

# American Choral Review

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In celebration of the Britten centennial in 2013 this issue of American Choral Review features two articles on the music of Benjamin Britten: distinguished scholar Alfred Whittall offers reflections on the composer's choral writing, and co-authors Thomas Folan and Nancy S. Niemi explore issues of identity in Britten's *Cantata Academica*.

## 'Uneasily Collective': Reflections on Benjamin Britten's Choral Writing

BY ARNOLD WHITTALL

One of Benjamin Britten's recent biographers, Neil Powell, is a longstanding resident of the Suffolk town of Orford, in whose parish church *Noye's Fludde* was first performed in 1958. On the strength of a more recent performance, Powell disarmingly declares that "of all Britten's works, *Noye's Fludde* is the one to hear—or better still, to take part in—when feeling ungrateful towards the composer or indeed towards life in general: moments such as the procession of the animals onto the ark, the storm itself, [...] the brilliantly adapted congregational hymn 'For those in peril on the sea' which follows it, the return of the olive branch-bearing dove and the unfolding of the rainbow are among the most affecting in Britten's—or, for that matter, anyone else's—music." Powell concludes that "our emotion is, I think, not sentimentality but sheer wonder at a kind of transcendent rightness."<sup>1</sup>

By referring to "our emotion," Powell is underlining the essentially collective nature of the experience in question. Not only does the audience for *Noye's Fludde* become a congregation, joining in the hymns as if at a church service, but the performers involve amateurs—children—who play and sing together. After all, there is no more basic feature of musical performance than the impulse for several—even numerous—individuals to sing the same thing at the same time: even, on occasion, in the unanimity of pure unison. Taking part, contributing to an overall effect which is different from and more satisfying than that



Photo by Ronald Haupt. Image courtesy of [www.britten100.org](http://www.britten100.org)

of one's own single voice is the essence of choral singing, and of the tradition of choral composition.

In another recent commentary on *Noye's Fludde*, Heather Wiebe writes of the ways in which "invocations of community and the practices of an English religious past were inextricably yoked to the work's central theme: the renewal of the world after destruction."<sup>2</sup> Dating from a time before concerns about global warming and other environmental issues became

<sup>1</sup>Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music* (London: Hutchinson, 2013), 348.

<sup>2</sup>Heather Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152.

prominent, *Noye's Fludde* might appear to be that rarest of occurrences in Britten's creative catalogue—an unambiguously up-beat and optimistic work. To the extent that it was intended primarily as a community-based project for young performers, that is understandable: Britten would not have wanted to set up any uncomfortable associations in the minds of listeners with his opera of four years before, *The Turn of the Screw*, and its theme of the young destroyed by the evil failings of adults. Nevertheless, Wiebe rightly points to the work's archaic, fantasy qualities: "this vision of community and renewal involved a complex set of social inclusions and exclusions. *Noye's Fludde* rendered the national faith as democratic culture, freed up from dogma and to some extent from morality, available to all through education and participation rather than ancestry. At the same time, the community it enacted was imagined on the ground of a narrowly defined English cultural past."<sup>3</sup> But this Utopian idealism was exceptional. No less than in his compositions in other genres, Britten usually tried to find ways of challenging the tradition that compositions involving choral singing should simply reinforce collective values and majority opinions, whether religious, political, or aesthetic.

### **'Useful' Expressions: Pacifist March to War Requiem**

For a composer who attached great importance to being 'useful' to society, choral music—and the tradition of choral performance in which amateur choirs are joined by professional soloists and (quite often) professional instrumentalists—might be expected to be at the heart of Britten's compositional enterprise. But he seemed to approach choral genres with increasing caution as his career unfolded, his unease with the 'big occasion' reinforced after the often incomprehending reception of his opera *Gloriana*, with its extensive ceremonial scenes, written to mark the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

With *Spring Symphony* (1948-9) and *War Requiem* (1961-2) the notable exceptions, Britten's career is marked by several aborted projects that would have involved substantial amounts of choral music. "From the early 1940s Britten had wanted to compose a significant, large-scale choral work that could take its place among the monuments of the English choral tradition."<sup>4</sup> Plans included a proposed setting of Auden's

Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being* in 1942, an anti-war project with Ronald Duncan in 1945, a requiem for Ghandi after his assassination in 1948, and an oratorio for York Minster in the mid-1950s, none of which came to fruition.<sup>5</sup> As Heather Wiebe has pointed out in her astute commentary, Britten was taken to task in this respect in Rosemary Manning's *From Holst to Britten: A Study of Modern Choral Music* (1949). Since this book was published by the Workers' Music Association, its accusation that—with the exception of the relatively slight *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942-3)—Britten has failed "to relate his art firmly to a social reality" is particularly significant for its confirmation of the then-common view that this composer, for all his brilliance, and for all his apparent relish for left-wing, pacifist subject-matter during the 1930s, was now "too clever by half" and also (at least by implication) distressingly indifferent to the social context within which his music came into being.<sup>6</sup>

The young Britten was well aware that there were many other British composers whom he regarded as unimaginative hacks, because they were happy to pander to rather than challenge the unthinking conservatism of local choral societies and school groups. Yet it must be admitted that his early forays into politically-committed choral composition do not rank highly within the hierarchy of his choral works as a whole. As a supporter of the Peace Pledge Union, founded by Canon Dick Sheppard of the prominent central London church, St. Martin in the Fields, in order to campaign against rearmament and increasing belligerence in the face of fascist threats and actions in Europe during the 1930s, Britten drafted a choral "Marching Song for Dick Sheppard and his League" on 30 November 1936: the words were by poet Ronald Duncan, who a decade later would provide the libretto for Britten's first chamber opera, *The Rape of Lucretia*. During the summer of 1937 Britten's publisher, Ralph Hawkes, persuaded the Peace Pledge Union to print the chorus parts for the March: however, "at a meeting of the Sponsors on 15 September 1937 Canon Sheppard reported that the March was not much liked by members, and Canon Stuart Morris's motion that it be withdrawn was carried."<sup>7</sup>

Judging by the material published by Donald Mitchell in 1981 and 2000,<sup>8</sup> *Pacifist March* was a fairly uninspired piece of musical agitprop, despite the prominence of ascending scales in the melody that

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>4</sup>Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Past*, 42.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Banks et al., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works* (Aldeburgh: The Britten-Pears Library for the Britten Estate Limited, 1999), 34.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 68-9. *Pacifist March* became the published title of "Marching Song for Dick Sheppard and his League."

would become a memorable Britten fingerprint in later years. Things did not improve greatly a couple of years later with *Advance Democracy*, a short unaccompanied chorus for the London Cooperative Society to words by the Marxist poet Randall Swingler: this, according to Peter Evans, “expresses high-minded but imprecise sentiments in simplistic and hideously banal language. Even so Britten manages to make haunting the opening mood of apprehension and puzzlement, and just about justifies his later relapse into busy (and wholly uncharacteristic) contrapuntal artifice by the reiterations of a constant G; but the Empire Day brand of truculent diatonicism is no more acceptable when adapted to the promotion of democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

Although this harsh judgement might be thought to take too little account of the extreme political and social pressures of the time, it is aesthetically perfectly fair. The more substantial *Ballad of Heroes*, for tenor or soprano solo, chorus and orchestra, using words by Swingler and W.H. Auden, and first performed at a Festival of Music for the People in London’s Queen Hall on 5 April 1939, was no less redolent of timely patriotic and pacifist fervour. Originally entitled *Anthem for Englishmen*, and intended as a tribute to British fighters killed during the Spanish Civil War, its quasi-Mahlerian bombast has several explicit links with other Britten works—links which tend to underline the inferiority of *Ballad of Heroes* to the works in question.

A decade later, in 1948, Britten’s return to choral composition involved a fundamental switch of topic from secular to sacred, and a new focus on material that decisively turned its back on the solemn and the march-like. To be useful was not to preach political sermons, but—as would happen again in *Noye’s Fludde*—to encourage audiences to participate in hymn-singing, in contexts refreshingly free from the conventions of traditional church services. The cantata *Saint Nicolas* (1948)—his first work involving amateur performers to include familiar hymn tunes—makes a very specific point of providing instrumental accompaniments to “Old Hundredth” and “London New” that go beyond the ‘normal’ harmonies supplied for organists in hymnbooks used in churches over many years, and the choral writing elsewhere in a score written to be performable by well-trained school children (and teaching staff) has plenty of the raw vigour and practicable challenges familiar from the *Friday Afternoons* songs and *A Ceremony of Carols*. While Britten would certainly have poured scorn on the kind of avant-garde choral music being produced during his lifetime that lacked both tonality and regular rhythmic patterns but still expected large numbers

of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses to produce the same pitch at the same time, he was never comfortable enough with the image of untroubled social solidarity and constructive collective behaviour to fall back on what, to him, would have been blandly predictable choral textures. Perhaps the archetypal image of the choir as questionable social construct in Britten’s oeuvre is the church congregation turned lynch mob in *Peter Grimes*, indulging in what one Britten authority has discussed in terms of “hate speech.”<sup>10</sup> With an irony that continues to hit home powerfully, the warm, self-satisfied collective celebration of the dawning of a bright new day by the assembled populace in the opera’s final scene turns dark and uncertain as if to reflect regretful awareness of the tragedy that the populace has been actively involved in bringing about.

The sense that close-knit societies are not simply repressive and intolerant, but can reveal guilty awareness of and regret for the effect of such unfortunate attributes on sensitive outsiders seems to have been a lifelong aspect of Britten’s own sense of his place in the world. We might therefore conclude that for its fullest musical representation this perception about social character and cultural practice needed the kind of contrast between the collective and the individual that vocal works reinforcing distinctions between a chorus and soloists embody. In Britten’s case, the larger-scale operas apart, this applies especially to *War Requiem*. At the outset, the choral chanting of the ‘Missa pro Defunctis’ is made to sound fearful and apprehensive by an accompaniment that is not only more fully-shaped melodically, but consistently questions the harmonic stability and tonal identity of the chanting. It is not a simple case of the orchestra ‘taking sides’ against a complacent chorus, however. *War Requiem* famously juxtaposes the ‘establishment’ orthodoxy of the Christian Mass of the Dead with the settings of poems by Wilfred Owen for tenor or baritone and chamber orchestra that rail against the complicity of the establishment in the killing game that is war.

The drama that gives *War Requiem* its unique atmosphere and impact requires that the two worlds, and with them the score’s diverse vocal and instrumental resources, converge. Whereas in the “Lacrimosa” the Owen poem (“Futility”) and the liturgy (“Dies Irae”) have different musics, which do not significantly overlap, in “Agnus Dei” there is virtual unanimity between the lamenting poet (“At a Calvary near the Ancre”) and the sorrowing congregation, a convergence gently reinforced when the choir’s concluding “Dona eis requiem sempiternam” is half-echoed by the solo tenor’s “Dona nobis pacem.” Then, in the final “In paradisum”, the

<sup>9</sup>Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 76.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Rupprecht, *Britten’s Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 52-62.

reconciliatory gestures of the opposing soldiers, now ghosts seeking peace (Owen's "Strange Meeting"), blend into the consolatory benediction of the Mass text. Yet the extended, never wholly stable tonality of Britten's textures, which reaches into the very last "Amen", ensures that the impossible and unpersuasive synthesis of the two is never attempted. Even though the Latin liturgy has the last word, the effect of the sceptic Owen's poetic representation of human tolerance and tentative agreement to coexist, if only in death, remains resonantly in the mind.

### ***A Boy was Born* and the Practicalities of 'Collective' Choral Writing**

When he began work on *War Requiem* in 1961 Britten could call on thirty years of professional experience as a composer, and choral composition had been part of his profile from a very early stage. As a student he sang bass in a madrigal group, and his earliest mature efforts were for small choirs—the Carol for SSA, "A Wealden Trio" (1929-30), and the anthem for mixed voices *a cappella* "A Hymn to the Virgin" (1930). The anthem, together with another carol "The Sycamore Tree" (also 1930), was written for the Lowestoft Musical Society to perform in St John's Church in Britten's hometown. But in 1932, now based in London, he was able to have his *Three Two-part Songs* performed in the more professional context of the Macnaghten-Lemare concerts by the Carlyle Singers. These were the first works of Britten's to be published, and led not only to another pair of short part-songs but to Britten's first substantial choral composition, the "choral variations for men's, women's and boys' voices, unaccompanied," *A Boy was Born*, written between November 1932 and May 1933.

*A Boy was Born* could hardly be a more striking complement to the instrumental works that immediately preceded it, the *Sinfonietta* and the *Phantasy* for oboe and string trio. *A Boy was Born* fits effortlessly into the great tradition of English *a cappella* choral composition reaching back to Tudor times, yet it is no less effortlessly contemporary, managing to create a suitable sense of spiritual awe while avoiding any of the laborious or sentimental piety so often instilled in 'Christmas music'. Britten was sufficiently attached to this early demonstration of his compositional skills to make significant revisions—mainly compressions and elisions—to the score more than twenty years later, in October 1955. Many aspects of this music merit detailed discussion, but it is particularly important to emphasize two textural qualities

that help to define the compositional idiom to which Britten remained, essentially, faithful throughout his life—and not just in choral compositions.

First, the opening phrase of *A Boy was Born*'s theme, while confirming a two-sharp, D major key signature as the basis for the music's extended tonality, or extended common practice,<sup>11</sup> combines chromatic inflection with non-standard chordal constructions, when the texture is viewed vertically. In conventional terms, the eight simultaneities comprising the first phrase contain no complete major or minor triads. What might be construed as seventh chords appear on the first beats of bars three and four and the last beat of bar four: but it makes more sense to regard all the vertical conjunctions between the first and last within this phrase as 'passing' sonorities which are primarily the result of linear motion—as counterpoint rather than as harmony.

On one level, this could be seen simply as the outcome of the common-sense awareness that choral singers—even experienced professionals—operate more in terms of how a particular pitch in their part relates to its predecessor and successor, rather than in terms of its position within the vertical arrangement of all the constituent parts. Vast numbers of choral compositions written between the later nineteenth century and the present day make free use of such 'non-standard,' contrapuntally-generated chording. And when this practice is combined, as in Britten's theme, with the enriching effect of a highly chromatic tonality—the theme is far from confined to the diatonic region of D major—and especially when performed in a resonant church acoustic, the result can be memorably intense. And although Britten went along with the inclusion of an organ accompaniment in the score of *A Boy was Born* when the revised edition was finally published in 1958 (as distinct from "a piano reduction of the choral parts for rehearsal purposes," which was also available) it cannot be said that the organ enhances the music's aesthetic impact. Rather the opposite.

The second textural point to make at this stage is also especially relevant to the kind of *a cappella* choral writing found in *A Boy was Born*. The number of singers required is not specified, but the score calls for each of the four main voice types to be subdivided, making eight separate parts, with the boys' choir as an addition in four of the seven sections. A performance in which the eight choral lines were each taken by a

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<sup>11</sup>For references to 'extended tonality', see Arnold Schoenberg, *Structural Functions of Harmony* (New York; Norton, 1969), and *Theory of Harmony* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978). For 'extended common practice', see Dmitri Tymoczko, *A Geometry of Music. Harmony and Counterpoint in the Extended Common Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

single singer would not be impossible (the semi-chorus called for in Variation 3 could still be formed by four single singers). But the work's most powerful and dramatic textures, like the stark contrasts in the finale's coda between the unison presentation of the theme and the contrapuntal web within which it is placed, seem to require larger forces—a minimum of two singers for each of the eight strands. With such an imposing choral mass, it is tempting to declare that Britten never surpassed the power of the way *A Boy was Born* moves inexorably on its increasingly fervent and elaborately chromatic way to the final, triumphantly affirmative D major triad. Unambiguously diatonic resolutions of this kind are much more rare in Britten's work as a whole than they are in his choral compositions involving sacred texts, and the combination of such an ending with a secular text—as in the *Spring Symphony*—simply reinforces the exceptional status of that work within Britten's overall output. However, whether sacred or secular, *a cappella* or accompanied, the kind of textural drama that results from moving between passages in unison or octaves and much more elaborate and less stable chromatic counterpoint provides the essence of the compositional persona that Britten deploys in his choral compositions.

Britten's belief in the need for composers to retain an active social role and not to retreat into avant-garde complexity and inaccessibility was reasserted with (for him) unusual fervour in 1969, in the context of an explanation as to why “at this moment of acute change in music [...] I perhaps am not the right person to guide young composers. My methods, which are entirely personal to me, are founded on a time when the language was not so broken as it is now.” Eventually, he is prepared to name—and compliment—one young composer, John Tavener (b.1944), “who is writing very hard and very interestingly in this country at the moment. [...] And I think he and many of his generation are swinging far, far away from what I call the academic avant-garde, who have rejected the past. He and many others like him *adore* the past and *build* on the past.”<sup>12</sup>

The implication here—arising, of course, long before Tavener became known as a leading proponent of ‘holy minimalism’—that the language of music is unusually ‘broken’ in the work of composers who reject the past, can be ascribed to Britten's unease with works like Harrison Birtwistle's opera *Punch and Judy*, which had been first performed in Aldeburgh the previous year. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, Britten himself is notable for avoiding the kind of large-scale choral and

orchestral work that might embody the most obvious affirmation of traditional musical values—an oratorio or a full-scale Mass setting for the Three Choirs Festival, for example. The possibility of a large-scale oratorio arose in America in the early 1940s—the time of his collaboration with W.H.Auden on the operetta *Paul Bunyan*. But the work—Auden eventually published his text with the title *For the Time Being*—never materialized, even though two brief *a cappella* carol settings, made in November 1944, use Auden texts which he included in *For the Time Being*. But *Spring Symphony* and *War Requiem*, Britten's only substantial choral and orchestral compositions, both make a point of treating their ‘parent’ genres in ways which suggest the composer's desire not to be unthinkingly associated with any British precedents. (Only in 1971, quite late in his career, did Britten actually conduct a major English oratorio, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, and might well not have done this had Peter Pears not wished to perform and record the title role.) All this is one way of saying that, in the case of the *War Requiem*, the obvious connections between its liturgical settings and those in Verdi's *Requiem* might serve to underline the overall differences between the two compositional concepts: Verdi's striking conjunction between operatic style and sacred text is worlds away from Britten's secular (Owen) and sacred confrontations and interactions.

With *Spring Symphony*, too, such possible precedents as Mahler's Symphony No. 8 (“Symphony of a Thousand”) or Holst's First Choral Symphony, Op. 41 serve mainly to demonstrate how unusually diverse the concept of symphony itself can become when the musical design is text-led. With its four Parts, the first three subdivided into five, three and three separate movements respectively and the finale a kind of miniature cantata, *Spring Symphony* might be thought almost defiantly ‘unsymphonic’ in all save the default notion of symphony as something substantial for a relatively large number of performers. Perhaps these generic complexities help to explain why the *Spring Symphony* caused Britten unusual trouble, though the fact that his main period of work on it came after an exhausting five years dominated by opera and preceding yet more demanding operatic commitments indicates that simple overwork might have been a major part of the problem. There is no hard evidence that *War Requiem*, which seems to have been completed in as little as ten months, posed comparable challenges. Perhaps the knowledge that he was engaged on something whose form was, in effect, unique was a factor. Arthur Bliss's *Morning Heroes* (1930) was a choral requiem alluding to the First World War, but the composer called it a ‘symphony,’ and his texts were

<sup>12</sup>Benjamin Britten in conversation with Donald Mitchell, “Mapreading,” in Christopher Palmer, ed., *The Britten Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 93-5. See also Paul Kildea, ed., *Britten on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 326-8.

all poetic, without any liturgical material. In any case, despite being on good personal terms with Bliss, Britten had little time for his music.

It is fair to say that it is not on account of their choral writing that *Spring Symphony* and *War Requiem* might be considered innovative. They are certainly not unrewarding to sing, but the need to allow for the involvement of amateur choral singers (even if ‘stiffened’ by professionals) and a reluctance to risk the kind of problems in rehearsal and performance that attended enterprises using large choruses like Alexander Goehr’s *Sutter’s Gold* (Leeds Festival, 1960) and Michael Tippett’s *The Vision of Saint Augustine* (BBC, 1966) would not have discouraged Britten from the path of relative caution. A practical musician to his finger tips, he was well aware that there is no more dispiriting sound than that of a substantial choir tentatively navigating what they have collectively deemed to be unattractive and unidiomatic music. These two works apart, therefore, all Britten’s choral writing outside the opera house was on a smaller scale, though the range is far from narrow, extending from the simplest kind of community event to sophisticated professional material.

### Britten’s ‘Modern-Classic’ Edge

The relative failure of *Paul Bunyan* and the reluctance to pursue *For the Time Being* wasn’t quite the end of Britten’s involvement with W.H. Auden’s verse. The *Spring Symphony*’s setting of “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” uses the chorus only for wordless refrains, but *Hymn to St. Cecilia* responds to one of Auden’s most sheerly musical poems with the kind of effortless inspiration in which every economically placed note seems inevitable and right. In many respects a ‘textbook’ demonstration of Britten’s personal brand of extended tonality, it is no less persuasive as a demonstration of how that emancipation of the dissonance that goes with extended tonality in Schoenbergian theory and practice need not require downplaying the role of consonance. Written in five parts (SSATB), the textures are richly imaginative, with marvellously fresh manifestations of some very basic choral devices. For example, the refrain that appears three times during the piece’s overall twelve minutes is first heard softly in octaves, with just a brief expansion to produce major thirds at one point. The second statement of the refrain offers the contrast of a strongly articulated harmonization that treats the hitherto fundamental E as center point rather than overall tonic. The texture for the final statement then ‘corrects’ the harmony to an enriched E major while providing a final reminder of the flowing contrapuntal style with which the *Hymn* begins. Along the way

the singers need to demonstrate needle-sharp, unemphatically speedy articulation at one extreme, seamless legato at the other, and an unselfconscious propensity for dramatic role-playing in between.

As an *a cappella* choral work, the *Hymn to St. Cecilia* might be judged as an ‘atonement’ for Britten’s decision to withdraw the seven settings of Gerald Manley Hopkins for small SATB group which he wrote in America in 1939. Colin Matthews, who edited *Ad majorem Dei gloriam* for publication in 1989, suggested that one reason Britten abandoned the piece—apart from the cancellation of the performance originally planned in London in November 1939—was “something to do with the great technical difficulty that the songs pose.”<sup>13</sup> Only in 1975, near the end of his life, with *Sacred and Profane: Eight Medieval Lyrics* for unaccompanied voices, written like the Hopkins settings for a small professional group directed by Peter Pears, did Britten produce something comparably challenging in the *a cappella* medium.

Laid out like the *Hymn to St Cecilia* for five-part SSATB voices, *Sacred and Profane* shows none of the loss of vitality or technical timidity that might be expected from a seriously ill composer. Indeed, comparing the first six bars of the first movement with the opening of *A Boy Was Born* reveals a starker distinction between the diatonic basics—triads of C major, E minor and G major—and the dissonant passing or prolonging sonorities created by the linear unfolding of the individual parts. What, taken out of context, might be classified as ‘dominant sevenths’ in bars 2 and 5 obviously do not function as such, and the expressive weight of the phrase is firmly directed onto the harshest dissonance, which is part of the final cadence. The stepwise ‘resolution’ of the dissonant D-flat onto C-natural, at the same time as E-flat moves to E-natural, might seem straightforward enough, but the starkness of the juxtaposition makes the C major much less stable and secure than it might be if diatonic consonance were given more time to re-establish itself. It is this pervasive instability, despite—because—of the closeness of the music’s harmonic elements to traditional classical constructs that give Britten’s music its ‘modern-classic’ edge, and that edginess is still strongly in evidence in his very late compositions.

As a choral work, *Sacred and Profane* nevertheless conforms to Britten’s propensity for giving such statements of collective enterprise a relatively ‘up-beat’ tone. The last movement, called “A Death” is a positively sardonic account of the physical and psychological indignities of aging and decline, ending

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<sup>13</sup>Colin Matthews, editorial preface to Benjamin Britten, *A.M.D.G. Ad majorem Dei gloriam: Seven settings of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Faber Music, 1989).

exuberantly in the same basic E major tonality as the serenely celebratory *Hymn to St Cecilia*. As with the first movement, however, there is more emphasis on the single tonic note than on singular modal identity—major and minor, consonance and dissonance contend with one another right through into the final cadence.

The *a cappella* genre carries with it the assumption that the singers are expert enough to maintain pitch without instrumental support, but several of Britten's compositions for relatively small vocal groups with some kind of accompaniment are intended to be within the range of amateurs as well as professionals. At the same time, however, accompaniment—especially from something other than the organ—can bring with it the possibility of wider generic resonances than those of the anthem or canticle for use during church services. Britten's genius for subtly modifying time-honoured generic categories was never more attractively evident than in *Rejoice in the Lamb*, described as a 'Festival Cantata' for SATB chorus, TrATB soloists, and organ (1943). The festival in question was the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration of St Matthew's Church, Northampton, and Britten's choice of verse by the eccentric eighteenth-century English poet Christopher Smart enabled him to provide a refreshingly un-pious, unusually witty fifteen-minute piece, accessible to experienced amateur choral singers and also transferring easily enough to concert performance. Britten's later responses to commissions for choral compositions for special occasions were always carefully considered, and two of the most substantial were written either side of *War Requiem*. *Cantata Academica*, *Carmen Basiliense* (1959), a dutiful marking of the quincentenary of Basel University, was conceived for either amateurs or professionals to perform, but is not especially distinctive—the specified texts gave the composer all too little to identify with or give special musical point to. Much closer to Britten's heart was *Cantata Misericordium* (1963), also a Swiss commission for the commemoration of the Red Cross centenary celebrated in Geneva. The small chorus required plays an active part in the vivid description of the story of the Good Samaritan around which the Latin text is built, and the work is notable for shunning self-congratulatory rhetoric. A third occasional commission was *Voices for Today*, a ten-minute "anthem for chorus (men, women and children) with ad libitum accompaniment for organ," written to mark the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations, and given a professional premiere in New York, Paris and London on the same day. Britten did not devote a great deal of time and effort to it, and Paul

Kildea's verdict is neatly apposite: "it is a slight, episodic piece, but a snug fit for both the occasion and Britten's pacifist convictions," with its cross-section of texts from "the great peace lovers of history," ranging from Virgil to Albert Camus.<sup>14</sup>

### A Range of Music for Treble Voices

Finally, there is a special category of accompanied choral works designed for treble (or soprano) voices. Starting with the lively and inventive *Friday Afternoons*, twelve children's songs with piano accompaniment, written between 1933 and 1935 for the school where Britten's elder brother was Headmaster, these (all but two to be sung in unison) set the scene for the later solo-voice collections of folksong arrangements, and for other works which offer some striking surprises.

Like *Hymn to St Cecilia*, *A Ceremony of Carols* was begun on the return voyage from America to England in March 1942, and might be expected to reflect the fact that, when disaster in the shape of enemy U Boats could strike at any time, anything serious or profound would be the last thing on the composer's mind. Though first performed by the women's voices of The Fleet Street Choir in December 1942, the definitive, revised version which Britten worked on during the summer of 1943 was described as "for boys' voices and harp." Recognition that insistence on a harp might limit the work's performances no doubt led to the rubric in the published score that a piano could be substituted—in which case the purely instrumental Interlude (No. 7) should be omitted.

As Heather Wiebe observes, "*A Ceremony of Carols* modelled an accessible and recognizably English high culture, widely available and rooted in the past and in shared practices of carol-singing"; and whereas "*A Boy was Born* was clearly set apart from liturgy or amateur singing [,] *A Ceremony of Carols*, by contrast, was an elevation *within* a social practice of carol-singing, much like the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols."<sup>15</sup> The generally serene and celebratory spirit of *A Ceremony of Carols* is given additional spiritual depth by the use of the plainsong *Magnificat* antiphon for the Second Vespers of Christmas as the basis for the framing "Procession" and "Recession" movements, the implication that the work begins and ends with the singers in motion anticipating the framing chants of Britten's three 'parables for church performance' (*Curlew River*, Op. 71; *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, Op. 77; and *The Prodigal Son*, Op. 81), dating from the 1960s. The work has drawn praise even from those who have little time for Britten's grander and more

<sup>14</sup>Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 486.

<sup>15</sup>Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Past*, 53-4. The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, established in 1918 and broadcast by the BBC since 1928, is a traditional service of lessons and carols held in King's College Chapel on Christmas Eve.

operatic projects: for example, the composer Thomas Adès (b. 1971) has spoken of how “the perfection in something like the *Missa Brevis*, or *A Ceremony of Carols*, is exactly suited to the subject, so you feel it very powerfully. They have this fierce, almost angry precision, which is powerful in these delicate children’s pieces with their slight primness.”<sup>16</sup>

After the mid-1950s, Britten’s contacts with the choir directors at Westminster Cathedral, and also at London’s Wandsworth School, reinforced his preference for “angry precision” over delicacy and primness. Like *Rejoice in the Lamb*—and despite its liturgical text, which Britten tackled as he was preparing to work on *War Requiem*—*Missa Brevis*, written in May 1959, has a plangency and an urgency that strains against any spirit of ritualised contemplation. This edginess soon re-emerges in the writing for the four treble fairies in the opera *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1959-60), and again in the slight but amusing “vaudeville for boys and piano after the old English ballad” *The Golden Vanity*, written for the Vienna Boys’ Choir in 1966. But it was Britten’s second ballad for “a large choir of unbroken voices,” this time with an instrumental ensemble comprising two pianos, chamber organ and percussion, that provides his most telling demonstration of the degree to which the choral genre could access areas of darkness and intensity otherwise found most starkly in his operas.

Though *Children’s Crusade* (completed in January 1969) sets Berthold Brecht’s text in German, it was designed for the Wandsworth choir, not the Vienna Boys. Written to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Save the Children Fund, the style and notational presentation of *Children’s Crusade* has much in common with the three church operas, to which it forms something of a pendant, and like them it relates to the stylized cross between concert and dramatic presentation pioneered in *Noye’s Fludde*. No fewer than nine solo singers are required to represent various characters (including ‘the dog’) but while the score suggests that these singers “should be placed in the front row of their respective sections” they are not costumed, or required to move about—with the single exception of Solo 2, “The Little Jew,” who should sing “out of sight, behind the chorus.”

Simply because the subject-matter has so much in common with that of Britten’s most serious and intense dramatic compositions, concerned with in-

nocence under threat and the horrors of war, it is possible to feel that the composer miscalculated in deciding to make *Children’s Crusade* a work for young singers. Brecht’s story of the tribulations of children in wartime—there are analogies with William Golding’s novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954)—does not imply that it is actually being narrated by children. Britten never composed anything less lyrical in character—he himself described it as “a grisly work,” but evidently believed that it could succeed, as in the first performance in St Paul’s Cathedral, when “the boys (singing and hitting) made a tremendous impression of passion and sincerity alongside the asinine pomposity of the established church!”<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, Britten’s very last completed work restored the status quo in celebrating something even more firmly established in the United Kingdom than the church—the monarchy. *Welcome Ode*, for young people’s chorus and orchestra “was written for the occasion of Her Majesty the Queen’s Silver Jubilee visit to Ipswich on 11 July 1977, and for the Suffolk Schools’ Choir and Orchestra, who gave the first performance on that day at the Corn Exchange, Ipswich.” Britten had died on 4 December 1976, so this posthumous premiere was a poignant as well as joyous occasion, underlining the range and imagination of his commitment to choral music, and his concern for making a special effort to involve young, amateur musicians in contemporary culture. *Welcome Ode* is a short, no-nonsense work in which, after the model of *Noye’s Fludde*, uneasiness would have been entirely out of place, along with all the darker, deeper feelings so boldly displayed in *Children’s Crusade*. But there is absolutely nothing effete about it, and to this extent it deserves its place in the canon of a composer whose supremely vital contribution to choral music of all kinds continues to reward both performance and study.

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<sup>16</sup>Thomas Adès, *Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 126.

<sup>17</sup>Kildea, *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, 505.



# Echoes of a Gay Narrative: Issues of Identity in the Recitatives of Benjamin Britten's *Cantata Academica*

BY THOMAS FOLAN AND NANCY S. NIEMI

*Musicology in its tradition has been reluctant to embrace any discussion of homosexuality as it would necessarily affect negatively on the canonic status of those well acknowledged musicians and composers who would thereby be at odds with the predominant authority (the Church, the Academy, Government), where acceptance of homosexuality would not even be in the discussion or considered.*

—Philip Brett<sup>1</sup>

Within the last two decades musicologists have become more receptive to research that explores sociological factors, particularly the ways in which private aspects of composers' lives influence their music. Issues of sexual orientation and identity have been perhaps the most musicologically 'outed' of these topics, and their omission from earlier studies reflects the attitudes and prejudices prevalent in society at the time—as the quote above by Philip Brett makes clear. The life of Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), whose centennial is celebrated this year, has recently elicited such inquiry.

Britten was far from outspoken especially where personal issues were concerned, and he neither affirmed nor denied the 'open secret' of his homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> Despite the composer's verbal silence, scholars such as Brett and Lloyd Whitesell have found Britten to be anything but silent on the subject in his musical works, suggesting that he preferred to deal with personal issues through the score. This line of inquiry has led to the perception of an extensive and recurring musical narrative of homosexual acknowledgement in many of his compositions, particularly the operas *Peter Grimes* (1945), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960); the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1957); as well as shorter pieces such as *Nocturne* (1958), a song cycle for tenor and orchestra.<sup>3</sup>

If such a 'gay narrative' is on display in Britten's major works, it seems plausible that more subtle appearances—perhaps better referred to as 'echoes'—



Photo by Victor Parker. Image courtesy of [www.britten100.org](http://www.britten100.org)

also exist in pieces less central to the composer's oeuvre. There is ample reason to suspect that *Cantata Academica* (1959), for example (which also comes from this period), was part of the composer's conscious effort to give his inner struggles a voice through music. Commissioned for the University of Basel in celebration of its five-hundredth anniversary, the text is a series of simple orations that do not contain the literary depth of an opera libretto like *Peter Grimes*, but nonetheless provide enough material to make clear references to similar ideas and their appearance in other compositions.

<sup>1</sup>Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten, Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (University of California Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>2</sup>For more on the concept of the 'open secret,' see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). In the first chapter Sedgwick applies the term to an "unmasked" homosexual who, when necessary or for convenience, identifies with the space in which he seeks refuge (the "glass closet") to avoid a hostile society. See also D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>For more information on narratives in the works of Benjamin Britten see: David Clippinger, "The Hidden Life: Benjamin Britten's Homoerotic Reading of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*" in *Literature and Musical Adaptation*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Amsterdam: Editions Radopi B.V., 2002), 137-152; Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004); Stephen McClatchie, "Benjamin Britten, Owen Wingrave and the Politics of the Closet; or, 'He shall be Straightened Out at Paramore,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8, no. 1 (March 1996): 59-75.

## The Role of the Recitatives

*Cantata Academica* is just over twenty minutes long and contains three recitatives for tenor soloist and piano. [All three recitatives can be found as Examples 1, 2 and 3 at the end of this article.] Though very short (approximately one minute each) they are especially noteworthy for the ways in which their musical vocabulary differs from what might be considered 'conventional' recitative.<sup>4</sup> Instead of a more traditional text-driven, declamatory style, Britten makes use of florid melismas, repetitious melodic lines, modal harmonies, tone clusters and sustained dissonance—creating harmonically rich, quasi-improvised music that sets a mood and suspends time, giving the listener opportunity for reflection and pause. Unresolved harmonies delineate ambiguity, and the addition of altered chords and non-chord tones give the recitatives a sense of 'uneasiness' while increasing their musical complexity and depth. The vocal lines often accentuate the exotic through the use of modal mixture as well as the harmonic minor scale, adding to their dreamlike quality. In contrast to customary recitatives, where tempo is likely to be determined by rhetorical gesture, Britten specifies the affect that he wants emphasized in each: *Lento* (*largamente e marcato*) for the first recitative, *Tranquillo* for the second, and *Liberamente* for the third. The resulting "soundscape" is akin to what Whitesell describes as follows:

*In the Nocturne...as well as in other pieces from the period, such as the fairy-tale ballet The Prince of the Pagodas and the opera A Midsummer Night's Dream, Britten finds another solution [about how to represent his sexual identity]. Instead of hobbling homoerotic desire with a fearful ambiguity, he sublimates that desire, translating it into dreamy, twilight pleasures and magical, rarefied soundscapes. He fashions an intermediary place on the threshold between public and private realms. The blurred, suspended quality he creates accommodates a multitude of individual fantasies by dissolving or veiling their exact objects. This makes it safe for all sorts of listeners to entertain phantoms, which would be disturbing or self-betraying if brought forth into the daylight.*<sup>5</sup>

The deeply 'private' music of the recitatives in *Cantata Academica* is unique and remarkably different from that in the rest of the piece, which portrays 'public' celebration through its chorales, choruses, and arias. These succinct vignettes, in which the

music has an otherworldly quality, unfolds slowly and lingers longer, are intimate spaces where Britten could convey not only issues surrounding his sexual identity, but also tensions that must have been present due to the composer's unwillingness to speak out in a public forum. Like Britten's personal dilemma between acknowledgement and non-acknowledgement, this juxtaposition between public and private music representing at once the individual, and at other times the community, sets up a dialectic through which the narrative can be glimpsed.

The distinction between these realms mirrors not only the composer's personal struggle, but also an attempt to reconcile other opposing issues such as love for an individual versus love for the community. For example, the text of the first recitative ("But who was the author of this heavenly gift to Basel, who of the Rauracian people, the good genius and illustrious founder?") refers publicly to the University's founder and eventual Pope of the Roman Church, Aeneas Sylvius. From the composer's standpoint, however, there is another individual who is the object of a more private affection: Peter Pears, the tenor who performed the recitatives at the cantata's premiere. The extended dissonance between D-sharp and E-natural that underlies the concluding bars can be construed as symbolic of this tension.

The more the recitatives are viewed in light of the dualities of public/private, reality/fantasy, individual/community, platonic/homoerotic, the more interesting they become, and the clearer one begins to hear echoes of the narrative. Once the listener has some sense of the specifics of the musical vocabulary involved, then what appears to be a rather straightforward work—composed to celebrate the anniversary of an academic institution—is punctuated with richer meaning, molded deeply by the composer's personal experience:

*As is well known by now, Britten's homosexuality significantly shaped his career. In the translation from private identity to public bearing, certain tensions exercised a defining influence...The struggle between the assertion and the elision of sexual identity played out to a remarkable degree in the music itself. Britten found different ways of working with a homophilic content while making it safe for a general audience.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>According to *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, recitative is "a style of text setting that imitates and emphasizes the natural inflections, rhythms and syntax of speech. Such a setting avoids extremes of pitch and intensity and repetition of words, allowing the music to be primarily a vehicle for the words." Don Michael Randel, ed., *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), s.v. "Recitative."

<sup>5</sup>Lloyd Whitesell, "Translated Identities in Britten's *Nocturne*," *Repercussions* 6 (1997): 110-11.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 110.

## Use of the Tenor Voice

Taking advantage of the traditional role of tenor as narrator, Britten composed the recitatives in *Cantata Academica* for a voice with which he was very familiar. Working with the same musician has distinct advantages and can add significantly to the inspiration that a composer derives from knowing the performer. In the case of Britten and Pears, Whitesell suggests that such a collaboration could well have served as a forum for the two to come to a better understanding of their personal relationship: one that, due to the spirit of the times, could never be ‘publicly’ acknowledged or openly celebrated.<sup>7</sup> Having Pears sing his music could only have helped inspire Britten in whatever compositional challenge was presented him. Since Pears was the tenor soloist for the premiere of the cantata, as well as for the *Nocturne* and many other works, it is unlikely that the recitatives would have gotten less attention or care than any other movements, despite their brevity. The narrative here extends beyond the music itself to the intimate knowledge between composer and singer, as well as the opportunity to share meaningful musical experiences that suited each one’s particular gifts.

The Latin text of *Cantata Academica*, despite being rather unremarkable poetically, assists Britten’s narrative in a number of interesting ways. It is effusive in its affection for both the individual (represented by Sylvius), and for the community (represented by the University and the city of Basel). Thus in the first recitative the object of desire, worthy of adulation, is the individual; in the second this expands to include all the founders of the University; and in the third, to encompass all citizens of Basel. What begins as an exclusive object of praise extends to an embracing love of community, and finally to an all-inclusive love of humanity.

The fact that the text is uncomplicated makes it a stronger vehicle for Britten to enhance the musical narrative. That it does not discriminate on issues of identity but rather appears to promote the concept of universal acceptance—even within the patriarchal hierarchy of the church—makes it safe for Britten to exploit, especially if the listener does not dwell on deeper musical meaning. It is also possible Britten hoped part of the new mission of the University might include acceptance of homosexuality.

In this light, Britten may have been thinking not only about his own private love, but also about the public affection that is manifested as text and music embrace the larger community, leading to acceptance of people “from all quarters of the globe,” as the text from “Tema Seriale” at the beginning of Part Two of the cantata states. Could such an idea have finally given Britten the opportunity to voice his identity?

*The movement on from sensuous beauty to the wisdom of knowledge of beauty as it really is, this is fundamental...Man-youth love, free from earthly finalities of procreation, is just that love which can foster spiritual ascent: love of external beauty and devotion to the intellectual are potentially able to develop together, the one leading to the other, raising the lover to the vision of the divine.*<sup>8</sup>

Britten preferred neither to acknowledge nor deny his homosexuality, and he expressed this ambiguity in his music. While references to it are most clearly delineated in his operas, their occurrence in other works suggests that the composer sought to include bits and pieces of the narrative in a variety of other ways as he fought his own personal battles. It is difficult to imagine that Britten could have written the recitatives of *Cantata Academica* without somehow including the man he loved.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>8</sup>Lloyd Whitesell, *Images of Self in the Music of Benjamin Britten* (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1993), 27.

### III. RECITATIVO

Lento, ♩ = 48 approx.

*f* largamente e marcato

T. Solo (rubato) At hu - ius cae - le - - - stis do - ni

Pfte. *f* Ped \* Ped

T. Solo cae - le - - - stis do - ni Ba - si - - - le - ac - - - do - ni scho - - - lae nos - trae.

Pfte. *f* (accel.) Ped \*

⊖ alternative text

T. Solo *dim.* *p* in tempo giusto *p cresc.* quis auc - tor fu - it, auc - tor fu - it, quis auc - tor fu - it, quis bo - nus

Pfte. (dim. con Pedale) (con Ped.) \*

T. Solo gen - tis Rau - ra - cae - - - tan - ti no - mi - nis

Pfte. *f* (rubato) Ped

T. Solo *dim.* *pp* ge - ni us cla - rus - que con - di - tor? Quis, quis, quis?

Pfte. (dim. con Ped.) \* (con Ped.) *mf* *p* *pp*

Eng. translation: "But who was the author of this heavenly gift to Basel, who of the Rauracian people the good genius and illustrious founder?"

Example 1: First Recitativo from Britten's *Cantata Academica*

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# VI. RECITATIVO

Tranquillo, ♩ = 44 ca.

T. Solo *p* *mf*  
 Et gu-ber-na-cu-la mun-di qui te - - - net,

Pfte. *pp* *sim.* *p* *mf*  
*Ped* \* *Ped* \* *Ped* \*

T. Solo *pp*  
 et gu-ber-na-cu-la mun-di qui te - - - net

Pfte. *p* *mf* *pp*  
*Ped* \* *Ped* \* *Ped* \*

T. Solo *mf* *animato* *rall. e dim.* *pp*  
 pre-ces pro-pi-ti-us ex-au-di-vit con-di-to-rum se-se o-ran-ti-um:

Pfte. *p*  
*(senza Ped.)* *(attacca subito)*

Eng. translation: "And He who is at the helm of the world heard with favour the supplications of the founders who thus prayed:"

## Example 2: Second Recitative from Britten's Cantata Academica

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# XI. RECITATIVO

Liberamente (♩ = ♩)

T. Solo

*pp*

O ci - ves Ba - si - li - en - ses, Ba - si - li - en - ses, o ci - ves,  
*tam ve - ne - ran - dam, — tam ve - ne - ran - dam, —*

(arpa I)

Pfte.

*p*

(VI. I)

(S. Solo)

*con Ped.*

T. Solo

ci - ves, tam no - bi - lem a - ca - de - mi - am

Pfte.

*f*

T. Solo

*dim.* *pp* *pp*

aux - is - se sem - per vo - bis lau - di, lau -

Pfte.

*mf* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

T. Solo

*pp*

- di sit, vo - bis lau - di, lau - di sit.

Pfte.

*pp*

(attacca subito)

Eng. translation: "O citizens of Basle, may you always be praised for having fostered so noble an academy."

## Example 3: Third Recitative from Britten's *Cantata Academica*

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