A Boy was Born:
An Examination of the Stylistic Influences on the Young Benjamin Britten

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Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was a prodigious and gifted composer for the voice whose collective oeuvre demonstrates an especially distinctive style and approach. Most of our musical and scholarly interest lies in the adult Britten, from *Hymn to St. Cecilia* (1942) and *Peter Grimes* (1943) through the *War Requiem* (1963) and beyond. But I suggest there is much to be gleaned from examining Benjamin Britten's early works. Specifically, what were his influences and how did they affect the formation of his mature compositional style? We should therefore give close study to Britten's first published choral work, *A Boy was Born*, Opus 3. Written in 1932-33 and published in 1934 by Oxford University Press, *A Boy was Born* was Britten's final school project (one that occupied him for an uncharacteristically long period of six months). It is an *a cappella* choral tour-de-force theme and six variations of about 30 minutes' duration for SSAATTBB choir and treble choir.

Given that Britten composed *A Boy was Born* at a relatively early age and while still a student at the Royal College of Music, an investigation into Britten's musical influences is appropriate inasmuch as it helps us to understand from where and why he chose the compositional design elements that become hallmarks of his mature style. My goal here is not to assign a direct causal relationship between the techniques of established composers and the student composer—that would imply that Britten had essentially no original ideas. Rather, when we examine how Britten drew from these various sources and techniques and applied them in his unique way, a more coherent understanding of *A Boy was Born* and of Britten's broader style may emerge.

Britten's journal entries from *Letters from a Life* reveal a college student who was constantly listening to music and attending concerts. He frequented the Proms at the Queen's Hall, London, concerts given by the London Symphony, the BBC Symphony, and anything Frank Bridge conducted. He would often borrow someone's radio to listen to BBC broadcasts. In short, he was immersed in the British concert culture of the early 1930s. He listened to and formed opinions about the canon of the German tradition, including such composers as Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms, and Mozart; other Romantics such as Schumann, Mendelssohn, Rimsky-Korsakov, Sibelius, and Dvořák; British composers such as Vaughan Williams, Elgar, and Walton; plus modern such composers as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Berg. He was exposed to at least five centuries of art music, and we therefore cannot expect

The CHORAL SCHOLAR
The Online Journal of the National Collegiate Choral Organization

Volume 1, Number 1 *Spring 2009*

that his influences would be clearly delineated or simple. Instead, as I will show below, Britten parsed compositional ideas from a variety of composers and assembled them in his own way. Specifically, I suggest that the young Britten's harmonic vocabulary is heavily influenced by William Walton, using *Belshazzar's Feast* as an example; his voice-leading is influenced by Ralph Vaughan Williams, using *A Fantasia on Christmas Carols* as an example; and the use of ostinato and layering are influenced by Igor Stravinsky, using *Petrushka* as an example. In each case, I will demonstrate that the influencing composition was active in Britten's mind and how Britten translates the technique into *A Boy was Born*.

Notably absent from this list of influences are Britten's official composition teacher at the Royal College of Music, John Ireland, and his de facto composition teacher, Frank Bridge. While Bridge wrote some choral music early on, his interest and focus, particularly after World War I, was in chamber and orchestral literature. Bridge's WWI period marked a rather significant stylistic change toward a more Continental style, especially regarding Berg, and while there was no doubt some transmission of this language in lessons, it was clearly not the kind of teacher-student relationship where Britten was pushed into the Second Viennese School. Rather, Britten describes Bridge's teaching as based on the idea that "you should find yourself and be true to what you found,"[1] not "write as I do." As for Britten's studies with Ireland, Britten's sometimes scathing journal entries about him make clear that the lessons were not always productive or inspiring, though he acknowledged later in life that Ireland "nursed me very gently through a very, very difficult musical adolescence."[2] Britten's work with Ireland tended to be in exercises: a mass in the style of Palestrina, a fugue, and so on. Indeed, it may be said that Britten was afforded the opportunity to develop a distinct musical language so early in his career because neither of his teachers exerted a didactic stylistic influence.

William Walton's Harmonic Vocabulary as Seen in *Belshazzar's Feast*

Britten first became interested in Walton's music in 1931 when he bought a piano score of Walton's *Viola Concerto* before attending a performance of the work on September 10. His diary entry for the day includes this glowing review: "Walton's wonderful Vla Concerto (beautifully played Tertis) stood out as a work of genius."[3] Much later in life, after decades of friendship, Britten wrote to Walton in 1963 and said:

> I don't know if I ever told you, but hearing your Viola Concerto & 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, & I couldn't get on with the 12-tone idea (still can't) - & you showed me the way of being relaxed & fresh, & intensely personal & yet still with the terms of reference which I had to have.[4]

Britten's first contact with Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* was a little later that autumn, on Wednesday, November 25, 1931. In preparation for the concert, Britten went to Oxford University Press to purchase a score of the work, and then attended the B.B.C. concert that evening. His review in the journal entry is: "Walton's Belshazzar's Feast (National Chorus – mod. good)—very moving & brilliant (especially 1st half)—but over long — & to [*sic*]

1 Benjamin Britten, "Britten Looking Back," The Sunday Telegraph, November 17, 1963 in *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 253.

2 Ibid., 147.

3 Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds. *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 204.

4 Ibid., 202.

continuously loud – I felt."[5] Britten rarely uses words like "moving" and "brilliant" in his reviews. But it was not a completely positive review. Rather, he cites two flaws: 1) overlong, and 2) too continuously loud. As to the latter, I think Britten signals his preference for a more balanced action/reflection scheme. To the former, I suspect the concert *itself* was 'over long,' since *Belshazzar's* lasts only about a half-hour. The full program was indeed long: Haydn *Symphony No. 88*, Mozart *Symphony Concertante*, Holst's *Hammersmith*, and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* – and Britten didn't get home until 12:30 am. Almost a year later, on November 2, 1932, Britten attended another performance of the work at the B.B.C. and gave the performance this review: "H. Samuel playing well (but not perfectly) Bach's D min Concerto. Not as good as I have heard him. Ireland's beautiful Forgotten Rite & a by no means perfect performance of Belshazzar's Feast by B.B.C. Chorus. Denis Noble is v. fine singer. It is amazingly clever & effective music, with some great moments, I feel."[6] This was ten days before Britten went to Chatto and Windu's to get a copy of *Ancient English Carols* and start the composition of *A Boy was Born*, so we know that *Belshazzar's Feast* was in his recent memory when he began composing. Further, Britten began piano study on an arrangement of Walton's *Sinfonia concertante* in June 1932 and reviewed Walton's *Façade* in July of 1932 as "Delightful & attractive."[7] In summary, Britten heard and studied Walton's music and reveals later that Walton's music was inspirational in his compositional process.

It is prudent to begin the comparison of *A Boy was Born* and *Belshazzar's Feast* with contrasts. Britten's work is for unaccompanied chorus while Walton's is for large symphony orchestra and oratorio choir; Britten's work is based on a New Testament theme while Walton's is based on the Old Testament; Britten's work draws from a variety of libretto sources, none of which are biblical, while Walton's libretto is strictly from the Bible; Britten's work has no soloist or narrator while Walton's features a baritone soloist who functions as narrator. We can summarize these contrasts by stating that *Belshazzar's Feast* was not a significant influence on Britten's setting of *A Boy was Born*, with respect to libretto, scoring, and overall structure. Rather, it is the pervasive use of non-tertian harmonies in both works that links the two compositions.

Let us look at salient examples of non-tertian harmony in *Belshazzar's Feast*. First, I will examine the pervasive use of quartal/quintal harmonies. In the haunting opening section for men's chorus, measures 9–11, "howl ye, therefore," collections of fourths are emphasized:

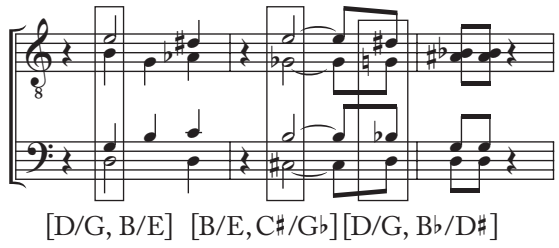

Figure 1: TTBB, mm. 9–11[8]

At two measures after Rehearsal 22, at "They drank wine again":

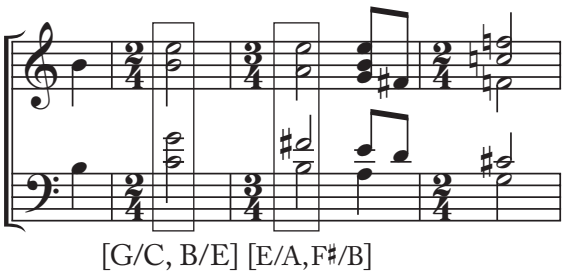

Figure 2: SAATB, mm. 311–14

[5] Ibid., 217.

[6] Ibid., 283.

[7] Ibid., 261.

[8] All examples from *Belshazzer's Feast* appear courtesy of Oxford University Press: Words selected from biblical sources by Osbert Sitwell. Music by William Walton © Oxford University Press 1931. All rights reserved.

At "pledged the King before the people":

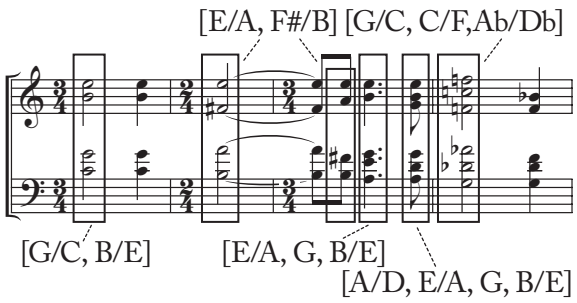

Figure 3: SAATTB, mm. 587–90

At "Make a joyful noise":

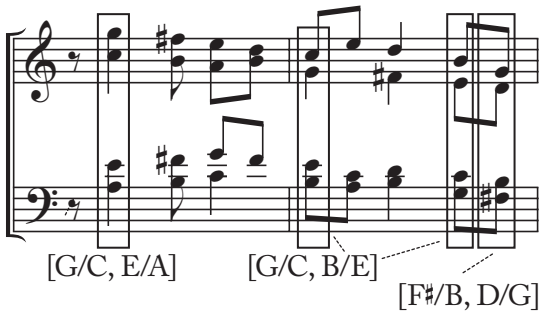

Figure 4: SATB, mm. 686–7

Britten's use of quartal/quintal harmony is equally pervasive throughout *A Boy was Born*.

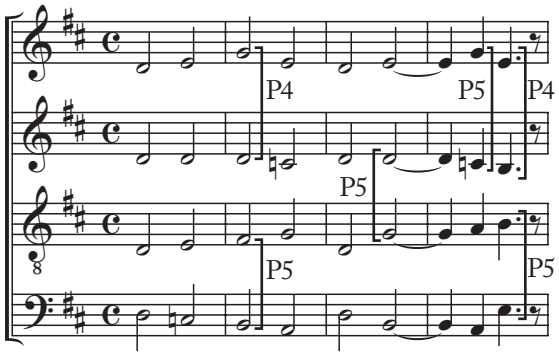

Figure 5: SATB, theme, mm. 1–4[9]

In Variation I, an excellent example is mm. 65-69:

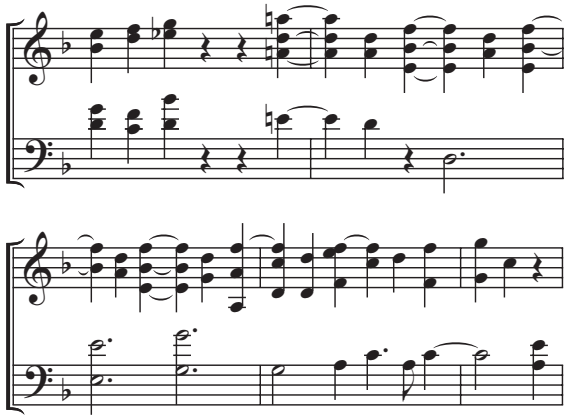

Figure 6: tutti, mm. 65–69

Variation III is dominated by quartal harmonies, as this excerpt of the first eight measures shows (see fig. 7). This is just a brief look at the pervasive use of quartal/quintal harmonies throughout the work. The similarities in timbres and voicing are striking.

But, just as in *A Boy was Born*, *Belshazzar's Feast* uses secundal harmonies frequently; at Rehearsal 4, "For they that wasted us…" (see fig. 8); at Rehearsal 8, "If I forget thee…" (see fig. 9); at page 69, "praise ye…" (see fig. 10); at four measures before Rehearsal 46 (see fig. 11), "who can neither see nor hear," which resembles the opening measures of the theme of *A Boy was Born* (see fig. 5); at "crying", page 91 (see fig. 12).

[9] All examples from *A Boy was Born* appear courtesy of Oxford University Press: *A Boy was Born* by Benjamin Britten © Oxford University Press 1934. All rights reserved.

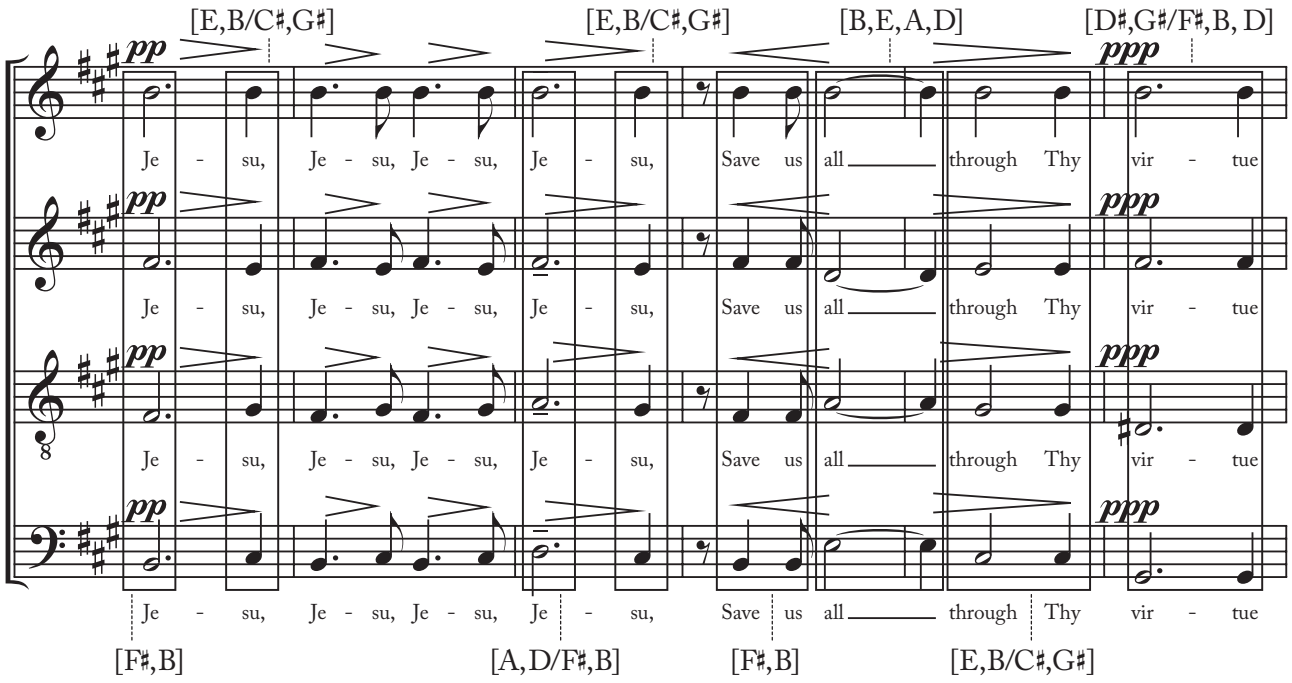

Figure 7: SATB, Variation III, mm. 1–6

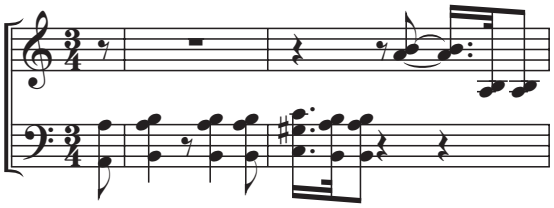

Figure 8: SATTB, mm. 48–50

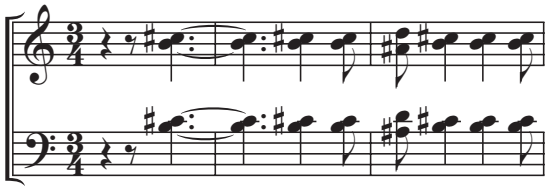

Figure 9: SATB, mm. 107–9

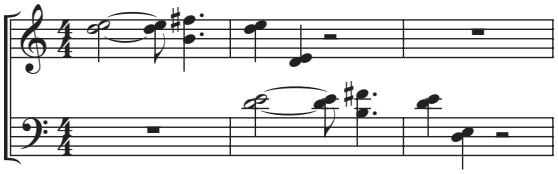

Figure 10: SATB, mm. 450–2

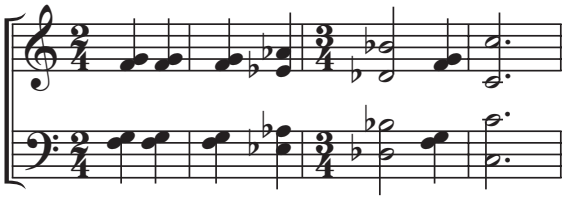

Figure 11: SATB, mm. 452–5

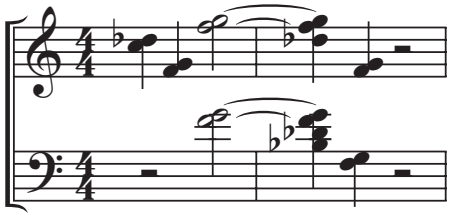

Figure 12: SSAATTBB, mm. 492–4

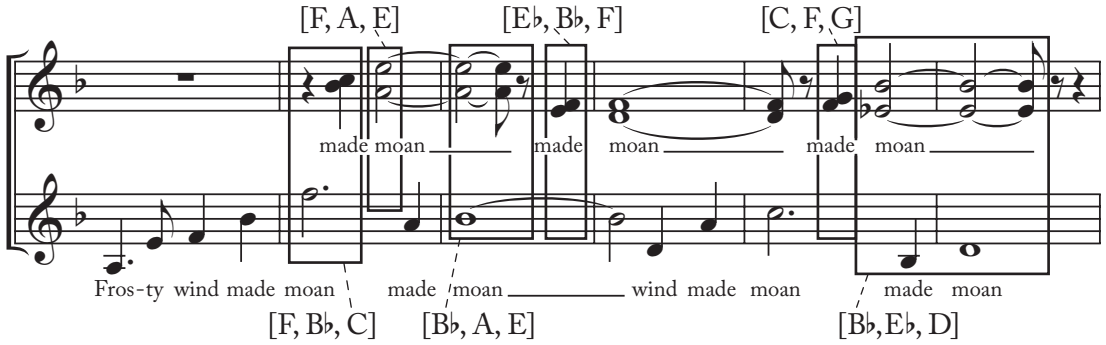

Figure 13: SSAA, mm. 8–13

This kind of stacked-seconds sound is something we consider a compositional hallmark of mature Britten. It is also used throughout *A Boy was Born*. The fifth variation in particular capitalizes on the dissonant second to evoke the atmosphere in Christina Rossetti's poem "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" (see figs. 13–14).

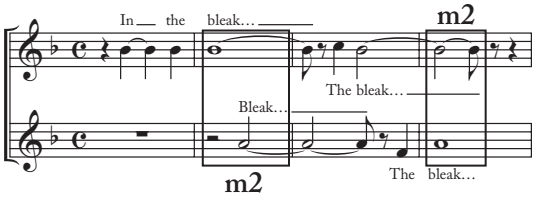

Figure 14: SSAA, mm. 1–4

This sound was established in the theme, as shown here in measures 8-10:

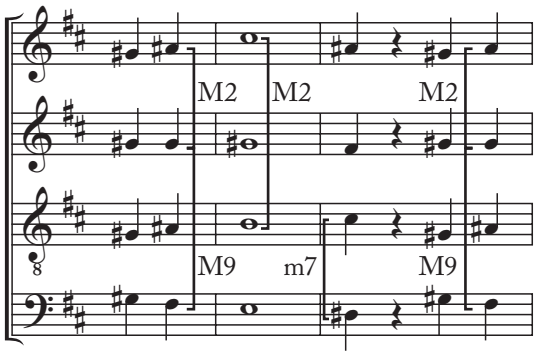

Figure 15: mm. 8–10

Given the preponderance of evidence, it is clear that Walton's musical language, specifically his non-tertian harmonies, were an active influence in Britten's mind when he composed *A Boy was Born*. The diary journals confirm this with his study of the score and his interest and overall positive reviews of the work.

Ralph Vaughan Williams and the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*

Britten's relationship with Ralph Vaughan Williams was an ambivalent one. On the one hand, Britten came to the Royal College of Music to study with Bridge, and both teacher and student rejected the English pastoral school of composition of which Vaughan Williams was a major force. While Vaughan Williams was researching folk songs, Bridge was researching the second Viennese school. Britten had this to say about Vaughan Williams's *Five Mystical Songs* in his journal entry for January 16, 1935:

> The fifteen biblical songs of R.V.W. finished me entirely; that 'pi' and artificial mysticism combined with, what seems to me, technical incompetence, sends me crazy. I have never felt more depressed for English music than after that programme… especially when I felt that that is what the public—no, not the public, the critics love and praise.[10]

Still, Britten did not dismiss the man outright and even admitted some praise. When writing about a December 1930 performance of the Vaughan Williams *Fantasia on Christmas*

[10] Ibid., 364.

Carols in which Britten was a chorister with the Carlyle Singers in the Kensington Festival, he said: "R. V. W. Xmas Fantasia thrilling to sing, & I should think to listen to. V. beautiful."[11] As for Vaughan Williams's opinion of the young Britten, we have both his comment about Britten's music in 1931 - "Very clever but beastly music,"[12] and on the other hand, the letter from the Royal College of Music's director, Hugh Allen, to Britten's mother, August 3, 1931, that begins: "I was delighted to hear from Vaughan Williams who examined at the end of the term for the Composition how highly he thought of your boy's work."[13]

What is striking about *A Boy was Born* was that, despite all the signs of Britten's mature style that I argue it demonstrates, the piece is also quintessentially English, which is to say that no one would hear it and guess that it was written by an American, French, or German composer. Of course, much of the English quality of *A Boy was Born* stems from its nature as a large choral Christmas cantata using English carols and poems. Below the surface, however, Britten adopts Vaughan Williams's voice part-writing, as seen in *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*.

Again, we must first consider the differences between the two works before we find their similarities. The *Fantasia* is about eleven minutes long while *A Boy was Born* is about a half-hour long; the former is for orchestra, baritone soloist, and choir, while the latter is for an *a cappella* double-choir with trebles; the former uses text and music from three folk carols (collected by Cecil Sharp, to whom the work is dedicated) plus a musical insertion of "The First Nowell" in the strings, while the latter uses original music to eleven more obscure texts; the former is modal, typically Aeolian and Mixolydian, while the latter is most often pentatonic; the former features the carols directly and adapts supporting textures around it, while the latter develops the original theme and constructs multiple layers of textures (ostinatos, narrative voices, et cetera).

It is clear from both Britten's written words and his music that he was in no way interested in emulating Vaughan Williams. But I argue that the choral culture in which Britten participated as a student at the Royal College of Music necessarily affected his approach to setting choral music; setting the work in a manner similar to such contemporary European works as Ravel's *Trois Chansons* or Distler's motets would not have been a real option since he had no exposure to that kind of choral music. Instead, his choral experience at the Royal College of Music was centered on the English Madrigal Choir with Arnold Foster,[14] who was a student and proponent of Vaughan Williams's music, the Palestrina-style Mass composition exercises with Ireland, and the steady diet of concerts featuring Vaughan Williams's music. These factors would suggest that when the young Britten set choral music (of which Bridge wrote quite little), he had an abundance of Vaughan Williams's influence and little of alternative styles. As we will see below, this influence is primarily in how the voices exchange lines and how repetitive canons create intensity.

Both *A Boy was Born* and *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* feature a choral part-writing technique in which a line is passed from voice part to voice part through the intersection of a common tone. Vaughan Williams uses this technique throughout the *Fantasia*, but particularly in the whole first section (mm. 1-81), as shown here in measures 26-27:

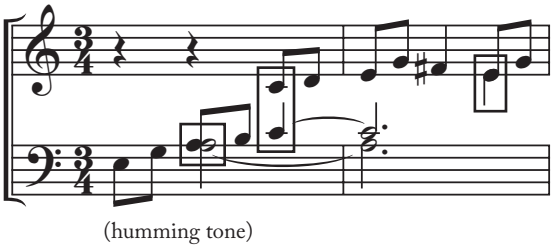

Figure 16: SATB, mm. 26–7

[11] Ibid., 191.

[12] Ibid., 191.

[13] Ibid., 197.

[14] Ibid., 145.

Britten employs a strikingly similar voice-leading throughout *A Boy was Born*. In Variation IV, the majority of the movement runs on the pentatonic scale motion between voices, as shown here with the basses:

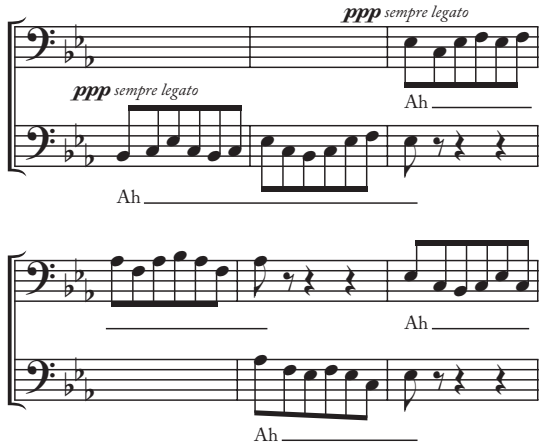

Figure 17: basses, mm. 1–6

We also see this in clear relief in the sixth variation:

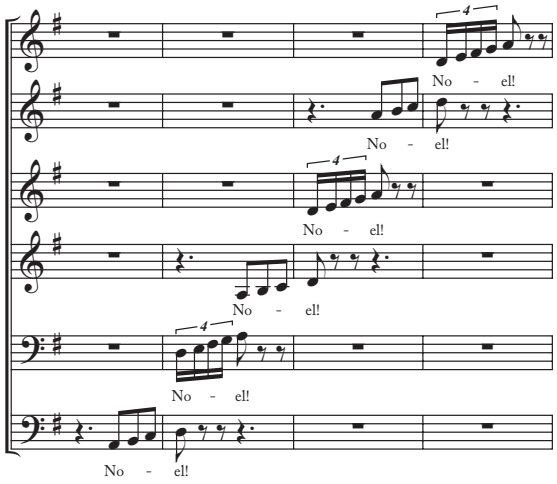

Figure 18: SI/AI/AII/TII/BI/BII, mm. 250–3

There is also frequent use of scalar canon in *Fantasia* that both looks and sounds in its technique like *A Boy was Born*. We find these canons in *Fantasia* at measures 72-78 in the chorus (see fig. 19).

At measures 107-122 in the winds and strings:

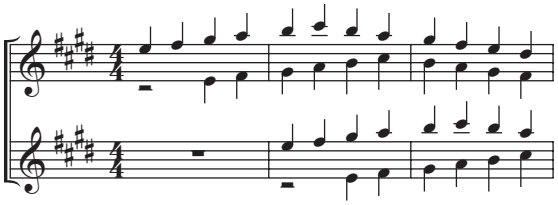

Figure 20: vln., fl., cl., ob., mm. 107–9

At measures 202-204 in the choir, at "All for to see":

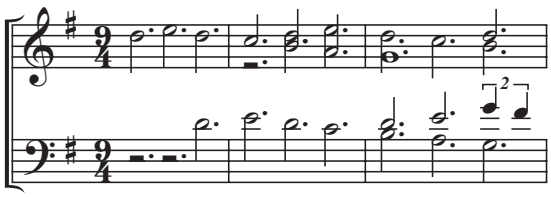

Figure 21: SATB, mm. 202–4

These are just several of the many instances in which Vaughan Williams intensifies the texture with simple polyphony. In most cases, these canons lead to the prominent entry of a carol tune, such as the orchestra's entrance of "God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen" at measure 213 after the build-up that begins at measure 202.

Britten uses these canons in *A Boy was Born*. In Variation V, Britten layers the treble choir over a scalar canon in the women's voices (see fig. 22).

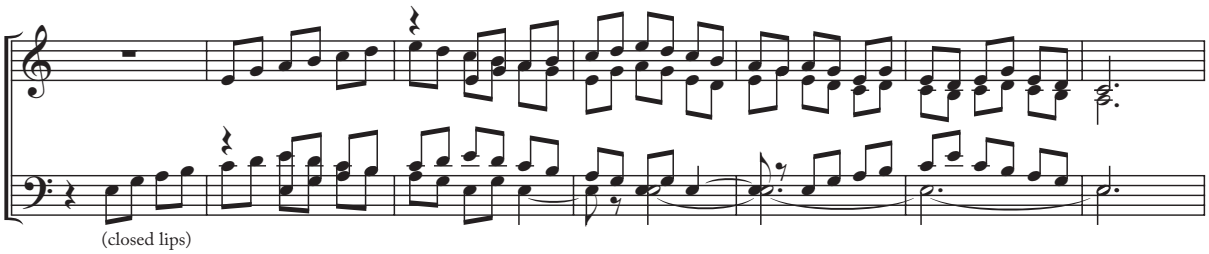

Figure 19: SATB, mm. 72–78

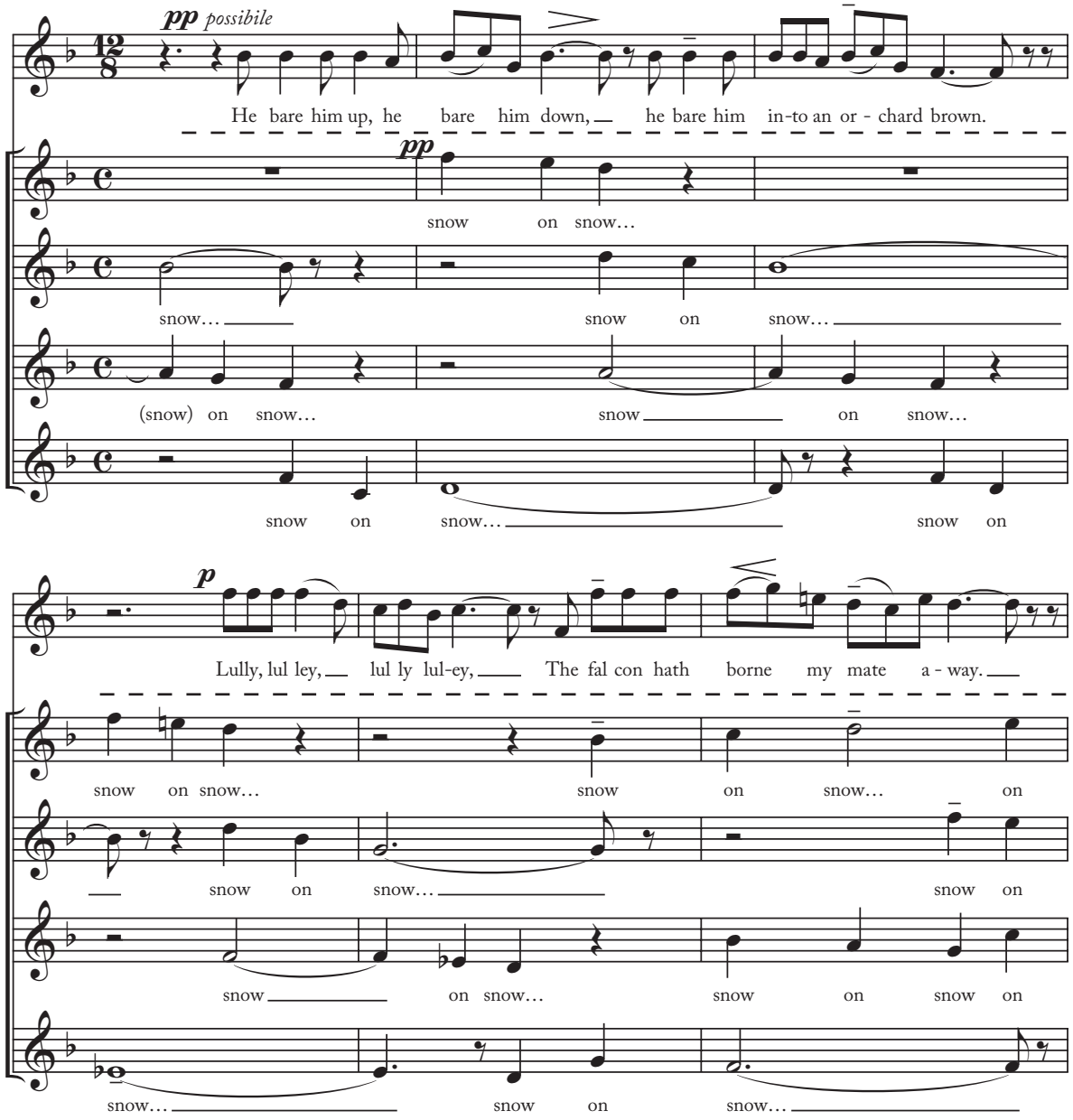

Figure 22: trebles, SSAA, mm. 24–9

Later in Variation VI, Britten shows both a "Welcome, Yule" scalar canon throughout the voice parts:

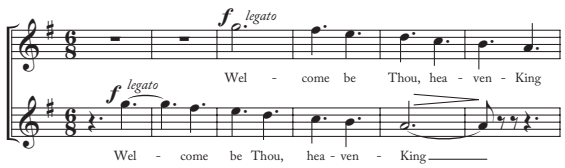

Figure 23: sopranos, mm. 230–5

So while Britten did not admire Vaughan Williams, per se, he was clearly influenced by the voice-writing techniques from this other great Christmas choral work.

Layering and Ostinato as Seen in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*

When Britten first met Walter Greatorex, the Director of Music at Gresham's (his public school), he was greeted with "So you are the boy who likes Stravinsky!"[15]—and the relationship never improved from there. Britten was captivated and intrigued by Stravinsky's music, and we have ample evidence of Britten's active interest in the composer. Britten's diary entry for January 27, 1931, reads: "Listen all the evening to Stravinsky concert. Remarkable, puzzling. I quite enjoyed the pft. concerto. Sacre—bewildering & terrifying. I didn't really enjoy it, but I think it's incredibly marvelous & arresting."[16] We know that he checked out a score of *Le Sacre du printemps* just a few weeks later on March 4, 1931, that he bought a recording of it on August 31, 1932, and that he described a B.B.C. Symphony concert on November 16, 1932, this way: "A competent performance of the all astounding Sacre to finish with."[17] This was the week in which Britten read carols and began sketches of *A Boy was Born*.

By November of 1931 Britten owned a recording of *The Firebird*, and he heard a performance of it by the B.B.C. Orchestra on March 13, 1932.[18] Regarding the *Symphony of Psalms*, Britten's review of a B.B.C. Symphony concert conducted by Ernest Ansermet on January 27, 1932, included the comment: "Stravinsky, Capriccio for Pft. (Strav. himself) & Orch. Amusing but not much more. Marvellous Symphony of Psalms (Strav.) tho'. Bits of it laboured I thought but the end was truly inspired."[19] He bought a recording of it on July 20, 1932, and a vocal score ten days later.

Britten attended the Ballets Russes on June 17, 1931, at which he saw a performance of *Petrushka*. He describes the piece as "most glorious of all… this is an inspiration from beginning to end."[20] For Christmas that year his parents gave him a miniature score of the work, and Britten bought the LSO recording on January 7, 1932, adding in his journal: "marvellous music—playing quite good."[21] On January 10, February 13 and 16, Britten made special note in his diary of listening to *Petrushka*, on November 24 he noted that he listened to "a faked perf. of Petroushka by Beecham—within an inch of collapse all the time,"[22] and the next day he wrote the theme for *A Boy was Born*.

Given this abundance of diary information about Britten's interest in Stravinsky, it seems clear that some aspects of the latter's style would be found in the former's music. I will look at *Petrushka* as an influencing composition, based on Britten's glowing review of *Petrushka* in concert, his subsequent possession of the miniature score and record purchases, and the coincidence of the poor Beecham performance the day before Britten began working on *A Boy was Born* in earnest . I suggest that *Petrushka* informed Britten's use of pentatonic collections, ostinato, and textural layering.

Petrushka uses pentatonic collections throughout the First Tableau. The work opens with a flute solo (see fig. 24).

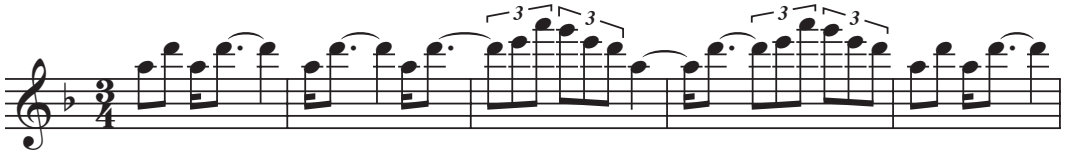

Figure 24: flute, mm. 1–5

15 Ibid., 121.
16 Ibid., 158.
17 Ibid., 286.
18 Ibid., 242.
19 Ibid., 231.
20 Ibid., 184.
21 Ibid., 227.
22 Ibid., 287.

This collection can be interpreted as a G pentatonic scale missing the third, B natural, or as 'stacked fourths', E-A-D-G. Incidentally, the third and fourth measures feature the (0,2,5) pc-set {D,E,G}, which is the theme of *A Boy was Born*. The {G,A,D,E} collection also serves as an ostinato, for example in the violins and harp at Rehearsal 2, 16, 34, 45, and so forth:

Figure 25: vln. I, m. 14

More specifically, that alternation of the open fifth and the minor third is a prevalent ostinato (in various ways) in the First Tableau.

Britten employs the major pentatonic scale consistently throughout *A Boy was Born*. Figure 17, above, shows the running pentatonic scale that goes continuously for the majority of Variation IV. Figure 26, below, shows how the first eight measures of Variation III can be best understood in pentatonic collections (see fig. 26).

Britten's use of the major pentatonic collection both in melodic and harmonic construction clearly resembles Stravinsky's use in *Petrushka*.

Stravinsky's use of ostinato is in itself the subject of multiple articles and dissertations, and a detailed discussion of the subject is beyond the scope of this work. I recommend in particular Gretchen Horlacher's article "The Rhythms of Reiteration: Formal Development in Stravinsky's Ostinati," in which she introduces her idea "that the progress of each stratum is controlled not only by its own pattern of repetition, but also by the patterns of repetition in other simultaneously occurring strata. The superimposed repetitions, then, are part of a strictly controlled contrapuntal texture."[23] In short, as she demonstrates with ostinatos from *Symphony of Psalms*, *Perséphone*, and *Les Noces*,

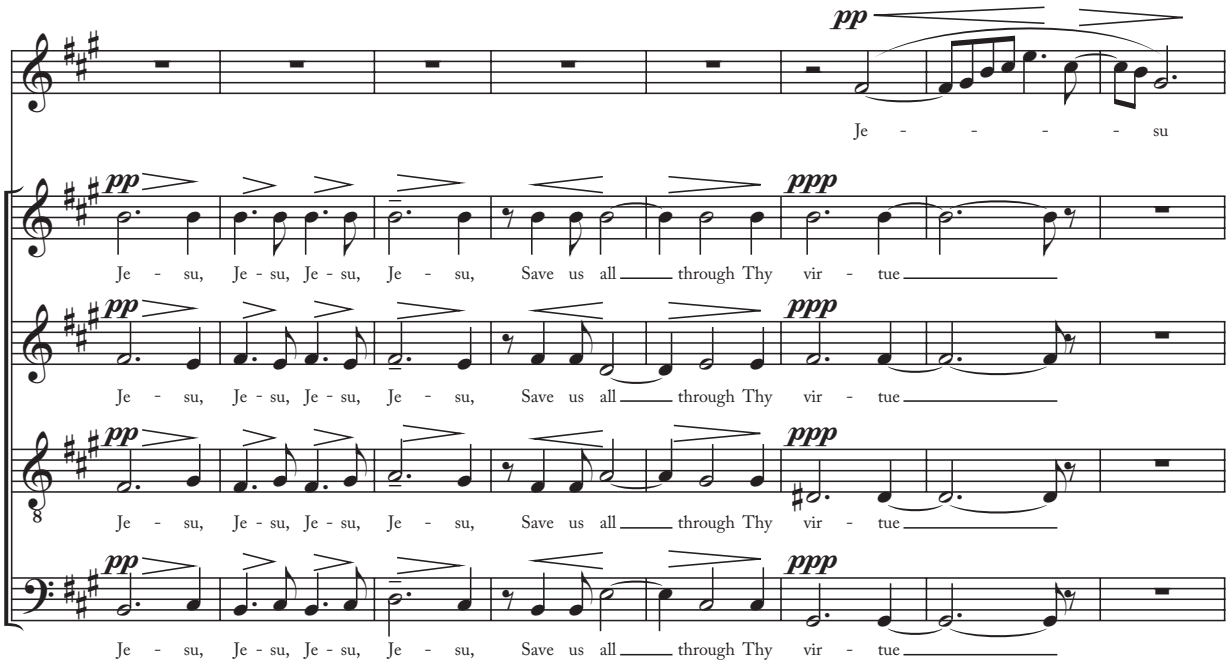

Figure 26: trebles, SATB, mm. 1–8

[23] Gretchen Horlacher, "The Rhythms of Reiteration: Formal Development in Stravinsky's Ostinati," *Music Theory Spectrum* 14/2 (1992): 173.

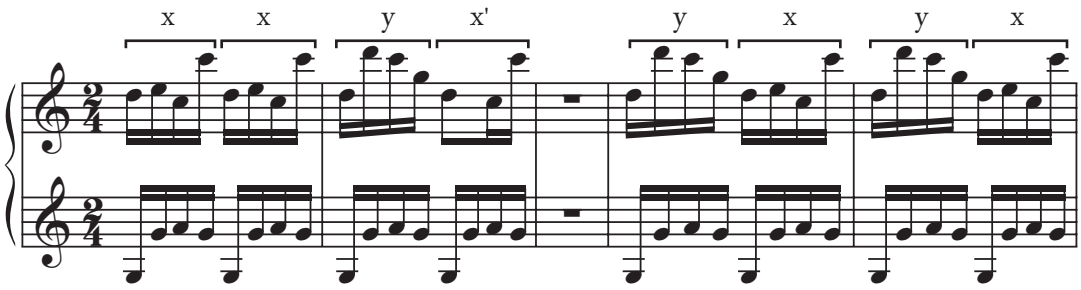

Figure 27: pno., First Tableau, mm.404-408

the cycle of each ostinato relates to the other layers and creates formal coherence.

We usually use the term *ostinato* to refer to one of two genres of musical composition: 1) those pieces based on a "ground," or a repeating melodic pattern that typically suggests a harmonic pattern and corresponding phrase direction and length ("Dido's Lament" from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, e.g.), or 2) a constantly repeated short musical gesture wherein the act of repetition itself becomes a formal design (Steve Reich's *Clapping Music*, e.g.). In *Petrushka*, Stravinsky creates ostinatos that resemble the latter more than the former — the ostinatos certainly do not dictate chord progressions — but, as Horlacher suggests, they create form through their reiterations and cycles. We have already looked at the predominant ostinato in the First Tableau at Rehearsal 2 above. Another excellent example of ostinato occurs in the piano part later in the First Tableau (see fig. 27).

In this latter example, the phases of the two ostinatos (for the left hand is a constantly repeated ostinato of its own) grow out of phase with one another. But in both cases, we are dealing with a fragment that has a scalar/harmonic implication and a short and easily definable rhythmic gesture.

The same can be said of Britten's ostinatos in *A Boy was Born*, though Britten gives them other identifying markers as well, such as a distinct text:

- In Variation I

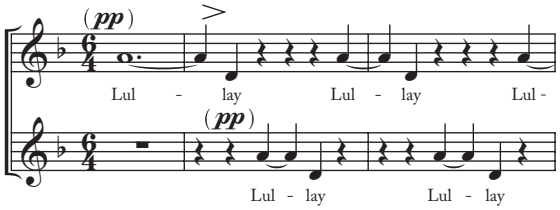

Figure 28: SI/II, mm. 1–3

- In Variation IV (see fig. 17)
- In Variation VI, with two simultaneous ostinatos

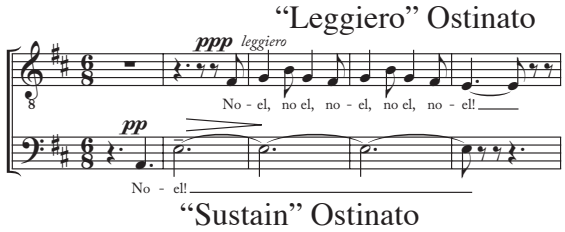

Figure 29: TII, BII, mm.1–5

In all three examples, the ostinato not only sets a harmonic/rhythmic context, but it also drives the movement with its constant repetition and manipulation.

Ostinato is one of the many aspects of stratification in Stravinsky's music, another topic that is teeming with excellent studies. Lynne Rogers' "Stravinsky's Break with Contrapuntal Tradition: A Sketch Study" is particularly good at discussing Stravinsky's approach to layered

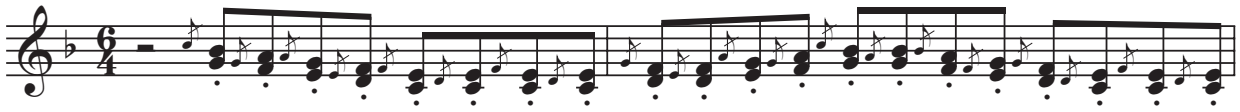

Figure 30a: vln. I soli, Fourth Tableau, mm. 39-40

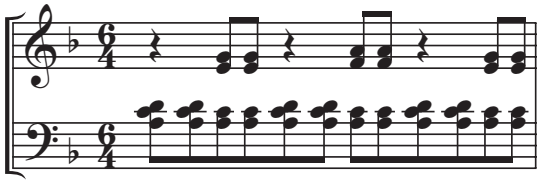

Figure 30b: vc., vla., vln. II,
Fourth Tableau, m. 39

composition, which she accomplishes by studying his sketches to the *Violin Concerto*. I quote her opening paragraph in its entirety, as it succinctly and perfectly describes the distinct issue of analyzing such compositions:

> The works of Igor Stravinsky have often been noted for the strikingly individual characteristics that so readily identify their composer. One of the most remarkable of these Stravinskian "calling cards" is *dissociation*, a contrapuntal structure that organizes the texture into highly differentiated and harmonically independent musical layers. Dissociation in Stravinsky's music may be seen as a type of counterpoint, but one that differs profoundly from traditional, tonal counterpoint. Tonal counterpoint, a counterpoint of lines, assumes the complete integration of its horizontal and vertical components. Melodically distinct lines combine to create a single harmonic progression that governs an entire texture. On the other hand, dissociation, a counterpoint of layers, does not assume such integration. Instead, the audible separation of contrasting, superimposed layers of musical material is primary, prohibiting the formation of a vertically unifying harmonic progression or pattern of simultaneities.[24]

It is here that I note that Britten's *A Boy was Born* is not properly a work of "dissociation." Indeed, what makes Britten's work so exceptional (especially for a young composer) is that

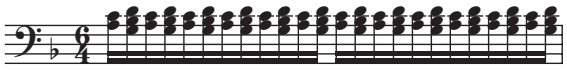

Figure 30c: bsns., Fourth Tableau, m. 39

the distinct layers do in fact relate vertically, that is, obey the same harmonic framework.

Edward Cone's "Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method" (*Perspectives in New Music*, 1962) addresses Stravinsky's stratification slightly differently. He seeks to find unity in Stravinsky's various stylistic periods by suggesting three phases of his technique, namely stratification, interlock, and synthesis. I suggest that this concept of stratification, which Cone defines here as "the separation in musical space of ideas – or better, of musical areas"[25] is the influencing force in Britten's use of layered composition. A classic example of this stratification is at Rehearsal 92 in the Fourth Tableau of *Le Sacre*. The "Dance of the Nursemaids" begins with three different ostinatos at Rehearsal 90, as shown in figs. 30a, b, and c.

Then, at four measures after Rehearsal 90, Stravinsky adds the Russian folk-song *"Akh vy sieni, moi sieni"*[26]as an oboe solo:

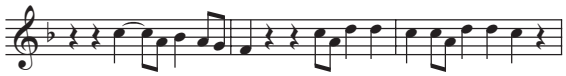

Figure 31: oboe solo,
Fourth Tableau, mm.42-44

By Rehearsal 92, he has added a fast scalar ascent in the violins, a pulsing {A,C,D} in the cellos and viola, an oscillating {D/F + C/G}

[24] Lynne Rogers, "Stravinsky's Break with Contrapuntal Tradition: A Sketch Study," *The Journal of Musicology* 13/4 (1995): 476.

[25] Edward T. Cone, "Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method," *Perspectives of New Music* 1 (1962):18–26.

[26] Frederick W. Sternfeld, "Some Russian Folk Songs in Stravinsky's Petrouchka," in *Petrushka: An Authoritative Score of the Original Version*, ed. Charles Hamm (New York: Norton & Co, 1967), 211.

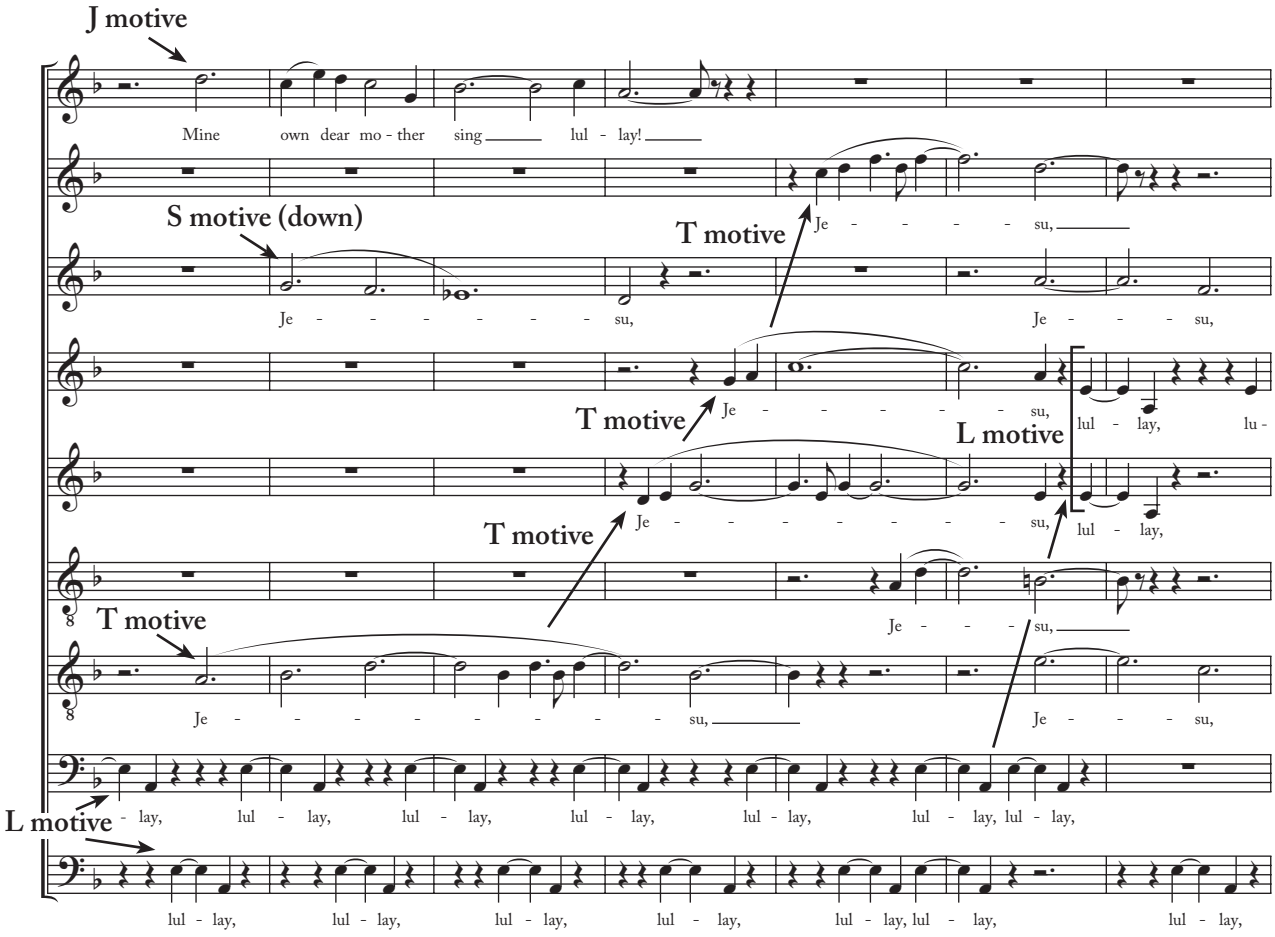

Figure 32: tutti, mm. 35–41

in the clarinets (which is the same (0,2,5,7) as the ostinato examined above), and the original pentatonic theme in the flutes. While the aggregate texture is incredibly busy, each stratum is clearly defined with respect to rhythmic gesture, melodic content, orchestration, and range.

This is the essence of Britten's layered textures in Variations I and VI. As figures 32 (Variation I) and 33 (Variation VI) show, Britten was both exceptionally interested and gifted in writing complicated multiple strata.

Using layered strata to such an extent is not something that Britten would have picked up from Ireland, Bridge, Vaughan Williams, or others at the RCM — it is clearly an influence of Stravinsky

This essay is by no means an attempt to consolidate the complete list of musical influences from which Britten felt a subconscious or conscious exertion. As I established at the beginning, Britten was exceptionally musically literate for his age and an acutely critical thinker. Other influences are also clear in his writings: Schoenberg, namely *Pierrot Lunaire* which he knew and loved by the start of *A Boy was Born*, and the Op. 31 *Variations*, which Britten heard in February of 1933; Bach, whose *St. Matthew Passion* he heard in March of 1931 and 1932, and, I believe, was the impetus for the stratified treble part (see the opening Chorus, measure 30, e.g.); Bartók, whose music he heard in March and July of 1932 ("I cannot say I love this music but it is amazingly clever & descriptive"[27]); and Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, a score of which Britten had purchased in January

[27] *Letters from a Life,* vol. 1, 240.

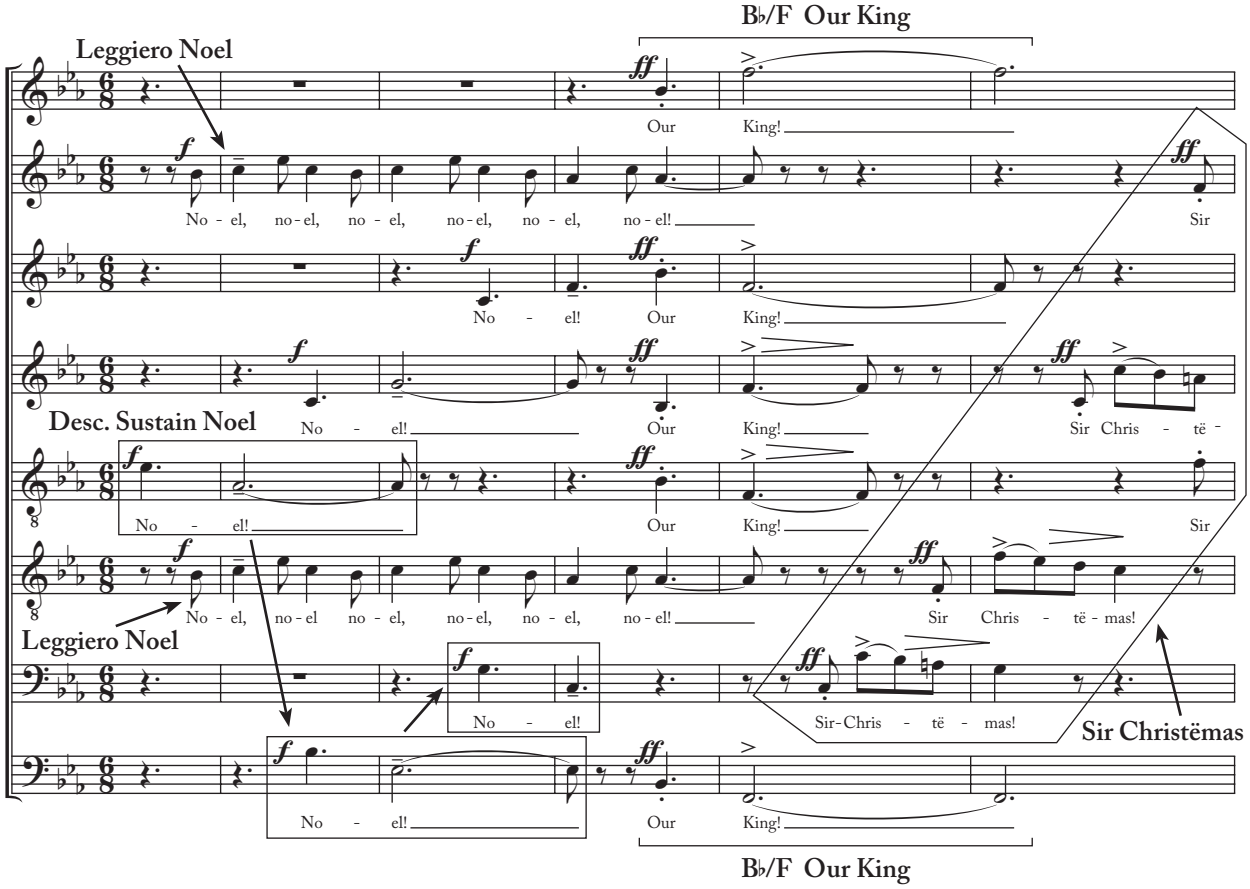

Figure 33: tutti, mm. 164–69

1931.[28] But given the detailed diary accounts of Britten's contact with and opinions about Walton, Vaughan Williams, and Stravinsky, combined with the clear evidence of the compositional design elements in *Belshazzar's Feast*, *A Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, and *Petrushka*, I suggest that Britten incorporated these ideas and synthesized the techniques, as is first seen in *A Boy was Born*.

TCS

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[28] Ibid., p. 156.