maid” with the Latin, “Peperit Virgo”, thus enabling the poem to be interpreted in a religious way. The “maid” as “Blessed Virgin Mary”, is an “ascetic”, “a stage of the soul before the vision of Divine Truth” and even a “fusion between the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene”. Britten gives the unusual direction - “Flowing with parody!”

Rhythmically and texturally, Britten emulates the secular folk-song elements of the early carols of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with their short sequential phrases and dance like rhythms; many of which can be found in the medieval Seldon or Trinity Manuscripts, for example, “Ther is no rose of swych vertu” or “Make we joye nowe in this fest”.¹⁴ Furthermore, he cleverly emphasizes the comical elements within the text - the rather childlike, almost nursery rhyme like questioning (“good was her food, what was her food?”, “good was her drink, what was her drink?”) and incomplete sentences, each time intensifying their effect through melodic decoration or slight changes in harmony. Throughout, the triadic up and down movement and the singsong phrases (sometimes palendromic mm. 20-21 soprano) is very reminiscent of children’s nursery rhymes.

¹³ Richard de Ledrede, Bishop of Ossory b. 1275 (France) d. 1360 (Ossory, Ireland)

¹⁴ Keyte, Parrott (eds.) *New Oxford Book of Carols*. (1992) OUP pp. 90, 424.

7 Ye that pasen by
(Mid 14th century)

Slow and dragging (♩ = 44)

The musical score is for a piece titled "7 Ye that pasen by" from the mid-14th century. It is marked "Slow and dragging" with a tempo of ♩ = 44. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of six staves: two soprano parts (S.1 and S.2), an alto (A.), a tenor (T.), a bass (B.), and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Middle English and Latin. The piano part includes a "Carol Theme" marked "p clearly".

Lyrics for S.1 and S.2:

Ye that pa - sen by the by the weiye
 Yay that pa - ssen bee the bee the way,
 Yay that pa - ssen bee the way, the weiye
 Yay that pa - ssen bee the way, the weiye

Lyrics for T.:

A - bi - det a lit - tle
 A - bee - det a lit - tle

Ex. 5.6 *Sacred and Profane* "Ye that pasen by", mm.1-3

"Ye that pasen by" a fourteenth-century religious lyric (sometimes referred to as a "planctus" - a lament from the cross) derived from the book of Lamentations (*Jeremiah*) is written from the perspective of Christ, who urges those passing by - perhaps his own contemporaries, but more likely, medieval Christians observing depictions of the crucifixion - to contemplate his suffering and sacrifice. The setting begins with a descending scale in the second soprano, with a type of heterophonic decoration in the first soprano (Ex. 5.6). A similar texture of either a descending or ascending scale coupled with a decoration of the scale in another part recurs several times throughout the movement (mm.1-2, 5-6, 9-10). Within that texture one observes an intervallic consistency that occurs between the two parts; first, the major/minor second that is immediately created as the syncopated decoration enters, and second, the minor third that almost always occurs as the scale moves up or down. Despite the fact the scales

sound modal none of them follow a strict established pattern; instead, they are hybrids of other scales (Ex. 5.7).

Phrygian Mixolydian

Scalic pattern mm. 1-2

F sharp minor

Whole Tone

Scalic pattern mm. 5-7

Phrygian

Octatonic

Scalic pattern mm. 9-11

"Carol" theme Major

Octatonic

Scalic pattern mm. 14-17
 ("Carol" theme also occurs in other places:
 Tenor m.3, Bass m. 7, Sop² m. 12-13, Sop¹ 18, 20)

Ex. 5.7 *Sacred and Profane*, "Ye that pasen by" Scale patterns.

It could be argued that the effect of one part 'dragging' behind the other is a direct musical representation of Christ dragging the cross to Golgotha or possibly an attempt to depict a sense of musical anguish. One is reminded throughout the setting of "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" from *A Boy Was Born* (occurring at a similar point in the cycle) where there is similar descending pattern representing snowfall with the same major/minor second dissonance occurring between the two voice parts.

Parallels can also be drawn with the earlier passion lyric – "Yif ic of love can" in terms of Britten's use of two distinct textural 'strata' to separate the different voices. Interestingly, Britten inserts the melismatic cadential theme from "Carol" (m. 3), the

previous movement, (now a major third higher.) The “Carol” theme occurs again throughout the work, always in a major key and sometimes altered rhythmically (mm. 7, 12-13, 14, 18-20). The ‘dragging’ theme of the opening few measures returns (m. 5) now a major third lower, along with the solo voice (m. 3) now in the bass – “if any like me is found”. Britten inverts the ‘dragging’ theme, which appears now in the tenor and bass (m. 9) leading to a climactic section where the solo voice part enters again with the “Carol” theme in the soprano (extended melodically), harmonized by the lower parts. The ‘dragging’ theme returns again (m. 14) with the soprano and bass singing the scale passage in octaves and the syncopated figure sung by the inner parts. This leads to the most dissonant two chords of the movement occurring on “thoru my”. The movement concludes with a harmonic chordal alternation between A-minor and B-major chords as an accompaniment to a further reiteration of the “carol” theme, now in the original key that it appeared in the previous movement (m. 18-20.)

“A Death” a thirteenth-century lyric is the longest setting in the cycle. With three distinct sections (Table 5.5), Arnold Whittall describes it as a kind of “miniature cantata”.¹⁵ The movement begins with a held major second, reminiscent of the major second interval of the ‘dragging’ theme from the previous movement. Interestingly, “E” is prominent at the beginning and throughout the movement and indeed the movement concludes with an E-major triad. Entirely possible is that Britten might have been recalling the main character of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* (1973), who fought

¹⁵ Ibid., 5. p. 277

vainly to counter the rigors of aging and death and who is coincidentally represented by an E–major vertical sonority.

Section A mm. 1-19 Slow (key sig. 1#)	Section B mm. 20-30 Quasi presto (key sig. 1#)	Transition mm. 31-35 Slow (key sig. 1#)	Section C mm. 35-61 Very lively (key sig. 4#)
Text: Lines 1-14	Text: Lines 15-20	Text: Line 21	Text: Line 22

Table 5.5 *Sacred and Profane*, “A Death”. Structure of movement.

In this opening section Britten depicts the various physical elements/stages of death with a series of solo overlapping ‘statements’ each characterized with typically Brittenesque ‘word painting’ and each beginning with a dramatic held note. “My eyes get misty” is depicted by an alternating major second, creating a sense of ‘blurredness’. Second, “And my ear full of hissing” closing with a diminished octave on the word “hiss” which is set against the overlapping A # against A natural of the F#-minor entry of “my nose gets colder”. Third, “My tongue folds over” with a falling perfect fifth in A-minor. Fourth, “My face slakens”, characterized by a descending Eb-minor V-I motive. Fifth, “My hair rises” with an ascending quasi-canonic, major second duet. Finishing this opening section Britten launches into the last of the bodily demises, the heart. Here, Britten so effectively represents the heartbeat, with an offbeat, syncopated figure in the second soprano (m.11) framed by a sixteenth-note figure (first soprano and alto) in a quasi hocketing effect (Ex. 5.8). This figure is also heard in the tenor as the “hand

composer's death of heart disease (*Sacred and Profane* was also written two years before Britten's death). At the beginning of Mahler's first movement, there is a similar stuttering 'heart beat' motif (an association that Bernstein made in his Harvard lectures, 1973),¹⁷ which is later played by the trombones at the height of the development section.

The climax to this first section of the movement comes with a series of strident augmented fourths on "stiffen". Britten then leads into a highly chromatic, sequential, unison triplet passage (starting on "E") – "all too late, the bier is at the gate" - the "bier" referring to the table or cart that the deceased's coffin (particularly in the middle ages) was placed on. The gate could refer to the Lychgate¹⁸ at the entrance of the churchyard or more likely the gate, which was often incorporated into the rood screen and where the body of the deceased was positioned for the funeral Mass. This triplet passage concludes with a C-major triad. Interestingly, one sees this C-major sonority ('purification') appearing, again, after a highly chromatic section (a similar appearance of the C-major vertical sonority occurs in "St Godric's Hymn", m. 24) and indeed at the point where the transition from life to death takes place within the lyric.

The second section (mm. 20-30) begins with a repeat of the E-F# clash found at the beginning of the movement (Ex. 5.9). Britten, again, proceeds to create differing textural 'strata'. He introduces two motivic elements: the first, a varying four-note figure appears in various vocal pairings, a major second apart. The other, more active part,

¹⁷ Leonard Bernstein *The Unanswered Question: Six talks at Harvard*. (Charles Eliot Norton Lectures), Harvard University Press (1990)

¹⁸ Lychgate (from the Old English lic - corpse) is a gateway covered with a roof found at the entrance to a traditional English or English-style churchyard.

displays its own musical irony; the fast tempo, the major key, the forceful dynamics finishing with a fast upward glissando, reminiscent of the “Ballad of Green Broom” from the *Five Flower Songs*. This poem must have resonated with Britten, with his failing health in the early 1970’s and most likely contemplating his own death. Certainly in other works in this final period, such as the last opera *Death in Venice* (1973) and *Phaedra* (1975), death is a very prominent theme. The 1960’s and 1970’s were a dark period for Britten. The majority of his compositional output during this time aside from the *War Requiem* (1961) showed a more intimate style. Even the operas *Owen Wingrave* which was written for television in 1970 and *Death in Venice*, showed a sparseness which is not present in his other operas, but also a sense that this work was the culmination of many of the themes that weave through the earlier stage works. In *Curlew River* (1964), the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965) we see this much darker style coupled with much smaller forces needed to execute these works. The *Suite on English Folk Songs* (1974) is more focused, and one can perhaps see this as a summing up of Britten’s late style as a whole. Kildea comments on the *Suite on English Folk Songs*: “around a nightmare of almost Berliozian intensity and hallucinogenic power if this is not enough, Britten’s subtitle to this folk collection, ‘A time there was’ - Hardy’s prayer for nescience, for the innocence of ignorance, amidst human hopelessness - is an indication of the dark mood prevailing.”¹⁹

The disproportionate setting of these few words “Of al this world ne give I it a pese! - For the whole world I don’t care one jot” (one line of text set to 24 measures of

¹⁹ Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, Allen Lane (2013) p. 288

music), surely speaks of Britten's own suspicions even contempt of the 'whole world', his critics, and the musical establishment in particular. The opportunity to set this ironic rebuttal at the end of his life must have attracted him. Never really fitting into the mainstream of post war Modernism, together with his stance on sexuality and pacifism, the establishment treated Britten with suspicion and at times the criticism was hard. Britten never responded well to critics and in many ways the creation of the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948 and the building of his concert hall at Snape Maltings in 1967 was a way of voicing his disdain for much of the musical establishment of post-war Britain. He truly believed the Aldeburgh Festival offered a creditable alternative to what was being provided in London and an alternative platform for emerging composers and artists. Indeed, towards the end of his life he surrounded himself with loyal supporters acting as a buffer to the 'whole world', rarely leaving the confines of the Red House and Suffolk.

Interestingly, there is no element of religious comfort in this last poem "A Death"; this humanistic view would have appealed to him, reflecting his own ambivalence of religion for the majority of his life. However, throughout Britten's lifetime he maintained good relations with a number of churchmen, most notably Rev. Walter Hussey²⁰ and Bishop Leslie Brown²¹. In the words of Leslie Brown who administered the sacrament Holy Communion to the ailing composer on several occasions, "I think Ben wanted to have religion when he was dying, but he could never really quite come to it".²² Peter

²⁰ Rev Walter Hussey b. 1909 (Northampton, UK) d. 1985 (Chichester, UK) Church of England priest, latterly Dean of Chichester Cathedral and celebrated patron of the arts. Commissioned Britten to compose *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943) and Bernstein to compose the *Chichester Psalms* (1965)

²¹ Bishop Leslie Brown b. 1912 (London, UK) d. 1999 (London, UK), Bishop of St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich (1966-78), formerly Bishop of Uganda. Brown presided at the funeral of Britten in December 1976.

²² Trevor Beeson, *In Tuneful Accord: The Church Musicians*, Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. (2009) p. 172

Pears said in an interview in 1980 “I don’t think he (Britten) really had any particular convictions as to what was going to happen after death, but he was certainly not afraid of dying.”²³

²³ Ibid., 22. p. 172

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Within the four works that form the basis of this study one finds a composer who understands the human voice but raises the bar as to what is expected of singers whether they be professional or amateur. Britten certainly pushed the boundaries of choral writing established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Arguably, he laid down the blueprint for this challenge in *A Boy Was Born*. The work that Britten affectionately called “my boy” introduces many of the compositional techniques and forms of expression, that appear in later works. Written as a theme and variations, Op. 3 is the first of a series of works that use elements of this form: *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge*-string orchestra (Op. 10, 1930), *Diversions*-piano and orchestra (Op. 21, 1940), *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*, (Op. 34, 1945), *Lachrymae* - viola and piano (Op. 48, 1950), *The Turn of the Screw* - opera (Op. 54, 1954), *Canticle III* - tenor, horn and piano (Op. 55, 1954), *Gemini Variations* - flute, violin and piano four-hands (Op. 73, 1965), *Third Suite for Cello* (Op. 87, 1971). It is interesting that Britten chose not to explore the theme and variations form again with choir, choosing only instrumental combinations for future compositions. One might see this as a tacet admission that in terms of accessibility to a choir, Op. 3 was a “bridge too far”.

Theme and Variation form requires a technical prowess that allows varied presentation of the same, or similar musical material, in ways that while seemingly different nonetheless cohere. Britten was attracted to this form precisely because of the demands it places on the composer. One only has to examine in *A Boy Was Born* how he generates over thirty minutes of unaccompanied choral music, from a single cell

[0,2,5]. Such remarkably inventive treatment of a relatively limited amount of musical material pervades his complete *oeuvre*. This creative response under strict parameters suggests Britten's appropriation of the Second Viennese school, a movement that Britten admired from a distance yet never totally embraced. It is fair to say that Britten was not a melodist, in the manner of the generation of British composers that preceded him. Composers such as Stanford and Parry had been heavily influenced by the mid nineteenth-century figures of Mendelssohn and Brahms and the traditions of the German romantic movement. Their immediate successors the "English pastoralists" had also placed an importance on melody, infusing their music with folksong. Any extended melodies that Britten used, tended to be borrowed material such as the famous theme by Purcell used in the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946), or they derived from a series of overlapping smaller motivic cells, characterized by the repetitive nature of certain intervals, such as the minor third. The way that Britten links all of the variations in *A Boy Was Born* with the [0,2,5] motive shows incredible élan. Undisputed is Britten's creative genius but one could argue that he relied heavily upon a rigid technique to create much of his music.

On a performance level, Britten demands of his singers a high level of technical accomplishment. The very close canonic writing and non-triadic harmony that is staple in his choral music, present many challenges to the choral musician. It would be fair to say that a large proportion of his choral compositions, due to their musical complexities, are not in the capabilities of many amateur choirs and only in the domain of professional ensembles. Because of the complexities and challenges *A Boy Was Born* presented choirs, Britten added an organ part, which was edited by Ralph Downs in 1955, to aide

with pitch stability. Although a large part of his choral music was written for professional groups Britten's commitment to community-based music, including writing music for children remained with him throughout his career. *Noyes Fludde* (1958) and *Friday Afternoons* (1935)¹, encapsulate this devotion to making music available to not just the 'cultured few'. Indeed, *Noyes Fludde*, based on a fifteenth-century mystery play, in its first performance, included local school children from Aldeburgh primary school, famously playing Britten's improvised percussion effects on mugs hanging from a piece of string.

Britten continues the late nineteenth-century tradition in pushing the boundaries of tonality to breaking point. Certainly, Britten cannot be classified as an atonal composer in the serialist tradition. The use of key signatures, triadic harmony, scale and modal patterns and cadential progressions, suggest that Britten was still a composer using recognizable tonal structures. Indeed, his two significant excursions into the world of Serialism, *Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Death in Venice* (1973) demonstrate many tonal traits, most notably the tonal key associations that Britten makes with various characters and scenes (e.g. *Turn of the Screw*: Schoolroom – F-major, Governess - A-major, Quint - A \flat -major; *Death in Venice*: Eschenbach - E-major, Tadzio – A-major.) Within his choral cycles the limitations of singers force Britten to retain elements of tonality whilst using elements of a non-diatonic language (e.g. quartal/quintal harmony), to satisfy his expressive desires as a composer. Robin Holloway sums up Britten's tonal language succinctly: "Britten's music has the power to connect the avant-garde

¹ *Friday Afternoons* was written for Britten's brother, Robert, who was a music teacher and regularly rehearsed his children's choir on Friday afternoons.

with the lost paradise of tonality”.² *A Boy Was Born* displays Britten’s fascination with a non-functional approach to harmony. He builds many of the vertical sonorities by layering fourths and fifths and abandoning triadic conventions. Often, harmonically unrelated chords are placed side by side in an unconventional manner but are given a ‘faux’ sense of functionality and coherence by compositional means that vary, but typically include the use of ‘common tones’ to link vertical sonorities (sometimes going to such lengths as restricting a single voice part to one note e.g. “Jesu, as Thou art our Savior - Variation III”, *A Boy Was Born*) and the repetition of small motivic or rhythmic cells which provide a linear connection to the vertical sonorities. As a result, much of Britten’s music remains tonally ambiguous.

It is his varied and highly imaginative use of textural layers that allow Britten to stand out amongst other composers of his generation. Britten’s ability to identify different types of discourse that reveal something important about character and sentiment within the text is remarkable. Whether he presents these voices differently thematically, tonally or registrally his ability to combine often very contrasting ideas simultaneously, yet maintaining an overall musical coherence is unique. Even more remarkable is the way that these contrasting ideas (although not always immediately apparent) often stem from a common genesis as in the [0,2,5] motive. The way that Britten places many contrasting textural strata together provides a textural counterpoint, which at times compensates for a lack of harmonic counterpoint. Furthermore, these textural contrasts contribute to the parody that is displayed so often in Britten’s music;

² John Bridcut, *Essential Britten: A Pocket Guide for the Britten Centenary*, Faber and Faber (2013) p. 16

that is, the juxtaposition of contrasting, even opposing musical elements, in such a way that they ultimately compliment each other.

Britten's anthological collections of poems for his choral cycles, are truly innovative. Remarkable is Britten's ability to juxtapose religious and secular texts sometimes within one setting, (In the Bleak Mid-Winter, *A Boy Was Born*) which, again, displays Britten's skill at bringing together contrasting components. Indeed, this is a compositional trait that one sees across Britten's work on so many levels. The varied settings of poems in the choral cycles, demonstrate the influence that the text has in determining many of the musical choices he makes. For example, if there are three sections in the poem one usually finds a corresponding ternary form structure to the music. Furthermore, the creation of different voices within a poem (Mary, Jesus) are identified in the music by the use of contrasting textural strata, motivic material or by various tonal associations (major tonalities represent God, purity etc.). Other consistencies can be identified between the subject of the text and the musical setting, for example, the setting of texts which focus on God/ Christ (particularly the Passion/crucifixion), tend to be more homophonic (*A Boy Was Born* - "Theme", "Jesu, as thou art our Saviour", "Yif ic of luvē can", *A.M.D.G.* - "O Deus, Ego Amo te")

The four choral cycles that form the basis of this study, contain an eclectic mix of poetry, ranging from the thirteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. During his career, Britten set some 350 poems to music.³ It is his exposure to such a vast array of literature, which indisputably began with his early association with W. H. Auden. The

³ Mark Padmore "Dream Weaver" *The poetry within Britten's Nocturne. The Guardian* 10/24/08

poets and authors that Britten uses cover a broad gammit of literary style, that is probably unmatched by any other composer in history, including even Schubert. The range of authors includes Michelangelo, Rimbaud, Hölderin, Goethe and Pushkin in their original languages, Racine and the Chinese poets Lu Yu, Wu-ti and Pho Chü-I in translation, and more than eighty poets writing in English- from St. Godric to W. H. Auden with Donne, Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Hopkins, Hardy, Owen and Eliot. Excluding the unfinished *A.M.D.G.* cycle (the only collection of choral pieces that use the same author), the other three collection's (*A Boy Was Born*, *Five Flower Songs*, *Sacred and Profane*) lyrics use a range of texts that covers three hundred years of history. Indeed, many of the texts for *A Boy Was Born* and *Sacred and Profane* are written in Middle English. *A Boy Was Born* and *A.M.D.G.* deal predominantly with religious themes but even in the secular poems of Op. 91, one often finds philosophical or self-reflective traits that suggest interest in universal human themes that transcend the ephemera of everyday life.

It is almost as if Britten reached new heights compositionally with *A Boy Was Born*. When one compares this work to the only two significant choral pieces written before it (*Hymn to the Virgin* and *Christ's Nativity*), one sees distinct differences. *A Hymn to the Virgin* uses a macaronic text (Latin and English), juxtaposed and given their own textural stratum, only at phrase endings do the two sound simultaneously. Occasionally Britten uses antiphony (antiphonal exchanges between sopranos and solo group accompanied by rising scale passage in the lower voices), to provide variety to music that is predominantly homophonic. Dramatically, two years on from *Hymn to the Virgin* Britten composes *A Boy Was Born*, a 30-minute work that reveals a level of

sophistication and compositional mastery not seen before. Harmonically he abandons tertian choral writing in favor of the lines interacting at different textural strata that may sing together, but have distinctly different characters. It is difficult to isolate a particular event which causes this dramatic sea change. Clearly, this was a period of great change for Britten as he began his studies at the RCM and was introduced to the London music scene. As mentioned, but perhaps underestimated, is his exposure at this time to numerous concerts and recitals of a whole array of composers and musicians.

It is interesting that Britten chose not to return to the theme and variations format in other choral cycles, nor did he compose another a capella choral cycle of similar length. The other three cycles all display many of the compositional traits found in *A Boy Was Born* - extraordinary inventiveness with minimal material, an ability to create a sophisticated textural landscape involving use of different textures simultaneously, skillful setting of carefully selected texts and a unique harmonic language that sits between the worlds of tonality and atonality. However, none of the other collections rely on a cyclic theme to provide formal unity to the extent between that one finds in *A Boy Was Born*; nor do the others display such skilled counterpoint. As Anthony Milner states: "Except in some sections of the *War Requiem* he never wrote such elaborate vocal counterpoint again."⁴

Attaching the label "cycle" to a composition usually implies that there are musical thematic connections between the movements or sections. In addition to musical links, vocal music may feature connections of a literary nature, such as the use of common

⁴ Anthony Milner, *The Britten Companion: The Choral Works*, (ed.) Christopher Palmer, Cambridge University Press (1984) p. 331

poet (*A.M.D.G.*) or textural theme (*Five Flower Songs*). To a certain extent the term “choral cycle” has been wrongly used to describe collections of partsongs that have a literary connection, viewing them as choral extensions of the song cycle of the nineteenth-century. The difficulty one has in classifying a work as a choral cycle and not simply a collection of partsongs that can stand alone, is the scarcity of such groups of pieces for purposes of comparison. Probably the earliest examples of a multi-movement cyclical choral work are the polyphonic cyclic mass settings of the Renaissance, that relied on a monophonic or polyphonic cantus firmus or theme, used in each constituent movement. The partsong can also find precedents in the Renaissance madrigal, which were grouped into collections for publication, but, apart from obvious literary connections (e.g. Monteverdi, *Lagrima d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata - A Lover's Tears at the Tomb of His Beloved*, Bk. VI), these did not usually show commonalities. Partsongs fell out of fashion with the advent of instrumental music in the sixteenth-century and the large-scale choral/orchestral works that followed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such composers as Haydn, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms and Bruckner revived the partsong genre. In fact, Liszt was the first composer in the nineteenth-century to classify a collection of accompanied partsongs, *Les quatre éléments (The Four Elements, 1844/45)*, as a choral cycle; but again, the cyclic connection is limited to a literary theme (the elements - “earth”, “wind”, “stars” and “floods”.) Closer to home, the partsong genre flourished in England particularly in composers whose works spanned the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries – Stanford, Parry and Elgar. Elgar’s partsong

collections (Op.45 1902, Op.53 1909), are the first English choral cycles of the twentieth-century. C. Hubert H. Parry's highly evocative collection of unaccompanied choral pieces, he classified as motets, the *Songs of Farewell* (1915), all treat the transition from life to death in religious terms. However, it is not until the composition of *A Boy Was Born*, that one sees an unaccompanied choral cycle that features both musical and literary connections between movements. In many ways, Britten is reviving a musical tradition that stretches back in time much further than the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while at the same time forging a highly innovative compositional path.

Within the choral cycles that Britten wrote after *A Boy Was Born* there are clearly elements that link the movements together, not least in the text connections, (flowers, religious poetry of Hopkins etc.) but also thematic connections, usually presented in the preservation/reappearance of particular series of intervals or vertical sonorities (Five Flower Songs – minor third; Sacred and Profane – “Carol” theme, C-major vertical sonority. Probably the least connected cycle musically, is *A.M.D.G.*, although this cycle is clearly unique amongst the others as it was left incomplete and the exact order of the individual movements is unknown. Arguably, the least connected cycle in literary terms, apart from the common Medieval poetry used, is *Sacred and Profane*. However, a feasible connection between these seemingly wildly contrasting poems could be that Britten's choice of texts is somehow autobiographical. Could the sequence of movements reflect various events in Britten's life? For example, does “St. Godric's Hymn” (sacred) represent Britten's birth and early childhood and “I mon waxe wod” (secular) his unhappy school days? “Lenten is Come” perhaps marks his move to

London and meeting Peter Pears. Could World War II be the “blast of the wind” of “The Long Night” and does “Yif ic of luvē can”, represent the end of the war and Britten’s success with *Peter Grimes*? Perhaps “Carol” marks the most productive time in Britten’s career, a period, when ironically he suffered with some of his worst self-confidence issues. Could the towering achievement of the *War Requiem* be somehow represented by the setting of “Ye that passen by”, a poem which also represents suffering, not of war, but that of Christ? And finally “A Death”, anticipating Britten’s own death from serious heart problems. What makes this theory more credible is that Britten wrote *Sacred and Profane* at the end of his life (a life that he knew would soon end because of a debilitating heart condition), selecting the texts from the R.T. Davies anthology not in the chronological order that they are presented but in his own sequence ending with “A Death”.

It is as a *choral* composer, apart from his probably even more popular achievements as a musical dramatist - that Britten seems to stand head and shoulders above his contemporaries (on both sides of the Channel). It is here more than in any other sphere of his work that the break with Edwardian conventions in particular, and with the nineteenth century in general, has become complete. It is here that he sets a shining example by creating a new musical style of idiomatic inevitability within a sonorous medium of very real limitations.⁵

One could argue that Hans Redlich’s statement of 1953, made at the height of Britten’s career, was an accurate prophecy of how future generations would view Britten’s contribution to choral music. In many ways, Britten was the new Purcell that Parry and Stanford were hoping their renaissance would eventually produce, a figure that would revitalize British music, restoring it to its former brilliance. However, Britten

⁵ Donald Mitchell, Hans Keller. (eds.) *Benjamin Britten, A Commentary on his works from a group of specialists*, *The Choral Music*, Hans F. Redlich, (1953) p. 85-86

was probably not the individual who Parry and Stanford had envisaged assuming this role. They believed that the 'savior' of British music would emerge from the next wave of English composers - their students, who were embracing musical ideas from the past and largely rejecting modernism. Music history has proved that very little progress has ever been made in musical thought and direction without significant change. Indeed, much of the major innovation in composition over the generations has originated from composers who have resisted standard conventions of the day. In 1930s Britain, Britten provided that change, embracing elements of modernism and looking towards the European continent and beyond for his inspiration. However, his success as a composer and in particular a choral composer, relied on him retaining elements of a tonal harmonic language, yet creating new and innovative choral textures. In doing so, Britten skillfully bridged the divide between composer and audience that Vaughan Williams and his contemporaries were very aware of, but at the same time embracing new ideas.

Britten's choral music legacy is multi-faceted. Undisputed is the difficulty of many of Britten's choral works (the unaccompanied choral works still represent some of the most challenging choral repertory), which were certainly out of the reach of many choirs at the beginning of his career in the 1930s, a time when professional mixed choruses did not really exist.⁶ Britten's music set a new standard for choral music in Britain expanding the possibilities of what could be achieved musically through this medium. Certainly Britten's compositional style, despite the influence of many composers, is

⁶ Since the 1960's a large number of professional mixed choruses have emerged in Britain, including The Sixteen, The Finzi Singers, The Holst Singers and Polyphony, partly as a response to the popularity of choral music as a means of expression for modern composers.

unique. One cannot easily mistake Britten for another composer. It is his understanding of the human voice, the ability to create innovative choral textures, insightful and skillful text setting, his unique harmonic language, and the simultaneity that characterizes his music, which undoubtedly, sets him apart from other composers of his generation. Moreover, for a mainstream composer of the twentieth-century, both in Britain and further afield, Britten is unusual in that choral music accounts for a significant proportion of his work. In many ways, this has directly influenced the next generation of British composers, individuals such as John Tavener, Judith Weir, James MacMillan, Jonathan Dove and Gabriel Jackson, who have all embraced choral music as a major genre for their expression.

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