

Benjamin Britten's compositions for children and amateurs:
cloaking simplicity behind the veil of sophistication

by

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EAST SUFFOLK

PEASENHALL

YOXFORD

SAXMUNDHAM

GREAT
GLENNHAM

To Ipswich
& London

To Norwich

LOWESTO

SOUTHWOLD

BLYTHBURGH

NORTH
SEA

LEISTON

THORPENESS

ALDEBURGH

PART OF
THE
SUFFOLK
COAST

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Maltings

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Preface

This thesis conforms to the house style of the Department of Music, National University of Ireland, Maynooth. As far as possible an adherence to *The Oxford Dictionary of English* has been made for spellings, where a choice is necessary. Any direct quotations from Britten's letters or diaries (or, indeed, any correspondence relating to him) maintain his rather idiosyncratic and variable spelling style (e.g. 'abit') and his practice for underlining words, which would appear to be a habit he retained from childhood, and no attempt has thus been made to alter them. All music quotations have been reproduced from various scores published by Boosey & Hawkes and Faber Music for the sole purposes of research only. All quotes from the texts Britten set are taken from *Benjamin Britten's Poets*, edited by Boris Ford, with every attempt being made to preserve the text layout form this source.

At the outset of this dissertation I find myself drawn to the very first Britten score I studied, some ten years ago now. As an undergraduate student of music I encountered Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, Op. 31 within the context of a composition and analysis class, and was immediately arrested by the composer's facility in generating complex orchestral and vocal colours which, in this instance, far belied the limited forces for which he wrote. I was equally engaged with the tautness of form Britten evinced in the setting of these wonderful texts; he composed with a sense of economy, always evading the verbose. And yet the net result was a score which, to the ear, was resplendent in its complexities. This intriguing dichotomy fascinated me and, in short, I was captivated:

Example 1

Britten: *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, bars 1-5

Lento ♩ = 54

dolcissimo

Horn in F

Voice

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

The Day's grown old; the faint-ing Sun

con sord. ♩ pp con sord. ♩

con sord. ♩ pp con sord. ♩

con sord. ♩ pp con sord. ♩

pp

In the years following my undergraduate degree I had the pleasure in performing several of Britten's choral works, namely *Rejoice in the Lamb Op. 30*, *War Requiem Op. 66*, *Hymn to St. Cecilia Op. 27* and *Five Flower Songs Op. 47*. It was therefore only natural that as I assumed the career of a music teacher in a secondary school, I would use my position therein to promote and endorse the music of Benjamin Britten by exposing my students to as much of it as was fitting. It was through the careful selection of appropriate choral pieces for my students to perform that I was once again lured towards Britten's compositional prowess which created, as Stephen Arthur Allen so aptly expresses, 'music that children [could] engage with and sing easily, while embodying sophisticated intervals and a symbolic dimension that offsets

generic expectations otherwise associated with such material.¹ Indeed, it is this very notion which provides the crux for this research. Having successfully negotiated many of Britten's vocal pieces in the classroom, my curiosity was sufficiently aroused to explore other works written for both children and amateurs alike, the results of which are embodied in this thesis. It is through the consideration of these selected pieces that I intend to ascertain how successful Britten's compositions were in cloaking an accessibility and simplicity behind the attractive veil of sophistication.

¹ Allen, *Cambridge Companion*, 283.

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- I also wish to acknowledge the Britten-Pears Foundation for providing pertinent advice and speedy replies to any queries I made during the undertaking of my research.
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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Marion Hyland, my former guitar teacher in the Royal Irish Academy of Music. The music tuition I received from her has fed into and enhanced every single aspect of my musical life, and for this I will always be grateful.

Introduction

The principal aim of this thesis is to examine a portion of Britten's oeuvre which was intended for performance by children and amateurs and thereby to assess the extent of the composer's success in achieving music which betrayed all the hallmarks of a sophisticated composition, yet providing a score which was accessible to its performers. Indeed, 'because of his refusal to 'write down' to the child performer, although drawing on his considerable technical expertise to tailor his music to the appropriate level of skill, there can be little doubt that this body of work contributes significantly towards what Humphrey Carpenter termed Britten's "huge achievement."²

It is most appropriate in this instance to interpret the word 'huge' as something of a double entendre; not only is the artistic merit of these compositions immense, so too is the fact that Britten's prolific contribution to music aimed at amateurs and the young was so voluminous in quantity. Certainly, when compared to his contemporaries in this regard, Britten far outshone the likes of Walton, Vaughan-Williams and Tippett, to name a few. Each of these composers had their own artistic axe to grind. For Walton it entailed a significant output in the orchestral genre, protracting stylistic idioms long set in place by Elgar, whilst also developing an accent comparable to Les Six; Vaughan-Williams strove to promulgate a tonality largely indebted to modal inflection, which coupled with his in-depth acquaintance with folk song, permeated much of his orchestral and operatic output. Even Tippett, who bore close associations with Britten (manifested in the cantata *Boyhood's End*

² Allen: *Cambridge Companion*, 291.

which was dedicated to both Britten and Pears), chose to avoid writing music for children and amateurs. Tippett's material, certainly his subject-choice for libretto, was firmly embroiled in a style heavily indebted to Jungian psychology, an approach which facilitated the composer in teasing out the many issues, such as Communism, Trotskyism, pacifism and homosexuality, which 'exercised him quite as much as finding a creative voice and reinventing a national music that would go beyond the folkloristic, the Vaughan-Williams-ish.'³ One might assume, therefore, that for Tippett to compose with the young performer in mind might involve too far a distancing from his otherwise lofty aesthetic, although, to his credit, he readily placed himself within the milieu of amateur music making conducting, for example, such ensembles as the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra.

As a result, it would appear that the mantle of eminent composer for the young and amateur alike belonged most securely in the auspicious hands of one Benjamin Britten. This position, however, raises some pertinent questions in light of the fact that his contemporaries steered away from composing for this select genre. What were, indeed, the driving factors which led Britten to focus a significant proportion of his output on this type of composition? The main body of this introduction will focus on determining Britten's inspirations and innate motivation towards the creation of this unique and heterogeneous oeuvre.

When considering the vast output of Britten, one may become overwhelmed at the astonishing variety of genres and forms his compositions assumed. Although he is most highly celebrated for his ventures into operatic writing, Britten's lengthy

³ Driver: *The Sunday Times* (18 September 2005)

compositional life-span (some fifty-four years)⁴, his self-imposed preclusion from any regular teaching and an appetite for a fruitful work ethic, engendered his undertaking of such diverse works as film music⁵, music for radio, incidental music, realizations, concerto cadenzas, folksong arrangements and band music, in addition to the customary gamut of composition types associated with a composer of his status. What ties these often disparate works together, what affords them a sense of identity to Britten and no other, is a subtle but distinct thread of thematic repetition which pervades much of his artistic output.

Themes and references which recur continually in Britten's music manifest themselves in a variety of guises that the discerning listener can identify through an assorted cross-section of his compositions. Take the theme of the sea, for example. Britten was born into 21 Kirkley Cliff Road, a house situated in the fishing port of Lowestoft, with its principal view being the North Sea. This overt relationship with such a strong force in nature was to provide a life-long stimulus and, as a theme or reference point, wove itself into several of Britten's compositions. Just taking his operatic output (which number sixteen in total), the theme of the sea is either explicitly or more subtly to be found in the following works: *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *Noye's Fludde*, *Curlew River*, *The Golden Vanity* and *Death in Venice*⁶. To place it in an empirical and somewhat bald fashion, nearly 40% of his operas concern themselves with this theme, a fact which is, to a large extent, representative of Britten's penchant for thematic repetition, as mentioned above. As David Matthews

⁴ Britten's earliest essays into composition began at the tender age of six years and a substantial corpus of unpublished juvenilia remains extant, with the more significant compositions dating from 1922 onwards.

⁵ His contributions to the General Post Office Film Unit formed an impressive body of over twenty film documentaries, with the majority of scores espousing traits of quality and interest – and frequently of innovation.

⁶ It is doubtful the composer could find a location any wetter!

asserts: ‘No composer, not even Debussy, has evoked the sea more powerfully than Britten in his opera *Peter Grimes*, the work that made him famous. Britten’s first memory, he told his friend and publisher Donald Mitchell, was *the sound of rushing water* as he was being born – but can one possibly remember one’s own birth? Might he not have been recalling the sound of the sea, the constant background to his childhood?’⁷ Indeed, when Britten experienced an affinity with a particular subject, he engaged with it at the deepest of artistic levels.

Amongst the themes and images which pervaded his music, another significant constant took the form of references to childhood and all that that might entail. By examining some of the more salient aspects of his early years it shall be demonstrated how these experiences fed into his inclination in later years to compose music not only about children but also *for* children. It is a well documented fact that Britten’s early childhood was characterised by a maternal upbringing that was thoroughly encouraging, if not demanding, of his prodigious artistic talent. Upon giving birth to her fourth child on 22nd November 1913, St. Cecilia’s Day, it would appear that Edith Britten had presaged a musical destiny for her youngest child and set upon realising that goal with a dramatic fervour. She provided his earliest musical memories by singing him to sleep during long periods of infant illness, thus instilling throughout his most formative years an inexorable link between music, his mother and a perception of sanctuary. It is also worth noting that both his sister and childhood friend, Beth and Basil Reeve, remarked on the uncanny parallel between Edith’s mezzo-soprano tone and that of Britten’s future partner, Peter Pears. At any rate, as the young Benjamin commenced formal piano lessons at the age of seven with Miss

⁷ Matthews: *Britten*, 1.

Edith Astle, his mother remained more and more convinced that his future success lay in a career centred on music. As observed by the aforementioned Reeve, ‘she completely dominated Benjamin’s early life and was determined that he should be a great musician. She would soon be telling friends that her son would be ‘The Fourth B’ after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.’⁸ And there may be some truth in this if one regards the mature style he voiced in his initial forays into composition. While still a boy of fourteen, his earliest endeavours in the field of song-cycles disclose his proclivity to the theme of youthful innocence and the loss thereof. The last song from his *Quatre Chansons Françaises*, entitled ‘L’Enfance’, is a Hugo setting which tells of a mother dying of consumption while her young child is singing innocently in a courtyard. The juxtaposition of a child’s nursery rhyme heard on the flute against the dying coughs of the mother embodied by the singer and orchestra urged Christopher Palmer to remark that ““the fourteen-year-old Britten is already preoccupied with the theme of vulnerability of innocence which is to pervade his whole life’s work.””⁹

This close, perhaps claustrophobic relationship with his mother had far reaching effects on Britten that would stem long into his adulthood. It would seem his psyche was conditioned to respond to dominating maternal-type figures as he encountered them right throughout his life, as if in some way he subconsciously endeavoured to perpetuate aspects of his childhood despite maturity. This view is certainly upheld when considering a letter sent to him from Marjorie Fass (a close friend of Frank Bridge, Britten’s first formal composition teacher):

I know he is in a mental muddle abt [sic] a great deal & dreads the future, so I had to go & put my arms around him & give him a good hug & he said ‘thank you, Marj,

⁸ Matthews: *Britten*, 5.

⁹ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 19.

that was nice of you'. *He really hates growing up* [my italics] & away from a very happy childhood that ended only with his Mother's death last Christmas.¹⁰

The death of Britten's mother in 1937 proved to be an unambiguous watershed in the young composer's life, and in many ways marked the end of his childhood. Still receptive to domineering personalities, Britten had struck up a friendship with W. H. Auden, a partnership which provided much food for thought to a man whose repressed and stifled ideologies were in great need of liberation. Indeed, 'Britten's politics changed from a fairly unthinking conservatism to an emotional commitment to socialism and especially pacifism, which he was to retain for the rest of his life.'¹¹ This close alliance, coupled with his mother's death, also opened up other windows of opportunity concerning the imperative determination of his own sexual identity. This aspect of Britten's life, which Auden was most keen to awaken, is expressed with few adept subtleties in a poem ('Underneath the abject willow',¹²) written expressly for Britten – the last verse is the most telling:

Geese in flocks above you flying
Their direction know;
Brooks beneath the thin ice flowing
To their oceans go;
Coldest love will warm to action,
Walk then, come,
No longer numb,
Into your satisfaction.

By taking his first tentative steps into adulthood, as it were, Britten experienced a new personal and artistic freedom which opened as many new doors as it had left shut behind. It is my contention, however, that the door was never allowed to be closed fully and the intensity of Britten's childhood emotions stayed with him throughout the course of his life, thereby acting as a catalyst to recreate moments of his own youth through the many compositions intended for performance by children.

¹⁰ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 114.

¹¹ Matthews: *Britten*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

Another significant attribute of Britten's which stimulated his inclination towards the composition of music for children and amateurs was the potent sense of identity he attached to his surroundings. Notwithstanding the years he spent living in London while attending the Royal College of Music (1930-1933) and the three years spent in the United States, Britten chose to reside in Snape, then Aldeburgh, places not far from his childhood home in Lowestoft, although he did maintain a residence (shared with Pears) in London for quite some time to facilitate his engagements in the city. His deep-rooted feelings of attachment to this location are exemplified when considering the inception of *Peter Grimes*.

Britten, along with Pears, had moved to the United States in 1939, his primary reasons for vacating England being the impending outbreak of war, much in sympathy with his resolute stance as a conscientious objector. The placing of such a considerable distance between himself and his homeland only served to emphasize the strong affinity he ascribed to Suffolk, resulting in the composer's development of his identification with England as a source of musical inspiration. Perhaps he had to get away from England in order to realise this, and his sentiments are expressed most clearly in a letter (1940) to his brother-in-law, Kit Welford:

You see – I'm gradually realising that I'm English - & as a composer I suppose I feel I want more definite roots than other people.¹³

This sense of 'Englishness', and a longing for home, was certainly felt most robustly when Britten unwittingly encountered an article that would provide the stimulus for arguably his most successful opera, *Peter Grimes*. The idea for the new opera had been triggered by E. M. Forster's radio broadcast, printed in *The Listener*, 'George

¹³ Mitchell: *Letters from a Life*, ii, 794.

Crabbe: the Poet and the Man', with its graphic descriptions of the sights and sounds of the Suffolk coastline where Britten had spent his childhood.¹⁴ The first mention of it appears on 29 July 1941, in a letter to Elizabeth Mayer:

We've just re-discovered the poetry of George Crabbe (all about Suffolk!) & are very excited – maybe an opera one day...!!¹⁵

Ultimately it was the composition and production of *Grimes* which was to encourage Britten to return to England in 1942. Upon his return, and in order to comply with his statement to the local tribunal for the registration of conscientious objectors, he immediately engaged himself with performing duties in the form of a Wigmore Hall recital featuring the premiere of the *Michelangelo Sonnets*. As detailed in this statement, Britten was more and more resolvedly identifying his role in society as that of composer and performer: 'I believe sincerely that I can help my fellow human beings best, by continuing the work I am most qualified to do by the nature of my gifts and training, i.e. the creation or propagation of music.'¹⁶ And so Britten, by way of occupation, became ensconced in what he himself felt to be his moral and social duty.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the first Aldeburgh festival opened only six years later in 1948. Apart from the English Opera Group's subtle malaise generated by touring, Britten's profound resonance with Aldeburgh as a location, within which he could actively promote musical activities, provided the ideal setting for a music and arts festival. From its inception, a guiding philosophy of the festival was that it should be

¹⁴ Wilcox: *Benjamin Britten's Operas*, 21.

¹⁵ Mitchell: *Letters from a Life*, ii, 961.

¹⁶ Matthews: *Britten*, 69.

'owned' by the people of Aldeburgh, and all those who attended concerts. Humphrey Carpenter noted that Lord Harewood, who had been appointed president of the festival, felt that 'while festivals were springing up everywhere, the one at Aldeburgh was intended to 'belong' to the locality in the sense that Mozart did to Salzburg. Harewood hoped that visitors "may feel that the hosts have at least not hired the entertainment for their guests, but have provided it themselves."¹⁷ And provide it they most certainly did.

The Aldeburgh festival presented to Britten the ideal platform to showcase the talents of local singers and instrumentalists, a group which entailed services of both children and amateurs alike. The premiere of *Saint Nicholas*, which took place at the very first festival, necessitated a choir and so the Aldeburgh Festival Choir was formed. Britten sourced singers from 'all over east Suffolk, from choral societies, schools and church choirs' and the degree of their accomplishment is attested to by E. M. Forster's description of how "the sudden contrast between elaborate singing and the rough breathy voices of three kids from a local "Co-op" made one swallow in the throat and water in the eyes."¹⁸ Such were the achievements of the first festival that Britten was encouraged at subsequent festivals to compose music which, once again, entailed the performing capabilities of children, even going so far as to involve the audience in the memorable premieres of *The Little Sweep* (act 3 of *Let's Make an Opera*) in 1949 and *Noye's Fludde* in 1958, a performance which saw the opportunity for increased numbers of Suffolk children to take part.

¹⁷ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 268.

¹⁸ LeGrove: *Cambridge Companion*, 308.

Towards the end of his life, Britten's artistic creed was most fittingly expressed in his speech upon accepting the First Aspen Award in 1964, the content of which is indeed a fitting summation, and vindication, for the truly significant contribution he made to the corpus of music intended for performance by children and amateurs:

I certainly write music for human beings – directly and deliberately. I consider their voices, the range, the power, the subtlety, and the colour potentialities of them. I consider the instruments they play – their most expressive and suitable individual sonorities...I also take note of the human circumstances of music, of its environment and conventions; for instance, I try to write dramatically effective music for the theatre – I certainly don't think opera is better for not being effective on the stage (some people think that effectiveness must be superficial). And then the best music to listen to in a great Gothic church is the polyphony which was written for it, and was calculated for its resonance...I believe, you see, in occasional music...almost every piece I have ever written has been composed with a certain occasion in mind, and usually for definite performers, and certainly always human ones...I belong at home – there – in Aldeburgh. I have tried to bring music to it in the shape of our local festival; and all the music I write comes from it. I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships. I can find nothing wrong...with offering to my fellow-men music which may inspire them or comfort them, which may touch them or entertain them, even educate them – directly and with intention. On the contrary, it is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that two of Britten's most famous statements (both the Aspen and registration for conscientious objectors), which are distanced by over twenty years, espouse identical traits of the composer's wish to be identified as a located artist, one who serves his community to the best of his abilities. It is my contention that these desires, in addition to the composer's absorption in childhood memories, exemplify the key motives which induced the composer to engage so thoroughly with the particular genre of music in question.

To conclude this introduction, I feel it necessary to tentatively broach the sensitive issue of the speculation which surrounds Britten's special relationships with children, and in particular, pre-pubescent and adolescent boys. It would be a falsehood to rebuff

¹⁹ Matthews: *Britten*, 138.

that Britten did not hold young boys, and children in general, in the highest regard, but the notion that he would act inappropriately towards them is a matter of gross speculation based on inadequate evidence. The facts which are brought to light in John Bridcut's recent publication, *Britten's Children*, seem to endorse the most commonly held belief that the boys who were close to Britten, and there were many, all appear to have had their lives enriched by the experience. Certain members of the Aldeburgh coterie deemed Britten's interaction with these adolescents entirely innocuous; a female perspective from Maureen Garnham (secretary for the English Opera Group) sheds an informative light on the subject stating that “‘Ben loved and understood children – all children, girls as well as boys – and frequently composed for them. Much has been made of his physical attraction to boys, which undoubtedly existed but which he always had under firm control.’”²⁰ As Ronan Magill, an occasional piano student of an ageing Britten, recalled to Bridcut, “‘innocence can be more beguiling than knowledge, so for an older person to see a ruddy, lusty youth making a whole lot of uncontrolled gestures could be attractive, I don’t doubt that.’” Asked if that was what Britten felt about him, Magill is unabashed: “‘if he did, then I’m glad that he did – if I could make him think that way for even five seconds.’”²¹

If children enjoyed spending time and working with Britten, then it comes as no surprise that amateurs relished the opportunity in an equal fashion, a sentiment clearly stipulated by James Day: ‘the amateurs felt, besides the privilege of working with an outstanding musician, that whether he was conducting his own music or somebody

²⁰ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 199.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 283.

else's, his musicianship and personal charisma added something to the performance as nobody else could.²²

At any rate, it is not within the remit of this thesis to explore the personal relationships Britten conducted with children, although the pleasure he took in their company undoubtedly stimulated his inclination to create fun and engaging music for them to sing. I wish, instead, to turn to the music itself and exploit that as an indicator of Britten's affiliation to children (and amateurs). To reiterate the aforementioned objective of this thesis, I intend to assess how Britten, in his compositions for children and amateurs, achieved music of a judicious complexity by close examination of relevant aspects from the following scores, namely: *Friday Afternoons*, Op. 7; *A Ceremony of Carols*, Op. 28; *Saint Nicholas*, Op. 42; *The Little Sweep*, Op. 45; *Noye's Fludde*, Op. 59; *Psalm 150*, Op. 67; *Children's Crusade*, Op. 82; and *Welcome Ode*, Op. 95.

²² Day: *Elizabethan Times to Elgar, Tippett and Britten*, 212.

Chapter 1 – Subject Matter & Text Setting in the Sacred Works

This chapter seeks to identify and explore the variety of texts Britten chose to set, and indeed the nature of their setting, for his music aimed at children and amateurs. In the interest of clarity, the chapter shall be divided into two sections. Following the first section, which outlines some general points on the composer's considerable skills in this field, the second section shall make further explorations into this area with specific reference to the sacred texts employed in his compositions for children.

Chapter 2 will also concern subject matter and text setting of those works which make use of secular texts, while also exploring how the different performing environments affected his not only his choice of text, but the manner in which he set them.

I

Benjamin Britten displayed a willingness, from a very young age, to seek out only the most apposite of texts for him to set to music. Although the lion's share of his extant juvenilia is instrumental music,¹ the young composer was also keen to compose music for voice and piano, indubitably for performance by the young Benjamin and the amateur mezzo-soprano tones of his mother. His choice of text for one of his earliest songs, 'Beware!', constitutes a warning against women. A duplicitous subtext can be read into the exegesis of these words (by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) when one considers their intended target and audience, i.e., his mother:

¹ See Appendix A for a list of selected juvenilia covering the ages of 9 – 15.

I know a maiden fair to see,
 Take care!
 She can both false and friendly be,
 Beware! Beware!
 Trust her not,
 She is fooling thee!

She has two eyes, so soft and brown,
 Take care!
 She gives a side-glance and looks down,
 Beware! Beware!
 Trust her not,
 She is fooling thee!²

Britten asserts that from his formative years he endeavoured to expose himself to what he expressed as ‘a catholic choice of poets,’³ and as such, cultivated a parallel facility linking his skill in text setting with other proficiencies in melody writing. Language certainly didn’t present too many obstacles in the way of the composer either, and in reference to the setting of French poetry he remarked that he was: ‘not a linguist, but I pride myself that I have a feel for languages.’⁴ Indeed, due to the profusion of vocal works (all types) in his output, one can almost perceive an inherent poetic inflection through even his instrumental pieces, as if the composer’s mind was given to text-setting even when there was no text to hand. Peter Porter draws a likeness to the instinctively poetic nature of Schubert: ‘for both Schubert and Britten the world in which music grows is a poetical place – i.e., it is human, speculative, dramatic, aphoristic and spontaneous. From the world of philosophy springs the opposite achievement of the symphonic.’⁵

Britten showed no less a poetical restraint in the choice of his texts for the young, but perhaps applied alternative criteria when making his selection, regardless of whether

² Matthews: *Britten*, 6.

³ Britten: *Tit for Tat*, preface.

⁴ Schafer: *British Composers in Interview*, 121.

⁵ Porter: *The Britten Companion*, 272.

the intended work was taking a sacred or secular approach. In an interview⁶ conducted with the composer and conductor Colin Mawby,⁷ the interviewee attested to the importance of choosing the right text for children's music:

You try to produce music which children can actually relate to. I find my stuff goes down very well with children. I can't pretend it's great stuff, but it goes down well with the kids. They must enjoy what they're doing, they must have fun, there must be humour in it. It's so important to find the right text, one which children can relate to and that's not awfully easy, unless you're in the position of commissioning texts which we were able to do with Maeve Ingoldsby [in his children's opera, *The Torc of Gold*]. It's hopeless in setting some metaphysical text because it won't mean a damn thing to them. If you don't get the text right in a composition you won't get the composition right. Gerard Victory used to say that it would take him months to find a text and days to write the piece. A good text will have good rhythm and good vowel sounds in it. Latin's ideal but not for kids. Then you must contemplate what the text means; what sort of a text is it? The composer had to get into the text and identify the imagery – the kind of imagery used in it. It comes easier as you get older. You have to see the rhythmical implications of the text, which is not always obvious. And then you've got the fag of actually writing the damn piece!

Mawby's outlook on choosing suitable texts for children's music is quite in harmony with Britten's: only one of the latter's most famous works in this genre employs a Latin text. Ironically, it is the *Missa Brevis* which connects both composers as Mawby was an organist at Westminster Cathedral when Britten was commissioned to write the work for its choir, under the direction of George Malcolm from the organ. Mawby was present for the original Decca recording of this work and supplied the organ parts during the plainchant sections for the men.

II

Britten's personal religious practices fluctuated throughout his life. As a young man in his twenties, Pears had remarked that he 'didn't go so often to church... I am not

⁶ For full text see Appendix B, 62.

⁷ Born in 1936, Colin Mawby is widely known as a choral conductor and composer. He has been Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral, London, Choral Director at Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) and artistic director of Ireland's National Chamber Choir. On his retirement from the National Chamber Choir in 2001 he was appointed Artistic Director Emeritus to the choir.

sure that he would really have called himself a Christian.⁸ Conversely, during an interview with the BBC for his fiftieth birthday, his religious beliefs had tempered to adopt a view perhaps more synonymous with someone of his age, and yet still bearing an overtone of dissension: ““I’m certainly a dedicated Christian but I must confess I am influenced by the Bishop of Woolwich and Bonhoeffer, and these people whom he quotes, and at the moment I do not find myself worshipping as regularly as perhaps I will later.””⁹ As noted by Carpenter, John A. T. Robinson (Bishop of Woolwich) had created a stir within the church as a result from his uncompromising publication, ‘Honest to God’, published in 1963. At any rate, as a composer he was keen to draw from a wide variety of sacred texts throughout his life, and he set them with the apparent conviction of a practising Christian: if not fully imbued with an authentic religious spirit, they at least ventured into the realm of piety.

Britten’s choice of sacred texts for his children’s compositions reflect this somewhat complex and ambivalent attitude to religious worship, and yet their inclusion in his oeuvre is hardly unexpected. Perhaps what attracted Britten to these texts concerning biblical tales was their palpable resonances with memories of his own childhood, indeed, ‘specific qualities associated with churches and church music that may be reckoned part of his childhood heritage return to colour his music again and again.’¹⁰ Interestingly, of the works to be discussed in this section, *Noye’s Fludde*, *A Ceremony of Carols*, *Saint Nicholas*, and *Psalm 150*, neither the *Psalm* nor the *Carols* were expressly intended for performance within a church, although their performance within a sacred environment certainly leads to a more atmospheric experience. One must therefore deduce that Britten’s settings, certainly those of *Saint Nicholas* and

⁸ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 112-3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 421.

¹⁰ Palmer: *Britten Companion*, 78.

Noye's Fludde, must have been texturally conceived to make advantageous use of a church's natural reverberant acoustic.

These spatial effects were surely put to no better use than in Britten's children's opera, *Noye's Fludde*, which was intended for performance within the confines of a church, and indeed proved to be the starting point for Britten's series of church parables composed during the 1960s. Following its premiere at the 1958 Aldeburgh festival in Orford Church, Donald Mitchell was prompted to remark that 'although written primarily for young performers (and with audience participation), *Noye's Fludde* – indubitably the most important and inspired of all Britten's works for children, in which the technical constraints prove to be the very *raison d'être* of its arresting musical invention – is both a parable and an investigation of the peculiar properties of a church acoustic.'¹¹

Even as a children's work, it is widely believed to rank amongst his highest artistic achievements. Indeed, the conductor at its premiere, Sir Charles Mackerras, cited it as "yet another manifestation of the diversity of Ben's genius. It's an absolute masterpiece."¹² This 'community' opera or 'pageant', a term which Britten favoured due to its implication of a spectacular procession illustrating historical events, originated in a commission from Boris Ford, who was responsible for schools' programmes for a London-based commercial television company called Associated Rediffusion. Although the commission never came to fruition, the request for a work based on one of the English medieval mystery plays encouraged Britten to re-examine a text which had instigated Canticle II – *Abraham and Isaac*, Op. 51. The particular

¹¹ Mitchell: *Cradles of the New*, 329-30.

¹² Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 238.

text which Britten chose was extracted from the Chester Miracle Plays, and is specifically taken from Alfred W. Pollard's edition: *English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes: Specimens of the Pre-Elizabethan Drama.*

The text of *Noye's Fludde* is surely borne out of Britten's response to the 'naïvety and rusticity of the original mystery play', which despite the sophistication of the writing, still 'retains a surface roughness or down-to-earthness.'¹³ The miracle play, or mystery play, was a form of medieval drama that enacted dramatizations from biblical topics, reaching its height during the fifteenth century, after a steady development stemming from the tenth century. The early texts are characterised by a lyrical simplicity to which dialogue and dramatic action were adjoined, with the staging consigned to the churchyard and marketplace. The use of Latin was replaced by the vernacular and, following a papal edict in 1210 forbidding thespian pursuits of the religious orders, it fell upon the town guilds to produce and stage these plays, thereby resulting in the insertion of scenes that were not from the Bible. Consequentially, their performance necessitated a more dramatic approach, thus providing an ideal material with which Britten could fashion his libretto. The texts, which were based on scripture and the lives of the saints, received performance on church festival days and were arranged into cycles whose nomenclature originated from the town in which they were performed. The chief fifteenth and sixteenth century English cycles include the York Plays, the Coventry Plays and, Britten's preferred text, the Chester Plays.

As a text, its success with children may very well lie in the fact that Britten retained its anachronistic spelling and grammatical style. Simplicity was very much the order

¹³ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 238.

of the day as these plays were originally intended to illustrate and edify stories from the bible to the illiterate medieval population. The Chester Plays therefore assume a most apposite vehicle through which a children's libretto could be moulded so that 'children can lose themselves (or perhaps without constraining thought *be* themselves) in the patent *enactment* of a legend when the language by its antiquity offers a ready-made *convention*...[and] the approach to the ancient story of Noah through an essentially medieval convention, realized in Elizabethan language of a fairly lowly order, was a splendid formula for arousing children's sense of the fitting.'¹⁴

Britten's arrangement of the text is a taut construction buttressed by a triptych framework of the hymns 'Lord Jesus, think on me', 'Eternal Father' and 'The spacious firmament'. Interspersed between the hymns are a series of strophic 'dramatic tableaux' – which are connected by sung dialogue.¹⁵ As a structure, Britten exploits the nature of a strophic setting to engender a simplistic shaping that both children and congregation could easily engage with, thereby allowing an extension of material which did not require its performers to tackle vast quantities of new music. Ever the practical composer, Britten would have been fully aware of children's capabilities and their limitations, and also of the time constraints placed on the various chorus masters who were training the multifarious choristers around Suffolk. In a similar vein, this compositional approach facilitated the composer's wish to invite the participation of the congregation in the singing of all three hymns. By employing this moderately austere construction, we witness a composer who readily dispenses with gratuitous technicalities in order to meet the needs of his performers: 'of Britten's typical operatic procedures of expansion, whether by development of

¹⁴ Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 272.

¹⁵ Seymour: *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 213.

accompanimental figures and manipulation of phrase lengths in homogenous pieces or by the introduction of significantly contrasted material in others, there is scarcely a trace.¹⁶ The intricacies and ingenuities of this work, which lend it a technical finesse to complement its undemanding textual structure, shall be discussed in Chapter 4.

As is frequently encountered with Britten's music for children, a subject matter of overt simplicity can often mask a more deep and meaningful thematic significance. As has been discussed in the introduction, Britten was a composer whose inclination towards absolute music was rare indeed; a continuous recurrence of themes special to him can be located, either subtly or explicitly, in most of his compositional output. One such theme which is highly prevalent in the subtext of several works, is a child's (usually a boy's) loss of innocence converging with an impending foray into an experienced, more adult locale. Britten's detractors accused him with the excessive dissemination of this subject in his music and although he rallied against this opinion, he later admitted towards the end of his life that there was something 'in that rather obsessive subject which can and does excite me, or anyhow occupy me.'¹⁷

This theme certainly rears its head in *Noye's Fludde*, though not in a strictly blatant fashion, and is further concealed by its presentation within an unambiguous Christian context. Wilfrid Mellers identifies the opening hymn 'Lord Jesus, think on me' as a starting point where Christ's mercy is invoked so that purity and innocence may be restored through the agency of the flood itself as 'although the Flood is in one sense a

¹⁶ Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 273.

¹⁷ 'The Week Ahead' (1st broadcast BBC, 6/1969)

destructive force, it is in another sense (as it was in biblical myth) a necessary return to the unconscious waters.¹⁸

Example 2

Britten: *Noye's Fludde*: 'Lord Jesus, think on me' (Congregation), fig. 1, bars 1-9

p (standing)

1. Lord Je - sus think on me, And purge a - way my sin; From
4. Lord Je - sus think on me, That, when the flood is past, I
earth-born pas-sions set me free, And make me pure with - in.
may e - ter - nal bright-ness see, And share thy joy at last.

When read in this light, the subtext of the loss of innocence prevails throughout and pertinently closes with the eight-part round of Tallis' Canon. The children's procession through the church aisles allows the singing audience to 'literally see and hear the passing of childhood...It was Britten's rare and peculiar gift, through his own daily reencounter with childhood, to transmit direct to the inner child in each of us, bypassing the jamming device that is so often interpolated by maturity.'¹⁹

The theme of childhood innocence is similarly woven into the very textual fabric of Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. This work, which was originally intended for women's voices and harp (a rather brittle and scintillating alternative to piano or organ), did not satisfy the composer in terms of its potential until he heard a performance of the Copenhagen Boys' Choir in 1952, some ten years after the work's composition. As a result, this work is most commonly performed by children's choirs since. Like *Noye's Fludde*, the carols were medieval in origin and were selected from a collection of poems entitled *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems* which Britten had unearthed in a

¹⁸ Mellers: *The Britten Companion*, 154.

¹⁹ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 239.

book shop in Halifax. This anthology proved to be more than mere reading material for his wartime journey home to Britain; while Britten was traversing the rough waters of the Atlantic, he was motivated to compose the *Ceremony of Carols*, inspired not only by the rich and stimulating medieval texts but also by the composer's need to 'alleviate the boredom!',²⁰

This productive navigation saw the composition of another piece, equally entrenched in the theme of lost innocence, the *Hymn to Saint Cecilia*. The text, by W. H. Auden, actively encourages the celebration of the loss of innocence:

O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain,
That what has been may never be again,
O bless the freedom that you never chose,
O wear your tribulation like a rose.

Resonances from this highly charged text, resplendent in surreptitious messages from Auden to Britten, are echoed in Britten's text selection for the carols. Amongst the poets he chose from were Wedderburn, Cornyshe and various anonymous texts. Certain texts, like this one by Robert Southwell, project an impression of safety and nurturing, such as the mother singing to her baby:

Example 3

Britten: *A Ceremony of Carols* 'That yongē child', bars 2-8

The musical score consists of two staves of music for a treble voice. The first staff begins with a dynamic of *parlante*. The lyrics are: "That yon-ge child when it gan weep With song she lul - led him a- sleep". The second staff begins with a dynamic of *più f*. The lyrics are: "That was so sweet a mel-o-dy It pass-ed al - le min-strel-sy.". The music is in G major, 2/4 time. The vocal line is primarily eighth notes, with some sixteenth-note patterns. Dynamic markings include *parlante*, *più f*, and a measure with a '3' above the staff.

²⁰ Britten: *A Ceremony of Carols*, preface.

But the presence of corruption is never far in the *presto con fuoco* canonic race, a mere beat apart, of another Southwell text:

Example 4

Britten: *A Ceremony of Carols* ‘This little babe’, bars /4-17

Presto con fuoco

Treble

This lit-tle Babe so few days old, Is come to ri - fle Sa-tan's fold; All
hell doth at his pre-sence quake, Though he him-self for cold do shake; For
sempre f
in this weak un - arm-ed wise The gates of hell he wil__ sur - prise.

Britten’s choice of text, in terms of appeal to children, comes second to the way in which he sets these poems. The various compositional devices (which shall be examined in Chapter 4) such as canon, irregular metres and so forth, give weight to Britten’s considerable ability for creating a complex musical texture which children can still engage with and perform without undue impediment. As such, the chief value of this work lies, according to Philip Brett, in its indigenous contribution to British choral music, whereby the piece combines a ‘musical language distinguished at once by its pronounced character as well as its restraint: all the marks of a classicism that cannot easily be discerned in earlier British music of the century’.²¹

Eric Crozier, a producer at Sadler’s Wells, not only supplied the libretto to three of Britten’s operas²², but also the text for *Saint Nicholas* and was as such, for the time being, one Britten’s closest colleagues and friends. The work itself was commissioned for the centenary celebrations of Pears’ old public school, Lancing College. Crozier

²¹ Brett: *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 370.

²² *Albert Herring*, *The Little Sweep* and *Billy Budd* (with E. M. Forster)

engaged with the task at a most professional level, carefully crafting the text from various volumes of history and legends of the early church. As it was his first main work for amateurs, Britten was suddenly taxed with the conundrum of writing music that wouldn't overstretch their performing abilities, while achieving the delicate balance of a musically satisfying score. This sentiment was clearly expressed in a letter to Pears on 18 December 1947: 'I am beginning St Nicholas, & enjoying it hugely. It'll be difficult to write, because that mixture of subtlety & simplicity is most extending, but very interesting.'²³

The principal challenge Britten faced in setting Crozier's text was the consideration of mixed forces: the choral text was to be sung by amateur forces while the role of St Nicholas was designated to a professional tenor, in this case, Peter Pears. The result is a divergent blend of choral textures that 'whether homophonic or polyphonic, are made up from individually very straightforward lines and an exacting solo rôle of far more sophisticated contours.'²⁴ It was in this work that Britten first involved the congregation by providing them with hymns to sing as part of the musical fabric, an exercise in text setting which he would recycle in his dramatic works *Noye's Fludde* and *The Little Sweep*. Indeed, by writing for these forces relatively early in his career, Britten demonstrated a security in his 'underlying convictions as a composer to ignore the undoubted disapproval of modernist taste for any endeavour involving a large number of amateur musicians.'²⁵ As the text betrays, Britten chose more metrical sections for the congregation:

²³ Mitchell: *Letters from a Life*, iii, 344.

²⁴ Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 258.

²⁵ Brett: *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 373.

Example 5

Britten: *Saint Nicholas* V, fig. 30, bars 1-7

CONGREGATION

All people that on earth do dwell, Sing
to the Lord with cheer - full voice!

Conversely, the vocal part for St Nicholas was assigned texts of a freer metrical manner:

Example 6

Britten: *Saint Nicholas* III, fig. 10, bars 17-23

NICOLAS

Heart-sick, in hope to mask the twist-ed face of po-verty I sold my
lands to feed the poor. I gave my goods to cha-ri-ty but Love _____ de-man-ded more

In general, Britten's manipulation of the text-setting in the choral sections is characterised by a fresh response which is bolstered greatly by the colourful orchestral figures underneath and the imaginative writing assigned to the tenor line.

The final sacred work under discussion in this section is Britten's *Psalm 150*, which constituted one of his many commissions for a school. On this particular occasion the music was destined for the centenary celebrations of his own *alma mater*, South

Lodge Preparatory School (now Old Buckenham Hall School). Unlike any of the other pieces discussed thus far, the *Psalm* makes no requirement at all for professional players, and is thus tailored expressly for children. It is a short work, perhaps the shortest of Britten's that warrants an opus number. Britten's exploitation of the text is governed by his desire to imbue a physicality to the singing. His own memories of school are predominated not by music-making but by sporting achievements; Britten was a keen sportsman and excelled at tennis and cricket (he was awarded *Victor Ludorum* while a pupil at South Lodge), his competitive streak lasting right throughout his life. It would appear that Britten was most keen to translate his penchant for energetic games into the piece of music that “might make his old school take music a little more seriously.”²⁶ There can be little doubt of the composer's intention for the opening vocal phrase: with each syllable separated by a quaver rest, a child would have no choice but to sing with an energy and attack comparable to the crack of a cricket bat against the ball or, perhaps, one of Britten's own devastating serves in a game of tennis:

Example 7

Britten: *Psalm 150*, bars 68-72

In a similar vein, Britten allows the child performer to revel in unadulterated musical excitement when he sets the text of ‘cymbals’ to be shouted instead of sung:

²⁶ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 13.

Example 8

Britten: *Psalm 150*, bars 160-161

Percussion

Soprano

Alto

Cym. clashed (let it ring)

fff

shouted

Praise Him u - pon the loud Cym - bals

ff

shouted

Praise Him u - pon the loud Cym - bals

That Britten could set a text with a child's eye for fun is clearly exhibited in all his sacred works and not least in *Psalm 150*.

Chapter 2 – Subject Matter & Text Setting in the Secular Works

Britten displayed the same keen eye, high standard and imagination when selecting texts for his sacred children's works as he did for his secular. Where a divergence ensues is the chosen location for these works: this particular genre encapsulates a variety of compositions destined not only for a church setting, but also the music hall, theatre and the classroom. This certainly provided Britten a broader spectrum when selecting his subject matter, and an eclectic choice of poet, playwright and librettist was employed when choosing the texts for the following works: *The Little Sweep*, *Children's Crusade*, *Friday Afternoons* and *Welcome Ode*. Furthermore, the variety of performance locations in the secular works, as opposed to the church bound sacred texts, garnered a different response to the way in which he set those texts, creating certain distinctions which shall be explored hereunder.

In the months leading up to the second Aldeburgh festival (1949), Britten was keen to create an opera expressly for that occasion. Following the success of *Saint Nicholas* at the inaugural festival, he was enticed once more to the concept of a drama entailing the acting and vocal skills of children, again drawing from the local talents of Suffolk. Although Beatrix Potter's 'The Tale of Mr Tod' and a science fiction story, provisionally (and curiously) titled 'Tyco the Vegan', had aroused his attention, the first opera ever to be staged at an Aldeburgh festival was *The Little Sweep*, or to give it its official title, *Let's Make an Opera*, of which the third act was *The Little Sweep*. In light of Britten's successful collaboration with Eric Crozier on *Albert Herring* and *Saint Nicholas*, Britten engaged him again as librettist for *The Little Sweep*, the story

of which was inspired by two of William Blake's lyric poems, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. That William Blake's story of the child chimney-sweep was the starting point for the libretto comes as little surprise. Apart from the familiar subject matter of a child encountering evil or danger, Britten's initial venture into stage performance as a three year old involved his being cast as the little sweep in Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*.

In terms of text setting, Britten's *coup* is embodied in the participation of the audience in four songs, namely 'The Sweep's Song', 'Sammy's Bath', 'The Night Song', and 'Coaching Song'. Crozier noted that during the period of composition Britten was exceedingly high spirited, as if it pleased him greatly to be writing music for children and amateurs to sing. His mirth is candidly exhibited in the opening 5/4 audience song:

Example 9

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: 'The Sweep's Song' (Audience), bars 1-8

The musical score consists of five staves of music in 5/4 time. The lyrics are integrated into the music, with each word or phrase aligned with a specific note or group of notes. The lyrics are as follows:

Sweep! Sweep! Sadd-le your don-key and set on your way! There's
chim-ney's need swee-ping at I-ken to- day. Bring bru-shes and scra-pers and bas-kets and sacks To
har-vest the soot from our chim-er-ney stacks So Sweep! Sweep!

This presents a challenging time signature for any audience to sing, although the chance for failure was greatly diminished by the staged rehearsal which is part of the drama in the preceding two acts of *Let's Make an Opera*. The specific location of a music theatre provided an apposite setting for this first section of the opera, the form

of which is a play illustrating the preparation and rehearsal of the opera itself. The raised stage of a concert hall doubles as a didactic platform from which the conductor can literally teach the audience their songs. In a similar ground-breaking move, Britten required the audience to replicate familiar bird-call of the Alde estuary, a daring attempt which caused some disquiet from the audience. Humphrey Carpenter regales Elizabeth Sweeting's recollection of a journalist entering into the spirit of the drama: ““a tall, lean, bespectacled figure rose from his seat among the doves...“Dear Mr Conductor,” he said, “I do not feel that my voice is compatible with the doves. May I please change my seat to be among the herons?” In a gale of laughter this was duly affected and everyone relaxed.””²⁷

Example 10

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: ‘The Night Song’, (Audience) bars /18-29

Despite Crozier's libretto betraying certain weaknesses,²⁸ its potency is regained in Britten's practical and effective setting which accurately gauges the children's abilities and limitations as *dramatis personae* and singers. For example, Britten opts for a spoken dialogue over recitative, an obstacle which few children perform

²⁷ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 276.

²⁸ Claire Seymour (121) interprets the text as displaying a somewhat Dickensian quality, where the brutality of Black Bob pitted against Sam's wretchedness is presented in rather simplistic terms resulting in an occasionally mawkish and over-sentimental libretto.

accurately. This adroit handling of the text ensures that ‘crucial ideas can be spun out to some length, and confusing subsidiary material can be kept to a minimum.’²⁹

If the nature of the subject matter for *The Little Sweep* can be described as rectitude overcoming adversity (Claire Seymour considers it as a ‘happy sequel’ to *Peter Grimes*),³⁰ then the ballad, *Children’s Crusade*, may be regarded as its antithesis. Britten was a life-long pacifist whose staunch anti-war stance informed several of his compositions, most eminently in the *War Requiem*, Op. 66. Britten’s reaction to the poetry of Wilfred Owen, whose war poems he had sensitively, if not benevolently, interspersed with settings from the *Missa pro defunctis*, was in stark contrast to how he approached the impersonal tone of Bertolt Brecht’s *Kinderkreuzzug*. Hans Keller’s translation of Brecht’s unflinching ballad furnished a text provoking a rather bleak and austere score which is noteworthy for lacking Britten’s customary felicitous approach to children’s music. It was written to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Save the Children Fund, and following the success of *The Golden Vanity*, Britten opted for another children’s work, this time combining the unique forces (in his output anyway) of boy’s voices, a large percussion ensemble, two pianos and organ.

The story tells of a group of refugee children wandering through war-torn Poland in 1939, a harrowing theme by anyone’s reckoning. An authentic poignancy surfaces when one considers how the children are forced to assume the adult roles they must adopt in order to survive the depredation of war, a notion powerfully reinforced by the stage presence of the children themselves:

²⁹ Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 265.

³⁰ Seymour: *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 121.

Once, to be sure, they found a soldier
Wounded, in pinewoods he lay.
They tended him seven days,
So that he could tell them the way.

He spoke up clearly, 'To Bilgoray!'
His fever made him rave.
An eight day he did not live to see:
For him too they dug a grave.

Their desolation is palpable in the following verse; any morsel of sanguinity is utterly absent from this text:

True, there was a signpost also:
Deep in the snow they found.
In fact it had ceased to show the way:
Someone had turned it round.

And when they hunted for Bilgoray
Nowhere could they find it.

Other characters emerge from the text evoke a conspicuous pathos, such as a girl and boy of twelve and fifteen years respectively, who are revealed to be lovers. Brecht's pathetic image of a feeble girl brushing her lover's hair is at odds with the subsequent verse which annihilates this gentle idyll:

And then there was some loving.
She was twelve, he was fifteen; there,
In a ruined cottage,
She sat and combed his hair.

But love, it is not for ever –
Not in the biting cold,
For how can the saplings blossom
With so much snow to hold?

What speaks to the audience in this work, though, is the highly responsive manner in which Britten set this distressing narrative. He himself labelled the work “a very grisly piece,”³¹ and this angularity of mood informed his approach to setting the text. The impassive and economical detachment of Brecht's language is couched idiosyncratically within the parameters of balladry. The past-tense setting is amplified

³¹ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 140.

at the beginning of several verses, such as in verses 16-18, each opening with the following lines: ‘Then there was a war’; ‘And then there was a trial’; ‘Then there was a funeral’. This ballad style proffers scant opportunity for standard operatic idioms, which perhaps is in keeping with the amateur voices of the Wandsworth School Boys’ Choir, for whom the work was written. A taxing aria, for example, might not have suited their vocal resources and, moreover, ‘the total rejection of polished language, of descriptions of subtle (or any other) emotional states, and of the first person’,³² ensures the absence of standard operatic convention.

In order to sympathise fully with Brecht’s laconic idiom, Britten adhered to a consistent syllabic word setting, perhaps more so than in any other vocal work of his. This is boldly stated in the opening phrase:

Example 11

Britten: *Children’s Crusade*, bars 1-2

In Po-land, in nine-teen thir-ty-nine There was the bloo-di - est fight:

In fact, such is the regularity of this feature that the occasions where Britten uses a melisma of even two notes are quite unusual, these instances occurring when the text refers to optimistic situations, such as in verse 6:

³² Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 286.

Example 12

Britten: *Children's Crusade*, fig. 4, bars 5-9

Britten makes similar use when wanting to portray a passage of time or distance travelled by the children:

Example 13

Britten: *Children's Crusade*, fig. 19, bar 5

It is quite likely, however, that Britten's inclination towards this syllabic approach is as much to do with the staging of this work as to his reaction to the text itself. In spite of the narrative being lengthy enough for an operatic libretto, it is never staged thus and 'the result is a curious hybrid, part choral ballad, part mini-oratorio, which is crucially dependent on all the words being crystal clear and comprehensible to make its effect [and so] demands a mastery of diction and powers of dramatic communication from its young performers.'³³

³³ Wilcox: *Benjamin Britten's Operas*, 46.

Britten's treatment of the text, from a structural viewpoint, is equally engaging, and serves as an adept enhancement to Brecht's narrative and imagery. He accurately identifies the framing technique that organises the verses and thus provides a corresponding setting which serves not only to highlight this structure but to augment its emotional impact. The opening six stanzas establish the dramatic scene, the bluntness of the text being echoed and promulgated in the percussion score. What follows is a series of verses (and the central body of text) delineating the narrative's foremost characters. The text at this stage promotes a detachment of sorts, as is common with the distinctive language of a ballad. It is in the closing frame, however, that Britten absorbs and emanates the very essence of the poet's assimilation into the first person:

Whenever I close my eyes
I see them wander
There from this old farmhouse destroyed by the war
To another ruined house yonder.

Example 14

Britten: *Children's Crusade*, fig. 27, bar 1-2

When ev - er I close my eyes I see them wan - der.

At this crucial juncture, Britten recapitulates the opening musical idea, thus creating a deliberate move emboldened by a surge in dynamics and energy to close the piece. Donald Mitchell noted this moment as a profound artistic utterance, all the more so for its occurrence within the parameters of music intended for, and about, children: 'it is a moment of revelation which transcends all questions of medium and it confronts

us simply with an experience which is explicable only in terms of major art, to which category Britten's *Children's Crusade* undeniably belongs.³⁴

The commencement of Britten's lengthy compositional career was initially marked by secular works intended for children's performance, a fact which further demonstrates his early fascination with the world of the child. Britten's exposure to an eclectic choice of poets acted as a catalyst to this end, with certain poets taking a preferential front seat: “the poet whose name appears most frequently is Walter de la Mare, whose verse caught my fancy very early on. I possessed several of his volumes, [and] although I hold no claims whatever for the songs' importance or originality, I do feel that the boy's vision has a simplicity and clarity which might have given a little pleasure to the great poet, with his unique insight into a child's mind.”³⁵

Indeed, it is the poetry of de la Mare that features in Britten's earliest published work which makes use of children's (or women's) voices, entitled *Three Two-Part Songs* (1932). Despite the composer being practically still a boy himself, these songs found their way to the printers and were accordingly his first compositions to be published.³⁶ As it was Britten's intention to make a living from composing alone, he saw that this particular genre was quite lucrative, creating the kind of remuneration that would allow him to circumvent teaching of any description in order to make ends meet. Basil Coleman, who produced several of Britten's operas, recalled him saying about his children's works, in particular *The Little Sweep*, “well, it's not a goldmine, but it's a

³⁴ Mitchell: *The Britten Companion*, 169.

³⁵ Routh: *Contemporary British Music*, 203-4.

³⁶ A year later he received his first royalty cheque for fifteen shilling following the sale of about a thousand copies.

little copper mine!”³⁷ In line with this sentiment, during a visit to Clive House (the Prestatyn school at which his brother, Robert, was headmaster), Britten commenced the composition of *Friday Afternoons*. The title has no actual connection to the songs, as John Bridcut observed in an untransmitted television interview with Robert Britten: ‘He asked his brother what he should call the work. Robert said he had no idea. ‘Ben then said, “Well, when do you do your singing?” So I said: “Friday afternoons”. “Right”, he said, “We’ll call it that.”’³⁸ While spending time at Clive House, Britten immensely enjoyed the company of the young boys and involved himself in cricket training and singing lessons; it would appear he quickly fostered a rapport with his young charges: “I shall be sick to leave this place; & am so fond of the school & the kids that I dread going back to the void of Lowestoft.”³⁹

The enthusiasm of the young boys made quite an impression on him and their youthful eagerness can be traced through these songs, which cleverly avoid the clichés so often associated with children’s music. This is, in part, achieved by the judicious manner with which Britten chose his texts. He was mindful to choose poems that possessed a humour which children could identify and thereby easily engage with. In ‘A tragic story’, for example, we encounter the amusing story of the sage whose ponytail presents a pressing dilemma. This sense of humour and fun was equally important in the actual setting of the words. In ‘Cuckoo!’ and ‘Ee-oh!’ we witness Britten setting these charming animal-themed texts employing repetition as a useful device:

³⁷ Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*, 229.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 58.

Example 15

Britten: *Friday Afternoons* ‘Cuckoo!’, bars 1-4



The use of a melodic ostinato is not only a time saving device in singing class, but also promotes an element of fun for the children. In the final song, ‘Abraham Brown’, the opening unison statement is repeated throughout, reaching its climax as the choir divides into a four part canon, a bar apart:

Example 16

Britten: *Friday Afternoons* ‘Old Abram Brown’, bars /2-6

The musical notation consists of two staves of music. The top staff starts with a forte dynamic (F) and the bottom staff starts with a piano dynamic (P). The lyrics are as follows:

Old A - bram Brown is dead and gone, You'll ne - ver see him more; He
 used to wear a long brown coat, that but - ton'd down be - fore.

The fact that these pieces were destined for the classroom allowed Britten to explore a medium he quite excelled at, indeed, ‘they are a showcase for Britten’s multifarious talents expressed in miniature form.’⁴⁰

Britten was to return to this genre at the very end of his life, thus bookending a career which contributed so wholeheartedly to music for children. The *Welcome Ode*, Op. 95 constitutes his last completed work and it was written in 1976, only four months before the composer died. Not only was it a work for ‘young people’s chorus and orchestra’, it also assumed the role of an occasional work for Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to Ipswich on the occasion of her Silver Jubilee. In a similar vein to *Psalm 150*,

⁴⁰ Johnson: *Britten, Voice & Piano*, 25.

the *Welcome Ode* is written expressly for children, incorporating a challenging orchestral score devised solely and intentionally for youth performance, namely the Suffolk Schools' Choir and Orchestra. There are, however, some dispensations allowed in the vocal score, which is typically bright and unaffected in character. The vocal part, requiring no soloists, consists of a soprano, alto and bass line, with a short 8-bar *ad libitum* passage for tenors in the first movement. In terms of subject matter, Britten chose three texts, all dealing with the theme of the May Day festival, from *Songs and Lyrics from the English Playbooks*. The first movement, 'March', portrays a largely homophonic setting of Thomas Dekker and John Ford's 1624 poem, 'Summer Pastimes'. The text receives a contrapuntal setting at the words 'Skipping lambs their bleating dams', creating a frivolity which epitomizes the entire movement:

Example 17

Britten: *Welcome Ode* I, fig. 4, bars 3-10

The musical score consists of three staves, each representing a different vocal part: Soprano, Alto, and Bass. The Soprano and Alto parts are in unison, singing a homophony. The Bass part provides harmonic support. The lyrics are as follows:

Soprano: Skip - ping lambs 'Mongst kids shall trip it round Skip - ping
Alto: Their bleat - ting dams 'Mongst kids shall trip it round, Their
S.: lambs 'Mongst kids shall trip it round
A.: bleat - ing dams 'Mongst kids shall trip it
S.: marked For joy thus our wen - ches we fol - low.
A.: marked round For joy thus our wen - ches we fol - low.

The closing movement, ‘Canon’, derives its text from Henry Fielding’s ‘Ode to the New Year’ from ‘The Historical Register for the year 1736/37’. Again, it betrays a mainly homophonic texture with a blistering contrapuntal section deriving its material from the opening unison passage. Its closing bars prompted Peter Evans to remark that ‘the clipped witticism of its last statement must represent one of the strangest endings to a distinguished composing career in the history of music. Yet it is a singularly happy comment on Britten’s view of his mission that he was ready to devote some of his last working hours to this wholly unpretentious piece, and that its high spirits effortlessly carry conviction.⁴¹

Example 18

Britten: *Welcome Ode* V, fig. 31, bars 5-8

Soprano *All day long.*

Alto *All day long.*

Bass *All day long.*

The orchestral part, which made no requirement for professionals, was written with a high pedigree of child performer in mind. That Britten was confident to write a demanding score betrays the more than healthy standard of performance in Britain at this period. Indeed, the progressive development in the standards of British instrumental teaching, coupled with the advent of youth orchestras, had facilitated Britten in this regard. Perhaps it would be fitting to allocate some credit to Britten himself for this high standard; certainly no other composer of his stature championed

⁴¹ Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 293.

the young, or, indeed, provided music of such high calibre, as he had throughout his life.

Chapter 3 – Instrumentation & Vocal Scoring: Innovation through Practicality

This chapter aims to ascertain the various compositional decisions Britten made in relation to scoring appropriate instrumental and vocal forces intended for his children's music. This chapter will be divided into two sections. Following a brief introduction, the first section shall focus on identifying the variety of instruments he chose, and indeed the manner in which he scored these instruments, thus revealing the innate sense of practicality with which he tailored his scores in order to facilitate the performing capacities of the children. Furthermore, an exploration shall be made into how these scores often entailed innovative creations to generate specific timbres unattainable from standard orchestral instruments. The second section shall concentrate on the voice types and vocal forces Britten employed and his treatment thereof, with particular reference made to his specific predilection for the vocal timbres of boys' treble voices.

It is a well documented fact that, from a very early age, Britten's facility for generating orchestral and vocal effects was buoyed by an imaginative response that informed much of his work. His music betrays an illustrious quality which 'seems all to evince more than anybody else's the quality that St. Thomas Aquinas called *nitor* – coruscation.'⁴² One of his primary achievements was the capacity to maintain and perpetuate this trait in his scores for children, without ever diminishing the special quality therein. He managed to accomplish this by writing children's adult music for them that was 'neither condescending nor sentimental, nor [were] there any elements

⁴² Routley: *Twentieth Century Church Music*, 71.

of self-conscious simplification.⁴³ This resulted in the listener being scarcely able to detect any imbalance between those roles written for children and adults within the same piece. In fact, this seamless texture *allowed* the listener to almost forget that they were being entertained by children, a conscious and shrewdly deliberate outcome, no doubt, on behalf of the composer.

I

Britten's compositions for children are quite remarkable when viewed in terms of their instrumental scoring. Quite early on in his career he was approached by the General Post Office's Film Unit to write a score which would accompany their documentary 'The King's Stamp'. What ensued was a fruitful partnership resulting in several film scores⁴⁴ covering a diverse range of titles, such as the more well-known 'Coal Face' and 'Night Mail' to the more inconsequential 'The New Operator' and 'How the Dial Works'. His initial forays, however, into this genre proved to be something of a challenge to the composer:

I spend the whole blessed day slogging at the film music in my room with a watch in one hand and a pencil in the other – trying to make what little ideas I have (& they are precious few on this God-forsaken subject) synchronize [sic] with the Seconds. Have a short break for a walk after tea...but otherwise I slog away until abt. 11.0 at night – trying to concoct *some* rubbish about a Jubilee Stamp.⁴⁵

Britten, nevertheless, pursued the medium and would soon experience compositional challenges more to his liking. When asked to provide music to a documentary about the 'travelling post office' (i.e. the mail train), Britten responded with imagination, spending time at a train station in order to record train sounds which he would later

⁴³ Palmer: *The Britten Companion*, 83.

⁴⁴ See n.5, p. ix.

⁴⁵ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 64.

recreate using conventional instrumentation. The result was ‘Night Mail’ and Britten deemed the score “not very good as music – but I think that with the visuals they will be alright – one cannot write “music” to these minute instructions, when even the speed of the beat & number of bars is fixed.”⁴⁶ But write music, he did. Most importantly, Britten was also getting his first taste of composing with restricted forces, a constraint that would serve him well for his chamber operas written expressly for the English Opera Group. He was thus endowed with a flexibility in his scoring that correspondingly shaped the very nature of the instrumentation in his later children’s scores.

As was customary with a large portion of his output, Britten often composed with particular performers in mind and this was certainly the case for his children’s works. He acknowledged that many schools and performing groups would frequently experience a dearth in instrumental resources and so maintained an *ad lib.* option in many of his works for this genre. Indeed, of the works under discussion within this study,⁴⁷ five of them contain the *ad lib.* alternative. On the whole, the *ad lib.* opportunities are quite uncomplicated: *A Ceremony of Carols* offers the choice to use piano in lieu of the harp (an option frequently exploited due to the harp’s demanding part), the *Welcome* Ode can dispense with the piano and a short eight-bar tenor part, and *Friday Afternoons* was originally intended for unison choir, but is also rewarding for solo performance, as Britten’s 1961 recording with John Elwes verifies.⁴⁸

The remaining three scores, however, stipulate more exacting instructions, which, ultimately, lead to a greater freedom for anyone wishing to stage the work. *Saint*

⁴⁶ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 71.

⁴⁷ See p. xviii of Introduction.

⁴⁸ For further information see Appendix C.

Nicholas contains an optional Percussion II line, to accommodate the number of percussionists involved in the performance; the note at the opening of the 2nd movement ‘The Birth of Nicholas’ states that ‘if there are many players to the second percussion-part, all the instruments (except the Timpani) of this number should be played by them’. It is in *Psalm 150*, though, that Britten’s true practical nature reveals itself. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the *Psalm* was written for the centenary celebrations of South Lodge School, and in terms of score flexibility, it embraces all that a school-intended work should:

Example 19

Britten: *Psalm 150*, bars 1-2

The musical score consists of six staves, each with a dynamic marking of **f** (fortissimo). The staves are grouped into sections:

- Treble instruments I & II:** The first two staves are for Treble instruments. Staff I starts with a quarter note, followed by an eighth note, a sixteenth note, and a sixteenth note tied to the next measure. Staff II starts with a quarter note.
- Trumpet (Horn or Trombone 8ve lower):** The third staff starts with a quarter note.
- Percussion:** The fourth staff includes 'Timp. (C G)' and 'Side Drum, etc.' It starts with a quarter note.
- Cymbals Triangle, etc.:** The fifth staff starts with a quarter note.
- Keyboard instrument:** The sixth staff starts with a quarter note.
- Bass Instruments (Violas 8ve higher):** The seventh staff starts with a quarter note.

The score is in common time (indicated by a 'C' with a '4'). The vocal parts (Treble I and II) are in soprano clef, while the instrumental parts (Trumpet, Timp., Cymbals, Keyboard, Bass) are in treble clef. The bass part is in bass clef.

Peter Evans noted that the *ad lib.* principle, which often implied a readiness to make do with less than the ideal instruments required, had been too common a feature with British composers, but that in the context of amateur musicians it works to the contrary, ‘inviting the presence of more and more participants rather than permitting the absence of some.’⁴⁹ Indeed, as Britten himself states in the preface to the full score, ‘the more, the merrier.’⁵⁰ On the occasions where this may not be the case, Britten skilfully safeguards the musical texture through the multiple doublings, as evident in Example 19.

It is perhaps in *Noye's Fludde* where Britten shows his most thoroughly inclusive outlook, particularly in the string section. The instructions in the preface to the score indicate Britten’s intentions for performance:

Strings ripieno. There are three sorts of amateur *Violins*: the *Firsts* should be capable players, not however going above the 3rd position, and with the simplest double-stops. The *Seconds* do not go out of the 1st position, while the *Thirds* are very elementary, and have long stretches of just open strings. The *Violas* need to be as accomplished as the 1st *Violins*, as do the 1st *Cellos*, while the 2nd *Cellos* have only the simplest music. The *Double Bass* part is very simple. The number of players is of course according to availability, but there should be at least twenty-five in all.⁵¹

His superlative attention to instrumentation caters for the very beginner up to the professional, and in an astute move to temper any intonation quandaries, Britten scored the strings in this rather ingenious but, paradoxically, simplistic manner.

In terms of instrumentation, Britten’s inventive imagination took full flight when faced with the challenge of incorporating unusual instruments into the fabric of a conventional orchestral score, and it is within the parameters of the percussion family that both the creation and incorporation of atypical instrumentation lends itself. One

⁴⁹ Evans: *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 282.

⁵⁰ Britten: *Psalm 150*, preface.

⁵¹ Britten: *Noye's Fludde*, preface.

only needs to turn to the score of *Noye's Fludde* to witness Britten's ingenuity and determination for creating, by any means possible, a precise timbre that a composition would demand. At the point where the storm commences, Britten wanted the rain to begin with small droplets. Imogen Holst, close friend and amanuensis of Britten, recalls that:

He had the idea of hitting teacups with teaspoons to represent the sound of the first raindrops falling on the ark, but he came round to me one afternoon saying that he'd tried it out at tea-time and it wouldn't work. By great good fortune I had once had to teach Women's Institute percussion groups during a wartime 'social half hour', so I was able to take him into my kitchen and show him how a row of china mugs hanging on a length of string could be hit with a large wooden spoon.⁵²

Britten was pleased with Holst's improvement and he was similarly eager to create an industrious tone to match the building of the ship. The apposite use of sandpaper presented itself as the solution to this situation:

Example 20

Britten: *Noye's Fludde*: 'Now in the name' (Noye's Children), fig. 23, bars 5-12

Britten also made noteworthy timbral use of handbells, a possible attraction stemming from Britten's discoveries on his travels to the Far East in 1955-6. Their appearance in *Noye's Fludde*, however, seems to have been brought about from when Britten had invited a handbell group from the Aldeburgh Youth Club to his home in order to

⁵² Palmer: *The Britten Companion*, 48-9.

perform for him. He was incredibly taken with their sound, feeling that they were “‘a gift from God,’”⁵³ and immediately set about writing a part for them in the nearly-completed score. To any spectator it embodies an aesthetically ethereal encounter, as expressed by one listener at the first performance: ‘To sit in Orford Church, where I had spent so many hours of my childhood dutifully awaiting some spark of divine fire, and then to receive it at last in the performance of *Noye’s Fludde*, was an overwhelming experience.’⁵⁴

The most adventurous percussive score by far, however, was the *Children’s Crusade*, which entails the use of six solo percussion and a larger body of tutti players. The variety of instruments required is quite overwhelming and necessitates the following instruments: tubular bells, xylophone, vibraphone, glockenspiel, celesta, side drum, tenor drum, tabor, bass drum, woodblocks, tambourine, castanets, rattle, triangle, cymbals (clashed and suspended), gong, anvil, cowbells and sleighbells. Moreover, he gives detailed instructions as to the use of a bass drum, which is to be played by two performers in a novel manner, incorporating the use of a gut string (to vary the pitch) and a cello bow to augment the sound created by hitting the skin with two soft-headed drumsticks. This may have appeared rather complicated, and consequently the full score was furnished with a diagram to fully illustrate Britten’s intentions.⁵⁵

What is remarkable about this score are the apparent lengths to which Britten went in order to create such specific timbres, particularly when placed in context of an instrumentally saturated percussion score. A concluding example of innovative

⁵³ Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*, 233.

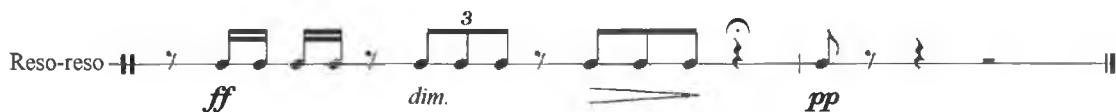
⁵⁴ Seymour: *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 221.

⁵⁵ See Appendix D

scoring is the inclusion of the ‘reso-reso’. This Latin-American instrument must surely have been a discovery to all the children who encountered it in 1969, and Britten chose it for its distinctive scraping sound to poignantly represent the dying barking of a dog (an illustration was similarly provided in the full score and is shown in Appendix D):

Example 21

Britten: *Children’s Crusade*, fig. 31, bars 8-9



It is rather ironic that, in this work for children, the pathos engendered by the dying barks of a dog quite often fell on the deaf ears of the very children who were performing it. John Bridcut tells of a contemporary performance by the Oxford Youth Percussion Ensemble, amongst whose ranks number a xylophonist, Jake Mortimer. His experience of the performance completely overlooked the disturbing text and grisly (again, to use Britten’s own description) score. He recalls: “‘my favourite bit is the beginning, because you can bang the instrument, and you can hardly hear anything else but the bang.’” And when asked of his understanding of the narrative, he replied “‘it’s about these children who crusade around Poland. They take a dog, to eat it, and at the end the dog starves and doesn’t fully recover: it’s really funny.’”⁵⁶ This ten-year-old’s experience would have no doubt pleased the composer enormously because, as Bridcut accurately posits, ‘Britten understood better than most of us how

⁵⁶ Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*: 143.

to handle a subject which simultaneously contained horror for adults and macabre amusement for children.⁵⁷

II

In a word, he disclosed the reality of his talent in discovering the possibilities of the human voice in music. “One of my principal purposes,” says the author of *Peter Grimes*, “has been to try to do justice to the musicality of the English language, to the vitality and freedom of which it has been completely deprived since Purcell’s death.”⁵⁸

This quote betrays the coveted position that the voice had assumed in Britten’s inner musical dialogue; as a composer, it became a primeval instinct to exploit this (primarily through the medium of English) and as such, his corpus of vocal works is abundant in size. It is an intriguing dichotomy, however, that Britain’s foremost operatic composer in the twentieth century felt equally at ease writing simple music for the child’s voice, within the context of opera, as he did intense climactic arias for the likes of Peter Pears, Janet Baker and John Shirley-Quirk. The deftness with which he could turn his pen to either style reveals just how invaluable he deemed the child’s voice to be in terms of musical and dramatic function.

There were, evidently, other profound and metaphysical issues to consider; by adopting a child’s voice into a musical texture, a guileless, innocent quality could be achieved that was beyond the reach of text alone. It is, in fact, the way a child will *not* interpret the text that this transparency is realized. If, for example, the *Ceremony of Carols* is sung by women, a certain element of allure is forsaken. Imogen Holt contends that ‘the loss is particularly noticeable in the solos. If a small boy sings the line about the nightingale whose “songs is hoarse and nought thereto” he makes no

⁵⁷ Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*: 143.

⁵⁸ Routley: *Twentieth Century Church Music*, 68.

fuss about it and the meaning looks after itself. But an adult...is likely to feel burdened by implications of the words and will strive to 'interpret' the phrase, in spite of the relentless repetition of the harp's falling semitone which is already saying everything that needs to be said.⁵⁹

Example 22

Britten: *A Ceremony of Carols* 'That yongē child', bars /9-13

pp tranquillo

Treble: The night-in-ga - le sang al-so: Her

Harp: **pp**

song is hoarse and nougat there - to

più f

Of course, when one thinks of Britten using children's voices, one immediately calls to mind the voice of a treble, a timbre which Bridcut asserts he used 'as naturally and as idiomatically as he did the oboe, the harp or the viola'.⁶⁰ The overwhelming majority of Britten's children's music was written and specified for boys, but intermittent references were made to specific vocal scoring for girls. For example, in *Saint Nicholas*, Britten depicts the outbreak of a tempest, dexterously conveying a

⁵⁹ Holst: *Benjamin Britten – A Commentary on his Works*, 280.

⁶⁰ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*: 126.

mood of angst by way of the untrained, pure and breathless tones of the distant choir of schoolgirls:

Example 23

Britten: *Saint Nicholas* IV, fig. 14, bars 1-12

SOPRANOS (semi-chorus in gallery)

Light - ning his-ses through_ the night, Blin - ding sight with
li - ving light! Ah! ___ Ah! ___ Ah! ___ Ah! ___

It was, however, the pure and inviting timbre of a boy's unbroken voice which resonated with Britten the most. His godson, Michael Berkeley, surmised that, to Britten, the sound of a boy's voice was ““the key to a door for him. It opened a door to his emotional landscape.””⁶¹ The subtext of the treble sound provoked a response in Britten, the corollary of which was music immediate in its intimacy. His most famous operatic role for a young boy is found in *The Turn of the Screw*. Miles' character hovers between innocence and corruption, a frequent enough theme in Britten's operas, and one which pervades most of the dramatic narrative. In a move similar to *The Little Sweep* and *Children's Crusade*, he flouts operatic convention by avoiding the standard aria and recitative model. In lieu of this, Britten achieves all he means to say, championing the miniature form with Miles' breathtaking song, ‘Malo’:

⁶¹ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*: 126.

Example 24

Britten: *The Turn of the Screw*: ‘Malo’ (Miles), fig. 51, bars 1-4

David Hemmings, who created the role of Miles, recalls staying at Crag House (Britten’s residence in Aldeburgh) during the period of the opera’s composition: ““we all gathered around the piano – Peter Pears, Jennifer Vyvyan, Joan Cross, Arda Mandikian, Olive Dyer and me. Britten played and we all sang to it. He really constructed the opera round our voices.””⁶²

It was customary of Britten to compose with particular performers in mind, as David Hemming’s recollections substantiate, and this predisposition has led Britten to the creation of some of his finest works for children. One particular partnership, which yielded the *Missa Brevis*, began in 1958 when Britten attended Westminster Cathedral Choir’s performance of *A Ceremony of Carols*. He was immediately taken with their lively, plangent sound and offered George Malcolm (Master of Music 1947-59) a liturgical work for the boys to sing. George was more than happy to accept Britten’s offer and suggested setting the mass, which was completed by July of the following year.⁶³

Malcolm had developed what is often referred to as a ‘continental’ sound with his choir, which was characterised by the natural energy of a young boy’s voice being

⁶² Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*, 195.

⁶³ For greater detail see Appendix B.

harnessed in order to produce a choral sound that was robust yet sensitive when required. Colin Mawby (subsequent Master of Music and former chorister under Malcolm) recalls Malcolm saying that “if you wanted to hear the natural sound of a boy’s voice then go to the play ground and hear them playing”. This timbre appealed hugely to Britten, and he even approached Malcolm when the libretto was finished for *The Turn of the Screw* for advice as to finding the right child for the children’s parts.⁶⁴ At any rate, the *Missa Brevis* was a success and helped address the lack of boys’ masses available at the time.

This partnership also resulted in Britten’s encounter with Head Chorister, John Elwes (formerly Hahessy). Britten was very taken with Elwes’ particular timbre and subsequently engaged him for a performance and recording of *Canticle II, Abraham and Isaac*. Elwes also made a recording of *Friday Afternoons* and recalls the recording process as one free of anxiety due to Britten’s encouraging and relaxed demeanour. He also remarked that, ‘interestingly, Britten originally wrote this for Kathleen Ferrier’s contralto voice, but perhaps had always felt that a boy’s voice would be more suitable. I was fourteen at the time and the range of my voice was steadily descending toward an alto-tenor range, a timbre which was surely appealing to Britten for the role of Isaac.’⁶⁵

It was perhaps the personal tailoring of voice parts which Britten evinced in his vocal scoring that made him such a superior composer for children’s music. His own melodic, harmonic and rhythmic impulses were curbed in order to take account of the

⁶⁴ Flora’s part was eventually assigned to a woman (Olive Dyer created the role), and David Hemmings, who played Miles, was actually a chorister at the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court Palace, but whose voice nonetheless displayed many traits similar to the boys of Westminster Cathedral.

⁶⁵ For full interview see Appendix C.

limitations of lesser-experienced performers, but this never resulted in any sense of compromise in terms of the music's quality, the greatest verification of this surely being the challenging score of the *Children's Crusade*, written for the untrained (but highly skilled) voices of the Wandsworth School Boys' Choir.⁶⁶ That Britten composed so much children's music which was directly inspired by the individual vocal styles he encountered pays testimony to the strong character in their distinct sonorities, a sentiment that is in agreement with the tribute Britten paid to Kathleen Ferrier after her death, ““The thing – the only thing – that moves me about a singer is the way the voice communicates the personality.””⁶⁷

⁶⁶ It was the remarkable musicianship and dedication of Russell Burgess that created the much sought after choir at Wandsworth. They sang with the similar forceful quality that Britten had found so hugely appealing in Westminster Cathedral Choir.

⁶⁷ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 212.

Chapter 4 – Compositional Devices as Building Blocks: Constructing the Veil

The premise of this final chapter is to make an examination into the compositional devices Britten employed in his children's music, with specific regard to how these devices engendered music which, by way of performance, presented little impediment and yet embodied an aesthetically persuasive musical experience. This 'veil of sophistication', which draped the entire gamut of this genre, assumed a number of different guises. Britten's 'cunning distribution of music for the professional forces'⁶⁸ ensured an underlying current of complex figuration, a feature he employed when it was deemed necessary. In *The Little Sweep*, for example, Rowan's aria 'Far along the frozen river' is the only number which could translate into an 'adult' opera. Rowan's compassionate character explores the elusive shift from adolescence into adulthood in this aria, and as such, Britten created her character for an adult performer:

Example 25

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: 'Far along the frozen river' (Rowan), fig. 24, bars 1-5

ROWAN *p*

Far a - long the fro - zen ri-ver Sharp a - cross the fros - ty air

It is, indeed, intriguing how this adult's music fails to detract, or indeed divert the listener's attention, from the more simplistic material presented by the younger performers. Nevertheless, in the interest of this study, a greater interest lies in how Britten achieved a similar sense of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic sophistication in

⁶⁸ Allen: *Cambridge Companion*, 286.

his children's music, the various compositional devices of which shall be examined hereunder.

Britten's confidence in melodic writing for children was fortified by the comprehensive auditioning process that took place for all first performances of his works in that genre. For *The Little Sweep*, Britten himself conducted the auditions, and recalled in a letter to Pears, “We went...to Ipswich & heard 37 children for the opera! Some, happily, *very* promising, & one poppet of a tough small boy!”⁶⁹ These initial encounters allowed Britten to gauge the performing capabilities of the children and, most likely, inspired him in the solo writing for the principal characters. The score of *Noye's Fludde* betrays Britten's adroit handling of the simplest melodic writing (i.e. a repetitive melodic contour that moves by step) which even the youngest of children could perform with confidence:

Example 26

Britten: *Noye's Fludde*: ‘Kyrie eleison’ (Animals Group I), fig. 34, bars 1-2

The musical notation consists of three staves of music in G clef, common time, and a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: Ky - ri - e! (with a fermata over the 'e'), Ky - ri - e!, and Ky - ri'e - le - i - son!. The music features eighth-note patterns that move step-wise between notes of different pitch levels.

A similar facility is given to the melodic writing in *Saint Nicholas*, whereby the step-wise movement of the alto line overcomes any difficulty that its exposed line might present:

⁶⁹ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 277.

Example 27

Britten: *Saint Nicholas IV*, fig. 16, bars 1-8

ALTOS (in gallery)

f portamento

Wind and tem-pests houl their cry Of bat - tle through the ra - ging sky

While step movement provides a stabilising effect for singers, the very same can be said for instrumental music. Returning to *Noye's Fludde*, during the storm the recorders are required to play a high chromatic line:

Example 28

Britten: *Noye's Fludde*: fig. 80, bars 1-2

(breath when you can!)

As is evident, any difficulties are surmounted by placing the chromatic line within a step-wise framework, a figuration which, in this instance, still projects a line of considerable complexity in that it completely evades diatonicism.

Another clever device Britten used to conceal a melody's simplicity was through its repetition with a change in harmony underneath. Whether the new harmonic destination creates dissonance or not, a child can easily sustain their line because of the repetition. This is the case in Sam's contributions to the busy 'Ensemble' from *The Little Sweep*, where his entries replicate the same pitch in each of his three entries:

Example 29

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: 'O why do you weep' (Ensemble), fig. 31, bars 4-6; fig. 32, bars 4-6; fig. 33, bars 4-6

SAM
How shall I laugh and play?
Vc.
laugh and play?

The same fresh reimagining of harmony under a repeated melody is used to great affect in 'The Fishing Song' from *Friday Afternoons*. Another obvious advantage, from a didactic viewpoint, is the time saving device this melodic reiteration provides to the harried singing teacher:

Example 30

Britten: *Friday Afternoons* 'Fishing Song', bars 3-4 & 21-22

Verse 1
p cantabile
Voice
Oh, the gal-lant fish-er's life
Verse 2
p slower - lazily
Piano
If the sun's ex-cess-ive heat

The melodic device, nevertheless, which stands out and permeates musical textures more so than any other, is Britten's use of canon, both vocally and instrumentally. His

partiality towards this figuration, however, goes further than just a wish to create an impression of contrapuntal sophistication. Stephen Arthur Allen sharply observes that ‘canons and rounds are both fun to sing and...such imitation tends to produce an impression of timelessness, enhancing the effect of non-development.’⁷⁰ That canons are a ubiquitous feature of children’s music in general may also suggest their frequent occurrence in Britten’s musical fabric as a glance back to his own childhood. There are examples of canon in several of his children’s works, but perhaps most notably in *Noye’s Fludde*, where the climactic setting of ‘Tallis’s Canon’ generates an elaborate eight-part contrapuntal tapestry. The opening statement is sung by Noye’s children:

Example 31

Britten: *Noye’s Fludde*: ‘The spacious firmament on high’ (*Noye’s Children*), fig. 113, bars 1-9

NOYE'S CHILDREN

The spacious firm - a - ment on high With all the blue e - ther - eal sky And
span-gled heav'n's a shin - ing frame, Their great o - rig - i - nal pro- claim.

In terms of melody writing, the *Children’s Crusade* represents the highest level of melodic complexity Britten demonstrated in any one of his children’s works. A former student of Wandsworth recalls the rehearsal process for the work:

We spent months and months in rehearsals before school, during the breaks, after school finished in the evenings, just trying to get it right. It was a very difficult time for boys of our sort – we weren’t specifically musicians but just happened to be there because it was the local comp[rehensive school] – so it was quite a challenge. We often used to be in tears at the end of the rehearsal because we just couldn’t get the intervals right. We’d try to pitch the notes in a dissonant chord, and then Russell

⁷⁰ Allen: *Cambridge Companion*, 282.

Burgess would bash them out on the piano, and we'd be way out, and think "Oh please, are we ever going to get this right?"⁷¹

Needless to say, the rehearsals persisted and the work's premiere was an unmitigated success. Interestingly, Britten integrates elements of serialism into the melody, which unquestionably does much to raise the bar of complexity therein. He is, however, judiciously sparing with its use, and was generally reluctant to incorporate it as a melodic mechanism into his children's works:

[Serialism] has simply never attracted me as a method, although I respect many composers who have worked in it...It is beyond me to say why, except that I cannot feel that tonality is outworn, and find many serial rules 'arbitrary'. 'Socially' I am seriously disturbed by its limitations. I can see it taking no part in the music-lover's music-making. Its methods make writing *gratefully* for voices or instruments an impossibility, which inhibits amateurs and young children.⁷²

At any rate, Britten permits the inclusion of all twelve tones at certain junctures within the *Crusade*. Perhaps because of his reaction to the meandering and desolate tone of the following text, he felt it appropriate to match it with the ambiguity that serialism intrinsically espouses:

Example 32

Britten: *Children's Crusade*, fig. 19, bar 5



In order to perpetuate this façade of sophistication, Britten engaged with certain harmonic devices in a similar attempt to mask the simplicity of the children's material. Britten's adoption of the passacaglia, or ground bass, as a harmonic apparatus is to be found in many of his works, not least within this particular genre. As a device, its propagation in the score for *The Little Sweep* projects a duality of

⁷¹ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 139.

⁷² Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 338.

function. Firstly, it harmonically, and rhythmically, underpins the opening 5/4 audience song (for melody see Example 9):

Example 33

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: ‘The Sweep’s Song’ (Audience), bars 1-4



Its second function is to complement and enhance the musico-dramatic value of the libretto. This is patently illustrated in Clem and Bob’s duet, as they turn menacingly on Sam, tie a rope around his waist and drag him towards the fireplace:

Example 34

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: ‘Now little white boy’ (Clem and Bob), bars 1-4

A musical score for two voices, BOB and CLEM, in 4/4 time. The vocal parts are supported by a piano accompaniment. BOB's part (top staff) starts with a piano dynamic (pp) and includes the lyrics "Now lit-tle white boy!". CLEM's part (bottom staff) starts with a forte dynamic (più f) and includes the lyrics "Shi-ver with fright boy!" and "Scared in the night boy!". The piano accompaniment features a repetitive eighth-note pattern throughout.

This ground is tightly-wound ostinato, which shifts tonally upwards as Sam prepares for his climb, thus presenting a musical connection most children could grasp.

Another pertinent example of a passacaglia can be heard in the storm section in *Noye's Fludde*. It begins in the dark tessitura of the strings, and eventually finds its way into the piano part following eight repetitions:

Example 35

Britten: *Noye's Fludde*, fig. 67, bars 1-4



Not only does it spell out all twelve tones, it expresses, according to Wilfrid Mellers, additional intervallic significances: ‘the flood takes the form of a passacaglia, with a chromatic, rhythmically restless theme in which a falling third expands to a fourth and then to a godly fifth... Though it generates the storm’s excitement, the passacaglia theme is also God’s Law which is beyond change.’⁷³

In a similar gesture of harmonic underpinning, Britten incorporates the use of pedal notes to securely anchor a chorus whilst pitted against the unencumbered freedom assigned to a soloist. An example of this can be found in *Saint Nicholas*, where the choral utterances of *Nunc dimittis* (though voiced in English), are secured tonally while the tenor’s reign is loosened to explore modal regions around the chorus’ orbit of the pitch D:

⁷³ Mellers: *Britten Companion*, 158.

Example 36

Britten: *Saint Nicholas IX*, fig. 61, bars 1-5

NICHOLAS *f* ————— *sempre largamente*
 CHORUS *ppp*
 Lord, L come to
 Lord, now let - test thou Thy ser-vant de - part in peace,
 life, To fi - nal birth
 ac - cord - ing to Thy word

Britten was mindful to manipulate other devices, such as phrase length and irregular metres to balance the melodic and harmonic gestures mentioned above. Returning to *The Little Sweep*, Britten integrates a four-bar ground (based on a rising scale of D major) and presents the children's entries in 3 bar phrases:

Example 37

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: 'Help! Help! she's collapsed!' (Children), fig. 41, bars 1-7

CHILDREN *p*
 Vc.
 Poor Ju - liet's ill! Look how she's ly - ing! So
 si - silent and still Can she be dy - ing?

Their three-bar phrasing offsets the rigidity of the ground, and the combined contrapuntal texture prompted by Miss Baggot and Rowan's interpolations produce an intricate musical texture of reasonable complexity. A similar process of juxtaposed

phrasing occurs in the opening hymn of *Noye's Fludde*, 'Lord Jesus, think on me'. In this instance, the bass line is anxiously out of kilter with the congregation's petition in the fourth verse:

Example 38

Britten: *Noye's Fludde*: 'Lord Jesus, think on me' (Congregation), fig. 3, bars /1-9

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the voice, starting with a forte dynamic (ff) and a dotted half note. The lyrics are: 'Lord Je-sus, think on me, That, when the flood is past, I may e-ter-nal bright-ness see, And share thy joy at last.' The bottom staff is for the piano, providing harmonic support with sustained notes and chords. The piano part is marked 'mf'.

In addition to the imbalanced phrasing, the bass line sequentially descends through the pitches E-B-F natural, thereby linearly outlining a tritone. Claire Seymour rationally contends that the jarring pitch of F natural 'injects a note of conflict and unrest; this unpredictable mingling of 'perfect' intervals with 'imperfect' tritones may signal harmonically the dramatic conflict between guilt and redemption to come.'⁷⁴ Indeed, lurking beneath the overt simplicity of the hymn lays a more complex, subtle layer which typifies the perceptive agility of Britten's craft in this type of work.

Of course, Britten never wholly turned his back on writing challenging moments for children, and his eminent practicality was once again revealed by carefully cueing any difficult entries a vocalist may encounter. In relation to conducting Britten's choral music for children, Colin Mawby remarked that, 'If you're doing accompanied

⁷⁴ Seymour: *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 214.

Britten, you'll never find anything that isn't prepared, everything is prepared. He was a totally, totally practical composer.' This can certainly be found in the score for *The Little Sweep*, in the scene where the children run in one after another to wish Sammy a good morning:

Example 39

Britten: *The Little Sweep*: 'Morning, Sammy' (Sam and Children), bars 1-3 and 9-11

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for JONNY, the middle staff for SOPHIE, and the bottom staff is for the Piano. The piano part features a series of eighth-note chords. The vocal parts enter with the lyrics "'Mor-ning Sam- my!'". The piano part includes dynamic markings such as *sforzando* (sf) and *pianissimo* (p).

Imogen Holst correctly observed that 'the rapid entries in their *allegro* ensemble [are] free from all peril of anxiety owing to the pianist's *sforzando* octave leap which gives the new note to each soloist exactly two bars before it is wanted.'⁷⁵ Britten's judicious application of cueing can also be found in the score for *Children's Crusade*, where the organ and xylophone provide pitches to assist the chorus and soloists with difficult entries:

Example 40

Britten: *Children's Crusade*, fig. 2, bar 1

The musical score shows three staves: Xylophone, Alto, and Organ. The Xylophone and Organ provide harmonic support, while the Alto sings the melody. The lyrics 'No - thing has come out of Po - land' are written below the Alto staff. Measure numbers '3' are indicated above both the Xylophone and Alto staves.

⁷⁵ Holst: *Benjamin Britten – A Commentary on his Works*, 285.

Other challenging moments transpire when Britten sets irregular metres, such as the 7/8 sections in *Psalm 150*. To counter this difficulty, however, he ensures the melodic line moves by step and with good use of repetition:

Example 41

Britten: *Psalm 150*, bars 133-140

Soprano & Alto unis.

Praise Him in the sound of the Trum-pet: Praise Him u-pon the Lute and Harp.

Praise Him in the Cym-bals and Dan- ces: Praise him u-pon the Strings and Pipe.

A similar concession to step movement and repetition is made in the *Welcome Ode*, also in 7/8:

Example 42

Britten: *Welcome Ode I*, fig. 2, bars 1-5

Soprano **p**

Sing, dance and play 'Tis ho - li - day;

The sun does brave - ly shine On our ears— of corn.

An interesting disparity can be drawn with the 7/8 Sanctus in the *Missa Brevis*. Not only does the melody outline a twelve-tone scheme in contrapuntal entries, the angular, wide leaps, which are largely absent in the ‘amateur’ children’s works, assure that this kind of composition was purely aimed at the choristers of a specially trained choir, as they certainly were at Westminster Cathedral:

Example 43

Britten: *Missa Brevis*: ‘Sanctus’, bars 2-3

The musical score consists of three staves (I, II, III) in G major, 2/4 time. Staff I starts with a forte dynamic (f). The lyrics "Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus," are written below the notes. Staff II begins with a dynamic change to f. Staff III also begins with a dynamic change to f. The music consists of eighth-note patterns.

In concluding this chapter it must be noted that, while he concealed much of the simplicity in his children’s music behind the ‘veil of sophistication’ (using the various compositional devices as discussed above), he was loathe to prescribe blatantly patronizing music that failed to challenge or stimulate them. Although he would never accept any inadequacies in performance, he did make allowances for the variety of performing standards and, as such, his parameters for perfection were much widened. Indeed, he acknowledged that the music he wrote for children and amateurs was intentionally crafted, so that ““even if they get it wrong, [it] doesn’t sound too awful – the actual polish of the performance isn’t the ultimate aim.””⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*, 234.

Conclusion

Remember there are lovely things in the world still – children, boys, sunshine, the sea, Mozart, you and me

This quote⁷⁷, from an undated letter that Pears had sent to Britten, does much to illustrate the pecking order of some of the most important aspects of Britten's life. It also substantiates the vast oeuvre within his catalogue that was dedicated, in part or in whole, to music for children's performance. It is an interesting paradox, therefore, that a hiatus exists in his output for didactic music (*études* etc.) of any description, notwithstanding, of course, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. Neither was he interested in teaching formally, whether instrumentally or compositionally. Perhaps one can deduce from this discrepancy that the fundamental *raison d'être* for his children's music may not lie in its edifying value, but rather, and more simply, in its ability to entertain and, in so doing, create an atmosphere of fun for both performer and listener alike.

What makes Britten's music so appealing to the child performer is perhaps its sheer physical energy. Humphrey Stone, who befriended Britten as a teenager, recalls that in his tennis playing “he had a nervous energy about him, rather like a coiled spring. The quickness and deftness of his playing comes into his music, in the way so much of it is highly sprung, taut, percussive and very unlimp! You felt the coiled spring was ready to leap on you! His spontaneity and his ability to be totally engaged with you while you were playing were the same when you watched him conduct of perform.

⁷⁷ Carpenter: *Benjamin Britten, a Biography*, 272.

The energy was about his love for giving life to something – whether it was children or his music.”⁷⁸ Indeed, his children’s music was positively infused with this physical energy and goes some way to explaining its success in the concert hall, theatre, and, of course, in the classroom.

In addition to the precious scores which Britten left behind, surely one of the most significant signs of his commitment made to children and the wider community is the Britten-Pears Foundation in Aldeburgh. This incorporates the Britten-Pears Library and Archive, which is a significant research centre and houses not just original scores, but all manner of paraphernalia associated with Britten’s compositional and personal life. It also contains a growing collection of books on composers, artists, writers and musicians which Britten and Pears began the assembly of in 1963. The Britten-Pears Foundation also supports the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, surely one of Britten’s most significant legacies in light of his contribution to children’s music during his lifetime. Since its establishment in 1972, it had flourished into a training centre, attracting students and young professionals from all over the world to receive tuition from the highest caliber of professional performers and teachers.

It has been the constant premise of this thesis to discover and elucidate the high degree of success Britten attained in fashioning music for children and amateurs which brought to light a sophistication that belied its truer, simplistic nature. In Chapters 1 and 2, an inspection of the various subject matters and manner of text setting revealed just how consistent Britten was in making the apposite choice of text, librettist and setting at every juncture. Chapter 3 explored the flexible, yet innovative,

⁷⁸ Bridcut: *Britten’s Children*: 182.

facets of Britten's instrumental and vocal scoring, demonstrating the exactness of his sensitivity to timbre, and the lengths he went to in order to achieve the precise sound he coveted. This chapter also investigated the penchant he held for the treble voice, whilst making pertinent reference to information gathered from interviews conducted with Colin Mawby and John Elwes. Finally, in Chapter 4, a detailed study was made of the scores themselves, examining the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic compositional devices Britten exploited in order to, as it were, cloak simplicity behind the veil of sophistication. His accomplishments in this regard have been duly proven, but perhaps, for the composer himself, the true achievement lay in the reaction of the children themselves to his music:

I think they get, perhaps unconsciously, a great kick out of doing something brand new. I find them also as audiences highly receptive – very choosy perhaps, but if they like something, and it can be music as new or as old as you like, then their reaction is spontaneous and encouraging.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Bridcut: *Britten's Children*, 240.

Appendix A

Chronology of selected Juvenilia (ages 9 – 15)⁸⁰

1922-3	‘Beware!’ (voice and piano)
1922-5	Ten Walztes [sic]
?1924	‘The march of the Gods into Paradise [sic] (piano duet)
1925	Andante in F Major (violin and piano) Fantasia (piano) Mass in E minor (soloists, chorus and orchestra) Sonata in D major (violin and piano) <i>The Elected Knight</i> (voice and piano) Octett in D Major (2 violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos, 2 doublebasses) Two Fantasies, Op. 17 (piano) Piano Sonata (Grand) No. 3 in B flat, Op. 5 4 Scherzos (piano) Untitled orchestral piece in two movements Rondo Capriccio in B minor, Op. 28 No. 1 (piano) 3 Fantasies (piano)
<i>March-April</i>	
<i>April</i>	
<i>June</i>	
<i>28 July-3 August</i>	
<i>August-September</i>	
<i>14 November</i>	
<i>December</i>	
?1925/6	Allegro Appassionata in G minor (piano) Allegro ma non troppo in D major (violin and piano)
1926	
<i>4 January</i>	Suite No.5 in E major, Op. 30 No. 2 (piano)
<i>5-10 January</i>	3 Toccatas (piano)
<i>10-12 January</i>	4 Etudes Symphonique (piano)
<i>7 April</i>	Trio in Fantastic Form (violin, viola and piano)
<i>17 April</i>	Sonata in A (cello and piano)
<i>18 April</i>	Masurka [sic] in F sharp minor, Op. 43a (piano)
<i>29 April</i>	Overture No. 1 in C, Op. 44 (orchestra; version 2)
<i>1-29 June</i>	Ouverture (orchestra; under pseudonym ‘Never Unprepared’)
<i>5 September</i>	Suite fantastique for large orchestra and piano obbligato (second movement dated 21 April 1926)
<i>26 September</i>	Poème No. 1 in D (orchestra)
<i>24 December</i>	Poème No. 2 in B minor (small orchestra)
<i>29 December</i>	Poème No. 3 in E (orchestra)
1927	
<i>28 February</i>	Symphony in D minor (large orchestra)
<i>12-14 February</i>	Poème No. 4 in B flat (small orchestra)
<i>14-19 February</i>	Poème No. 5 in F sharp minor (orchestra)

⁸⁰ Mark: *Cambridge Companion*, 13.

<i>March-May</i>	String Quartet in G
<i>June-July</i>	String Quartet in A minor
<i>2 August</i>	<i>The Pale Stars are Gone</i> (chorus, piano and strings)
<i>5 September</i>	<i>Chaos and Cosmos</i> , symphonic poem for large orchestra
<i>27 September</i>	Sonata No. 10 in B flat (piano)
<i>October-February</i>	Sonata No. 11 in B (piano)

1928

<i>25 January</i>	<i>Dans les bois</i> (orchestra)
<i>6 March</i>	<i>Humoreske</i> (orchestra)
<i>11 April</i>	String Quartet in F
<i>16 April</i>	Menuetto in A minor (piano)
<i>16-23 April</i>	Elegy (strings)
<i>13 June</i>	'Silver' (voice and piano)
<i>21 August</i>	<i>Quatre chansons françaises</i> (soprano and orchestra)
<i>31 December</i>	'Tit for Tat' (voice and piano)

Appendix B

Interview [edited] – Colin Mawby: 7 July 2006

Q. What are your principal recollections of George Malcolm, Westminster

Cathedral and their unique sound to which Britten was so attracted?

George Malcolm was educated at Wimbledon College in London and when he was there in the 1920s he came across the extraordinary Jesuit, Fr. Driscoll, who had a superb choir. Now, Driscoll's choir was discovered by the Sunday Times music critic, Ernest Newman, who was a great Wagner writer. Newman said that it was the finest choir that he had ever heard. Driscoll had started a choir school there and it was a boys' and men's choir. He was very embarrassed to be discovered in this way as Newman had written several articles about him in the Sunday Times about the nature of his work.

Now, George was inspired by Driscoll and inspired by the sound that Driscoll's boys made, so George developed the ambition to start his own boys' choir and therefore to develop the work which Driscoll had done. George was in the RAF during WW2 and when he came out (he used to conduct the bomber command band) he had the choice of an appointment as assistant conductor at Covent Garden or going as Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral. Because he had this ambition about a boys' choir he went to Westminster Cathedral as Master of Music where there's a choir school. I was in the choir when he applied for the job and out of the four applicants we all thought George was the best, no question of that. At the Cathedral, he developed this sound. It was a very controversial thing he was doing at the time and was known as the

'Westminster Croak' by a lot of the Anglican cathedral organists, but in fact it had enormous influence and a lot of people imitated it. It came from George's knowledge of singing, from the idea that he would recreate Driscoll's sound and improve it, but also by the force of his personality, which was really quite extraordinary.

In 1959 George had done a lot of work with Britten; he used to do a lot of conducting and harpsichord work and he knew Britten well. In Christmas of 1958 he invited Britten to hear his *Ceremony of Carols* in Westminster Cathedral and Britten came along and was most taken by the noise that the boys made. He offered to write something for George and asked what he would like. George thought about it and said he would like a mass but he wanted a mass that could be sung on ordinary days, in other words, a short mass, which was not for big feasts. The reason being that there weren't a great number of boys' masses and George thought Ben could plug this particular gap. George always used to say if you wanted to hear the natural sound of a boy's voice then go to the play ground and hear them playing – then you'd hear their natural sound, and it wasn't the sort of sound you'd hear in an Anglican church, which George described as 'they stopped castrating the boy and now they castrate the voice', which was controversial but he often said it. Ben agreed to do the mass. In June of 1959, George was stuck in a traffic jam on the top of a bus and he suddenly decided he couldn't stand the cathedral anymore so he got off the bus and went and resigned and told Ben, who was not the best pleased. Ben inquired about the mass he had promised to write so George told him he'd have to write it very quickly because the boys were leaving at the end of July which gave him 8 weeks. George went down to Aldeburgh for a weekend to tell Ben about the structure and theology of the mass and it was written in about 3 or 4 days in order to meet this deadline.

The extraordinary thing about the mass is its construction, and Ben was a master of musical form and in that mass it is amazing. The Kyrie makes its statement, then the Christe just mirrors it upside down and then the final Kyrie is a reprise of the first one plus a little coda. The actual amount of music in it is quite small. It is a masterpiece of construction in its simplicity. If you want to see how to construct a piece of music with no material, that is it. It is totally extraordinary. Now the Gloria; George suggested he took the intonation sung by the priest as a basis for the movement, and it was chosen from the *liber usualis*. Of considerable interest is that the Gloria is in 5/8 and 7/8 which is naturally derived from the ictus - he took the rhythmic structure of the chant. The Sanctus is very loosely based on a twelve tone theme, you'll find every semitone is there [sings the theme]. That goes absolutely right through the Sanctus. It's not strict twelve-tone but all tones are represented. The Benedictus is a canon. The Hosanna in the Benedictus reverts to the twelve tone. The Agnus Dei is a ground Bass, a passacaglia. The reason he was able to write that mass so quickly, I am convinced, is because he worked on the construction of it, and then fitted the notes into the construction. I'm quite certain that's the way he did it, I might be wrong; obviously he had ideas how to do it but they were very strictly disciplined by the actual structure. If you don't actually understand that, you won't get to the bottom of the piece. It's an absolute miracle. You try and do it yourself!

The first performance was in July in 1959 and George had the choirboys at the west end of the cathedral, and he played the west end organ. I played the organ at the east end where the men were singing the plainchant. I didn't play the Britten, I played the plainchant. All sorts of people came, William Glock, Peter Pears, Julian Bream. He did two performances, both on successive days. There's a recording, I don't know if

it's still extant, issued by Decca of the first performance, except the Sanctus at the first performance went wrong so they took the Sanctus from the second performance.

Then George left and that was sort of it but he carried on his friendship with Britten. One of the soloists at that Britten mass was John Hahessy, now known as John Elwes. The Elwes family had a very fine Tenor, Gervase who knew Driscoll and said that no one knew more about the human voice than Driscoll did. Gervase more or less made the role of Gerontius (*Dream of Gerontius* by Elgar), in other words they were delighted to have another tenor in their family.

With regard to conducting the mass, it's very simple to conduct; it's very simple to sing, there's no problems in it at all. The children respond to it, they love it and enjoy the experience. I've done it with a lot of choirs; it's just extremely simple. Britten was able to write choral music for a choir which fitted in with the voice totally and didn't present insuperable problems. He had all the assistance from Peter Pears as to how to do it. Britten had an instinctive knowledge of children, what children could do. In a way he was very childlike and Pears used to do all the business side of things. Britten was a very shy, sensitive person. He just knew about the voice. I mean, I've done a hell of a lot of Britten. You might have to spend a few hours learning notes, but the next day they're all there. There's no problem, there's no problems at all.

Q. What other Britten works have you conducted?

I've done the *War Requiem* with the RTÉ Phil, *Rejoice in the Lamb*, the a cappella pieces - there are one or two difficult pieces there. If you're doing accompanied Britten, you'll never find anything that isn't prepared, everything is prepared. He was

a totally, totally practical composer. If you go through *Noye's Fludde* there are parts for the fiddles which only play open strings, and first position. Also what's marvellous about it is that you can involve all the parents in it, not just in the congregation singing the hymns but in the making of scenery. In my own children's operas which I did for the National Chamber Choir, I used the same technique. My approach was to involve the whole community. A school is a community; you can't separate the choir from the rest of the community. If you're going to do something it mustn't be something the choir does and no one else. It struck me as being terribly important that you should involve the parents and the children making scenery and painting. It becomes a community operation rather than a choir operation. I think that's what Britten did in *Noye's Fludde*, everyone was involved in it and that is why it was so successful. I think Britten was very aware of that. Again, it's not a difficult piece.

Britten is, to my mind as a conductor, someone whose music I always find terribly easy to teach. I don't know whether I'm just lucky. The *Hymn to St Cecilia* presents vocal problems, the *Missa Brevis* doesn't present vocal problems. The music Britten wrote catered to the needs of whom he wrote for. He wrote for children. He had this extraordinary facility in being able to write very, very simply, and to do anything simply is very, very difficult. It is very difficult to write a good hymn tune. He had this facility to write extremely simple music probably without thinking, he knew what kids could do and what they couldn't do. The last thing you want to do with kids is to bore them and make them sing all sorts of difficult notes, it's just the last thing you want to do. In *Psalm 150* he executes canons so that children would enjoy what they were doing and that was a very important part of this.

Q. What are your recollections of meeting Britten?

I've met him twice, at the performances of the *Missa Brevis* and the *Ceremony of Carols*. He's a very shy person, not the sort of person you could talk to. I was very young then; if I met him now I could probably talk to him but I was extremely young. He communicated through music, just simply that. George Malcolm was very childlike and I think that's one of the reasons they got on so well. George was a pretty difficult character and I suspect Ben Britten was a pretty difficult character too. George was difficult but was a superb musician, although he was a bad alcoholic but subsequently gave it up for the last 40 years of his life. He was an extraordinary person who used to read Greek poetry for fun, if you can imagine that, because he was a Classics scholar at Balliol when Ted Heath was the organ scholar there.

George always used to relate his interpretation of polyphony to Latin poetry and to the metres of Latin poetry. That's why his polyphony was so idiosyncratic, so personal to him; he approached it in a different way. He wasn't a natural lover of contemporary music; he used to find it difficult. He told me he could understand all of the Britten mass except the Sanctus, which he couldn't understand, then after a bit he did understand it.

Whether I like Britten's music is another matter. I have a love-hate relationship with Britten. I find a lot of it very brittle. The *War Requiem* I think is quite superb. Shostakovich called it the greatest piece of music written in the 20th century, a judgement to which one would bow, I think. I find a lot of it brittle though. It's like all composers – their output goes up and down. I also think that his heart condition in

fact affected the energy in his music. If you compare the energy in the *Serenade* for Tenor, Horn and Strings with the songs towards the end of his life, I find the same energy isn't there and I've always put that down to the fact that in some way the heart problem affected his composition. It's a personal view. But he was an incredible composer. I mean, some music speaks to you, some doesn't, and it's as simple as that. The early stuff is amazing. *Rejoice in the Lamb* is truly extraordinary, especially the text [taken from Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*]. The conception of the lines about flowers being the poetry of Christ is one of the most stunning things I've ever come across. To me, that explains what flowers are all about; that is such a profound thing to actually explain and I often refer to it. That was a text which clearly spoke to Britten.

I find it difficult to compare composers with each other; I think each composer has something to say. I think where Britten's scores are of superlative quality is his technique. But that applies to other composers too. Lennox Berkeley's technique was quite extraordinary too: I feel some of his string music has more soul than Britten's.

Q. Do you think there was any correlation in sound between the Wandsworth School Boys' Choir and the sound created at Westminster?

About Wandsworth and Russell Burgess - he was inspired by George Malcolm's sound and he wanted to reproduce this in his school, which had a very good headmaster and a very good choir, and made a great deal of noise. He got Britten into writing for him, and they certainly had a lot of influence on Britten's work. Their particular sound certainly spoke to Britten; the natural context of the boys' voices was what he was after. The *Children's Crusade* is a very fine piece. The use of, for

example, the slung mugs in *Noye's Fludde* was completely innovative at that time, I mean we all do it now. Britten was able to imagine all this and the influence was enormous, he was just incredibly good at writing for children. I can never imagine any children bored when performing his music. It's just good fun. When the Wandsworth choir did Berlioz's *Te Deum* with Colin Davies in St Paul's Cathedral, they were superb, and they worked and recorded with everybody.

Q. Is there a comparison between the sound of the Vienna Boys Choir (for whom Britten wrote *The Golden Vanity*) and the Westminster/Wandsworth sound?

If you can compare sounds, then yes. Language was different, so was style and tradition. I heard the Vienna Boys' Choir several times. They were similar in a way. Everyone used to call George's sound the 'continental' sound. When I took over I changed it slightly, it was a personal thing and I don't know if it pleased George too much but my personality is totally different from George's. One's personality completely affects this. I used to study with Adrian Boult and he wondered how Toscanini could produce such a personal sound out of an orchestra, and he eventually worked out that it was the powers of Toscanini's concentration which made the sound and I'm sure that's true. The higher the level of concentration, the more personal the sound. George had this; I occasionally had it.

Q. Concerning your compositions for children (operas, songs etc.), what were the particular areas of concern for you during composition?

Well, that the children could do it. It took me some time to reach that conclusion, but when you try to teach children things that they can't do you know you've gone wrong. You try to produce music which children can actually relate to. I find my stuff goes

down very well with children. I can't pretend it's great stuff, but it goes down well with the kids. They must enjoy what they're doing, they must have fun, and there must be humour in it. It's so important to find the right text, one which children can relate to and that's not awfully easy, unless you're in the position of commissioning texts which we were able to do with Maeve Ingoldsby. It's hopeless in setting some metaphysical text because it won't mean a damn thing to them. If you don't get the text right in a composition you won't get the composition right. Gerard Victory used to say that it would take him months to find a text and days to write the piece.

A good text will have good rhythm and good vowel sounds in it. Latin's ideal but not for kids. Then you must contemplate what the text means; what sort of a text is it? The composer has to get into the text and identify the imagery - the kind of imagery used in it. It comes easier as you get older. You have to see the rhythmical implications of the text, which is not always obvious. And then you've got the fag of actually writing the damn piece! In terms of harmonic language, you can venture into dissonance as long as it makes sense; it has to make sense to the child. I mean, life is dissonant, particularly today. Children live in a dissonant society - listen to their pop music, it's dissonant. Another essential aspect of writing for children is energy, and that is difficult to do.

Appendix C

Interview [edited] – John Elwes (formerly Hahessy): 22 July 2006

Q. What is your background in cathedral singing?

As a young child, I met Audrey Christie [founder of Glyndebourne Festival Opera with her husband, John Christie], who felt I possessed a talent for singing. She strongly suggested to the London County Council that I should be sent to a cathedral choir school. Since my father was Irish, it was presumed that I was Catholic and so I was sent to Westminster Cathedral as a chorister at the age of about eight and a half. I subsequently became Head Chorister there and thus began my life-long career as a singer.

Q. What are your principal memories of Westminster, particularly working with George Malcolm and the distinctive sound he developed for the choir?

Life as a chorister in Westminster was busy, enjoyable and very engaging. We sang for at least fifteen hours per week, for the services alone, and all through Latin. George Malcolm [Master of Music 1947-59] was an inspirational character, who had exacting standards when it came to diction, intonation and phrasing. He was a keen linguist and a very cultivated man. Despite the discipline was much admired by the choristers.

The natural and sometimes raucous sound of a boy's voice, as is often heard in the playground, interested George and he harnessed this energy to produce a choral sound that was powerful yet sensitive. The sound that the choir produced was often referred

to as a ‘continental’ sound. That is a bright, forward, uncovered sound. Listen to any of the continental choirs. Latin was a major contributor to this choral sound, being a language that requires all consonants and vowels to be clearly articulated. It requires the vowels to be purely sung, unaffected by the suppressing element of diphthongs, as in English. These demands tend to place the voice further forward in the mouth, indeed, singing in English can often force the voice further back in the throat, and lead to a bright, clear sound that is the major characteristic of the choir in Westminster Cathedral, and still is to this very day.

An example of this sound can be heard quite clearly on the 1959 recording of Victoria’s Responsories for Tenebrae [John was second soprano], which was recorded for Argo Eclipse, the sister label to Decca. George Malcolm was a superb musician but in vocal music the text was all important and he saw the music as the means to bringing the overall painting alive. The text of the Tenebrae is extremely dramatic and correspondingly the music is sung in a highly dramatic manner. This performance was considered by some, notably in King’s College Cambridge, as ugly, uncontrolled and out of tune. By many others it was viewed as a brilliant and masterful recording, contributing a fresh approach to the generally more careful and subdued choral singing heard in English cathedrals and colleges. It gave Malcolm the opportunity to express his unique choral sound and to state quite clearly that cathedral choral singing need not be subdued and secondary in the church services, but forthright and very much present. He felt that the traditional Anglican vocal production of the boys was leaning towards a ‘hooting’, suppressed and unlike boy-quality which prevented a dramatic and colourful interpretation of the music. He certainly shook the choral world and for some of us his influence has been lifelong.

The training I received at Westminster was second to none; I know that what I learnt there from George was the fundamental education for my singing career which followed, and that most of my subsequent training at the Royal College of Music was of secondary importance to that which I had learnt at Westminster Cathedral. [John has led a very successful career performing with conductors such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Roger Norrington, Joshua Rifkin, and Christopher Hogwood and has participated in more than 100 recordings]

Q. What are your principal recollections of working with Britten?

We would have first encountered each other when Britten attended our performance of the *Ceremony of Carols* in December, 1958. George commissioned the *Missa Brevis* from him, which was really thrilling to sing. In fact I remember seeing the unfinished score of it on Britten's piano during a visit to Britten's London house some weeks before its completion. The BBC made the original recording which Decca then issued and we each received a copy of the record. Ben wrote a personal message into my score and that he wrote 'from a grateful composer' shows a very modest and appreciative side of his character.

Following this, Britten asked me to sing *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* in concert with himself and Peter Pears at the Wigmore Hall. Interestingly, Britten originally wrote this for Kathleen Ferrier's contralto voice, but perhaps had always felt that a boy's voice would be more suitable. I was fourteen at the time and the range of my voice was steadily descending toward an alto-tenor range, a timbre which was surely appealing to Britten for the role of Isaac. The recording was made in Kingsway Hall, London. Ben then suggested that he would accompany me on another disc and chose

songs from *Friday Afternoons*. The title of the disc is ‘Songs from Friday Afternoons’ and includes other songs, such as ‘Corpus Christi Carol’, arranged for piano and voice, which was dedicated to me. [The recording also features Michael Berkeley (son of Lennox Berkeley) providing the ‘Cuckoo’ ostinato in the song ‘Cuckoo!’]

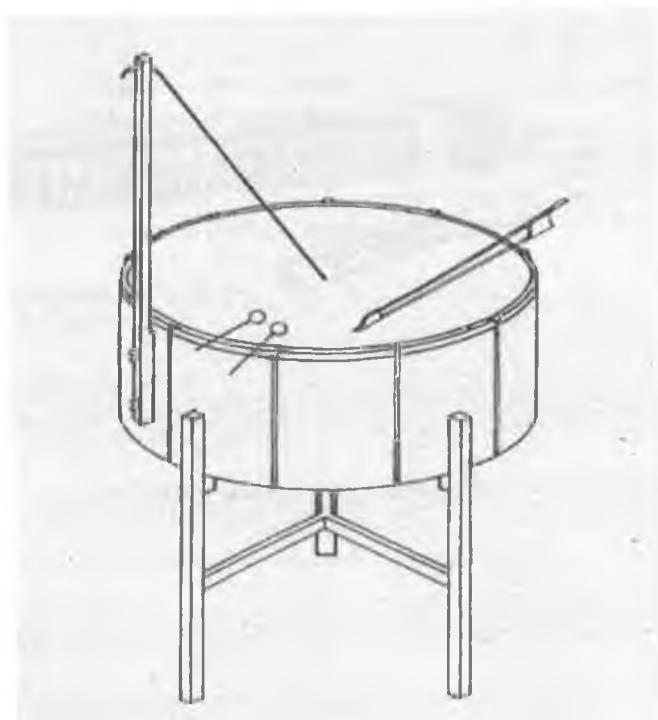
In terms of the recording process, in Abraham and Isaac, I recall that Pears did not hold back at all for his vocal delivery, and gave a full-bodied and vigorous performance, despite the weaker boy’s voice next to him. Perhaps Ben felt the drama would be heightened because of the imbalance of man’s voice pitted against a boy’s. This is certainly lost when the part of Isaac is played by a contralto, or even counter-tenor. Britten was quite exact in the sound he required; for the ‘Corpus Christi Carol’ he wanted the opening and closing ‘Aahs’ to have a gradual fading effect, which was achieved by slowly turning towards and away from the microphone for the opening and closing of the song.

Working with Ben was always a delight and there were never any feeling of anxiety; I think Ben knew that this kind of secure environment brought out the best in a performer, certainly in a child. He was always thoughtful and kind to me, sending me cakes and postcards while I was in school. I stayed in Aldeburgh a number of times and my memories of that period are very happy, full of musical experiences and fun. Sport and fast cars featured prominently and I recall competitive games of ping-pong in which he never held back. In many ways he was a real godfather to me.

Appendix D

Example 1

Bass Drum (variable pitch) used in the Children's Crusade



Example 2

Reso-reso used in Children's Crusade



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Abstract

This thesis explores a selection of Benjamin Britten's oeuvre which was intended for performance by children and amateurs. At the outset, an enquiry is made into the various stimuli which motivated Britten to create such a significant corpus of works in this genre. Issues explored to this end include significant experiences from his own childhood, recurring themes in the subject matter of his works and his concerted aspiration to be a community-based artist in his native county of Suffolk. Through the main body of this study, an assessment is conducted as to the artistic merit achieved in these works by examining the individual components of subject matter, text setting, instrumentation, vocal scoring and compositional devices. The fundamental premise of this assessment provides the crux for this thesis, whereby an inquiry is established into Britten's aptitude for generating compositions of a substantial complexity which caused limited encumbrance and utmost pleasure to the children and amateur forces that performed them.